



**NUI MAYNOOTH**

*Óliscéil na hÉireann Mhá Nuad*

## **Quality Review of the Department of Applied Social Studies**

**November 2008**

### **Peer Review Report**

**Peer Review Group:**

**External reviewers:**

**Ms Lydia Meryll,  
Greater Manchester Development Education  
Project, U.K.;  
Professor David Byrne, Durham University, U.K.;**

**External stakeholder:**

**Ms Liz Sullivan, Combat Poverty Agency, Dublin;**

**Internal reviewers:**

**Professor Jim Walsh, Deputy President, NUIM;  
Professor Tom Collins,  
Dean of Teaching & Learning, NUIM.**

# Department of Applied Social Studies NUI Maynooth - Quality Review Report

November 2008

## **Introduction**

The Department of Applied Social Sciences at NUI Maynooth originated as the Centre for Applied Social Sciences but is now a normal department of the University located within the Faculty of Social Sciences. First it delivers or validates programmes in two broad areas i.e. a set of pre-professional, professional, and post basic professional qualifications in Youth Work and Community Work ranging from pre-professional foundation courses delivered by partners through to a post professional MA. Second, it delivers a strand on Social Policy within the broad diet of the B. Soc.Sc. programme within the Faculty as a whole. It previously also ran a prestigious MA in European Social Policy but this programme is not currently available. Proposed developments include the establishment of a professional doctoral programme in Applied Social Studies, the development of professional social work teaching (although we understand that this element has now been placed on hold pending developments in Ireland), participation in a new B.A. in Public Policy, and the development of a B.Soc. Sc. programme in Equality Studies and an MA in Community and Youth Work (MACYW) to commence in September 2009.

## **List of academic programmes:**

Current academic programmes offered by the department are:

- Diploma in Youth and Community Work – Two years full time
- Diploma in Youth and Community Work – Three years in-service part time
- Progression year for Diploma holders leading to a B.A. (Applied Social Studies)
- Postgraduate Professional Diploma in Community Work by both one year full time and two year part time in service routes.
- Post-professional M.A. Applied Social Studies
- Social Policy component of the B.Soc.Sci. programme within the University
- A variety of programmes leading to NUI certificates:
  - (1) Certificate in Community Work in a Changing Ireland
  - (2) Certificate In Youth Arts Practice
  - (3) Certificate in Youth Justice

- (4) Certificate In Supervision for the Social Professions
- (5) Certificate in Youth Studies
- (6) Certificate in Management in Leadership and Organisation.

## **Administration**

### **1. Internal to Dept**

The reviewers found that the Department was encountering heavy administrative demands in relation to the administrative resources available to it. This reflected the combination of the large number of programmes offered by the Department including those offered as certificates on an outreach basis and the administrative demands which derived from the placement elements in those programmes leading to professional qualifications. The administrative resources of the Department comprised two part time administrative assistants with professional placement management being handled by a ‘permanent’ (i.e. regularly engaged) employed on an occasional lecturer basis.

In consequence, although this did not ultimately detract from the performance of the Department, there was evidence that the Department struggled in coping with its inter-relationship with the administrative systems of the University as a whole which in turn has some difficulties with the processes and arrangements made to facilitate a wide variety of students. Partly this seems to have been a consequence of work overload in the Department.

### **2. Central to university**

The reviewers in general found a sound and comprehensive set of administrative systems in place within the University. However, there was evident difficulty in matching administrative systems and procedures organized around the needs of full time students in relation to the substantial part-time student body in this Department. There was a recognition of this and willingness to develop University systems and procedures in a way which could resolve these difficulties. This will be important as the University is proposing to develop a much more extensive programme of part-time routes to third level and beyond qualifications, and experience in relation to the Department of Applied Social Studies will serve as a basis for these developments.

## **Quality Review visit**

### **1. Response to Self Assessment - Departmental Profile**

The Quality Assessors received a clear written report from the Department of Applied Community Studies a few days before the visit. This part of our report refers to the written assessment provided by the staff in this report.

### *1.1 The Introduction*

We were impressed by the far reaching and aspirational mission statement which the Department has adopted. It locates the Department in a global and ethical framework and we saw evidence during our visit of the commitment of all staff to this over riding mission. Links are made to the NUI Maynooth Strategic Goals 2006 – 2011 and the role of the Department in improving offerings as a leader in the provision of Access and Lifelong Learning was acknowledged as strong. The Department lays out 7 Objectives for developing, enhancing and extending their programme. However, their introduction also acknowledges that there remains a challenge to convey the values and achievements of the Department internally to other parts of the University. Recommendations by External Examiners were mentioned, but we had no sight of these.

### *1.2 Teaching, Learning and Assessment*

The report spells out the approach to teaching and learning, which emphasises participation as a pedagogical priority. This reflects the working principles of the professions into which the graduates will move and is therefore highly appropriate and requires skills in negotiation and flexibility in terms of delivery. Student learning autonomy is stressed as are the underpinning values of engagement, social justice and empowerment. We found strong evidence that these principles were upheld in practice within all aspects of the student experience.

Support for student learning is reflected in the structure offered for mature students, who continue to need to maintain paid employment. The new block route to the BA ASS is a case in point and follows a history of modularisation with part time routes to study available for the professional courses. The list of pre- professional courses is additional evidence of a pro-active access policy and also of a preparedness of staff to go to where the learning is needed.

Creative teaching and learning methods are charted in the report and the use of role play and simulations was evidenced as key learning moments by students and past participants during the interviews. Tutorial support is described in the report to be essential to the integration of practice and theory and the development of professional perspectives. Again this was greatly valued by students themselves. The same principle of integration is behind the design of assessment tools, requiring a praxis approach within all assessed assignments, with a summative reflective “dissertation” as a requirement at BA level. The unseen exams were balanced by integrative assignments and the Department was experimenting with Moodle-based assignments also. The use of Moodle was greatly appreciated by those students who had had access to it, as it made home study much easier. It was very useful to have the detail in the report of a full programme (p15) to see the variety of modes of assessment. Each student is aware from the start of the programme of assessments from the Departmental Handbook.

The report recognises the importance of engaging the students actively in ongoing evaluation of the courses. This was borne out by the students themselves. Appendix 9 shows evidence of the impact of Student review meetings and the willingness of staff to adapt. Relevance to the changing needs of the field is evidenced in Appendix 7 where the contribution of the Courses Consultative and Advisory Group is demonstrated. Their role is very clear and members of this group saw the opportunity to contribute as a part of their own continuing professional development.

### *1.3 Programmes.*

The report charts the development of the Department's work since 1981, when Maynooth was the first university in the Republic of Ireland to offer professional courses in community and youth work. It describes the range of courses currently offered, and we thought that they could have made more of their widening participation strategy, which is evidenced through the pre-professional out-reach programmes which are responsive to local need and ensure that non-traditional learners can feel secure when approaching the university for full professional training and education

### *1.4 Students*

The Appendices detail a remarkably consistent growth in student numbers and also in retention from year to year, with the BA ASS degree year taking time to gather momentum, but eventually in 2008 showing that 2/3 of the professionally qualified students are opting to stay on to complete a degree year. This matches the changes in the professions of Community and Youth Work across Europe, where Social Pedagogy has become a graduate profession where youth and community workers have parity of esteem with Social Workers and Teachers. It is also very encouraging to see that the new post-professional MA programme has picked up well. Most of the MA students we met during our visit had been previous Diplomates or Certificate students and were using the MA as a way of theorising their current practice. Most of them are in senior posts across Ireland.

Retention of younger students following the BSocSc is not quite so impressive, with the cohort recruited in 2004 showing a decline in numbers of 12 over the three years. This is actually very good in terms of national comparisons in the UK and the numbers for this popular course have continued to rise since 2002. Staff **are considering introduction of a placement element along with focused career guidance**

The professional placement requirements of the Diploma programmes mean that modules offered in years one and two of the B.Soc. Sci and Diploma programmes have to be delivered separately although students do come together in year three for B.Soc. Sci and post-professional B.A. levels.

The introduction of Masters by Research and Doctoral studies was mentioned. The Department has not yet fully developed a record of research supervision for conventional Ph.D. studies although initial steps have been made in this direction. We understand that developments are in train across the Irish Republic in relation to the development of collaborative arrangements among Universities in the delivery of the training component of Ph.D. programmes and consider this provides a good way forward for this department.

Appendix 12 reveals a very high staff-student ratio for this Department in comparison with others in the Faculty for the past two years. UK Universities delivering similar professional courses would have a reduced ratio and this is encouraged by the British National Youth Agency in their endorsement processes as the learning associated with practice-based work has to be tied back into the formal course delivery through tutor liaison contact

#### *1.5 Research and Scholarship activities*

The list of Areas of research (P17) may seem fairly light weight, but we took it in addition to the details, in Appendix II of funded research (p52), external assignments and public service (p50-52), and public presentations. These represent a prodigious contribution to the field, nationally within Ireland and across Europe. The fact that research since 2006 has been undertaken with key partners in the field, means that the research and development contribution of the Department is embedded in the development of practice in Ireland. (We would draw attention here to the brief constructed by the Social Policy and Social Work Panel for the most recent UK RAE) We were impressed that academic staff had been able to develop a profile of published research within such a full commitment to teaching. The report stresses that the MA developments are hoped to make more space and provide a climate to develop a culture of research within the Department.

#### *1.6 Service to Academic and other communities.*

This chapter reveals the Department's commitment to professional fields and issues of human rights, justice and equality. A major contribution has been to helping to develop the All Ireland Standards for Quality Community Work, the Youth Work Act and the national Youth Work Plan. The pioneering work with Traveller communities has had long term support from the department and the reputation of the University is enhanced by the role played in the European Union's Fundamental Rights agency, where Anastasia Crickley has been appointed Representative of the Chairman in office of the OSCE. Other members of the staff team have taken on challenging roles within Irish community and

social welfare organisations. This adds to their credibility and to the reputation of the Department as their work is seen a major social asset and demonstrates the implications for a critical dialogue with core curriculum ideas within all the courses.

What was not so evident from the report was a culture of inter-departmental collaboration on emerging national and international agendas. There was evidence, in conversation with Heads of other Departments, that there was strong commitment elsewhere in the faculty to the same values, but the opportunities for collaboration have not yet been explored except for some “teaching out”.

### *1.7 Departmental Processes and procedures.*

The description of how roles are allocated to tutors reveals that all core staff team members have cohort responsibility, timetabling, assessment and recruitment as well as teaching responsibilities on the very high number of ECTS modules (90). Although placements are co-ordinated by one member of the part-time staff, each tutor seems to have a range of placement visit and liaison responsibilities. Staff also are involved in the interviewing process and in Garda vetting procedures. This is not unusual in similar Departments elsewhere, but can mitigate against sustained research effort, unless it is directly related to the processes of learning. The NSETS professional body recommendations on page 46 request a review of the staffing complement and status of Occasional staff. There is no table in the report which shows the range of responsibilities of each member of the staff team.

The report spells out the challenges posed by these ways of working. Occasional staff may fill the gaps in teaching and placement supervision, but this has the effect of timetable challenges. The administration needs therefore to be accurate and effective for the students and staff to have ongoing information flow and updates about any changes. It is not clear in the report whether there is central support from university systems to support the two job share administrators in administration of the 7 programmes and the Social Policy teaching. The report acknowledges that students themselves need to have a full engagement with these university wide systems. The academic staff are clear that, “We ourselves are challenged to develop our management procedures and administrative capacity...” (23) This was reinforced by our interview with the University Administrators, who may see the Department as an administrative “Island”. Objective 7 (p28) shows that staff have begun to consider the need for and process of achieving a clear shared value base and more coherence between internal Department and university-wide processes.

### *1.8 Looking to the Future*

This Chapter sets out very clearly 7 Objectives for development with a set of Implementation Steps through which to achieve stated outcomes. This is a thorough and ambitious agenda. This section also acknowledges that professional courses such as these need to reflect the changing environment and pressures which are faced by the field – rising unemployment, European funding priority changes, climate change, new uses of information technology etc. They are keen to maintain the in-put of key professionals from outside the university so that these changes can be addressed in up-to-the-minute curriculum content. The staff demonstrate a determination to develop themselves and their skills in order to deliver the developments they aim for.

## **2. Comments in light of evidence from visit**

### *2.1 Student Experience*

Every student group at every level of study reported extremely favourably on their experience of study in this Department at Maynooth. They referred both to the quality of the content of their education and to the care and attention given to its delivery by staff members. They also commented on the approachability of staff and their evident concern for their students and willingness to help them in every way. Students evidently enjoyed their programmes, regarded them as valuable both intellectually and in terms of personal development, and felt that the staff of the department were exemplary in their attention to student needs.

There was equally favourable comment made by the professional students in relation to management and supervision on the placement elements of their professional programmes. This is often a difficult area to get right. It is plain that it is got absolutely right at Maynooth and the Department is regarded by students as outstanding in this respect.

The only area of difficulty identified by any students related to the problems encountered by some part-time professional students in relation to access to University facilities as a whole. In part this is a function of the need to develop the University's administrative systems to more fully accommodate the needs of part-time students but it also reflects a history of the University as a full time 9 – 5ish institution. The University's senior management, both academic and administrative, are plainly aware of these issues and are taking steps to deal with them. It is perhaps particularly important that student support services, including services for students with various disabilities, are made more accessible to part-



time students. Given that many part-timers are students coming from backgrounds with limited experience of third level education and that these cohorts include a high proportion of people with less than favourable experiences of second level education, this is particularly important in relation to access issues. Again we encountered a good awareness of these issues and evidence of willingness to engage with them from University senior management. The Department has had an exemplary and outstanding – it is difficult if not impossible to praise the staff too highly in this respect – record of enabling access to students from such backgrounds and taking some of them all the way through to Master's level achievement.

It is plain that some of the difficulties of part-time students derive from their differential treatment in relation to fees in comparison with full time students. This is a consequence of national policy and outwith the direct control of the University but the assessors would urge that the University makes strenuous representations on this matter at the highest level. This is particularly significant given the value of part-time routes for access for students from non-traditional academic backgrounds, one of the areas in which the Department has made an outstanding contribution. The University leaders and the Department should consider ways of improving access by part-time students to facilities for food and drink and designated teaching rooms.

## *2.2 Discussions with Departmental staff*

The assessors were impressed by the staff of the Department, both full and part-time. In relation to the latter we noted that the Department relies to a considerable degree on a cadre of outstanding people engaged on occasional lecturer terms. We felt that this group have delivered to the highest levels but that it would be important in the future to regularize their position through fractional permanent contracts.

In relation to the full time staff we encountered a group of very able academics who were not only delivering extremely good teaching but also had played and were continuing to play a vital role in the development of professional training, policy formation, and appropriate engagement in civil society both in Ireland and beyond. The staff were modest about their excellent record of academic innovation in relation to programme development in this department. This has been coupled with an exceptional record in making third level and fourth level University education available to students from non-traditional academic backgrounds and 'difficult to reach' social groups. Coupled with what by UK standards is really quite an extra-

ordinarily high retention to qualification rate for these students, this is an outstanding achievement.

We would also emphasize the role that the staff have played in contributing to public affairs in Ireland and beyond. This has not only been in relation to areas of professional practice and policy development, although that contribution has been both considerable and innovative with staff taking a leading role here. It has also been in wider civil society and this reflects very well both on the Department and the University. Funding associated with these contributions has often been generous, but is not always a reliable source of revenue to fund a large cohort of occasional staff. Support with business planning had been considered.

That said, this has not been without its opportunity costs and it emerged in discussion with staff that they feel that they have not had the resources, and above all else, the time, to develop their role as academic researchers to the degree that they would wish and of which they are plainly capable. Given everything else they do the staff of the Department have actually performed well in relation to formal academic output and have an excellent record in obtaining grant income in relation to policy and practice research. We would particularly note the role they have played in research for both governance and client group users – an area of research practice which has been particularly valued by the Research Assessment Exercise Panel - Social Policy and Social Work – which would have evaluated the work of this Department if it had been in a United Kingdom University. The outstanding contributions made by staff in other areas have plainly limited their ability to publish in a more formal academic sense and this has implications for academic careers. This is a general problem in University Departments which have substantial professional programmes and it is exacerbated here by the valuable role of the staff group outwith the University across Irish and even European civil society. Senior management in the University were plainly aware of this issue and its consequences and seemed very willing to address it.

### *2.3 Discussions with External Stakeholders*

The assessors had the opportunity to have a very helpful and informative discussion with a group of external stakeholders drawn from a range of agencies operating in Ireland. As with students, and it is both relevant and appropriate that many of these stakeholders were former students of the Department, we found stakeholders to be extremely supportive of the

Department and to view its role in relation to their work in the most favourable terms. This related not only to the contribution made by the Department to professional training and post-professional development in Ireland but also the considerable engagement by Departmental staff with the activities of a whole range of youth, community, anti-poverty, and anti-discrimination projects and programmes and governance / government initiatives. The value placed by stakeholders on the work of the Department and their very high opinion of the quality of students trained by the department was evident.

#### 2.4 External examiners' perspectives

The assessors did not have made available to them a set of the most recent external examiners' reports. However, both the academic assessors have themselves relatively recently been external examiners for NUI Maynooth and have covered the full range of programmes offered by the Department. We therefore feel able to say that we are fully confident of the quality of student achievement across the whole range of programmes and consider that the quality of assessment at Maynooth is entirely appropriate and proper. These students achieve as well as and are as properly assessed as any in the institutions in which we have taught and where we have examined elsewhere.

### **3. Conclusions**

#### 3.1 Strengths – exemplary practice

- Positive experience of students across all programmes at all levels
- Considerable achievement in formal assessment by students on all programmes at all levels
- Extra-ordinary success of the Dept in recruiting non-traditional students from diverse backgrounds
- Very high student retention to completion of registered programme with movement onwards to more advanced levels of study
- The successful development of a full suite of pre-professional, professional and post-professional programmes in community and youth work from certificate to post-professional Master's level
- The establishment of the B.Soc.Sc.degree and of a solid and well integrated social policy strand as a highly valued component of the B.Soc. Sc programme
- The continuing enhancement of a significant national and international role in:

- the establishment of Standards of Practice for youth and community work in Ireland
- the influencing of policy formation across a range of issues with special relevance to identity, social inclusion and community cohesion, and social justice
- the formation and delivery of policies relevant to young people and diversity in Ireland and beyond
- The development of an outstanding network of expertise and support in relation to CYW in Ireland
- The development through the post-professional Master's programme of the foundation for a research student culture in the department as part of the whole Faculty
- The assertion of a set of values and the translation of those values into practice which affirms and reinforces values central to the mission of the University as a whole

### *3.2 Weaknesses*

#### 3.2.1 The team is over-stretched by:

- i. The very large number of programmes delivered by a small teaching group
- ii. The complex management and supervisory needs of programmes with substantive placement components
- iii. Insufficient administrative support which leads to a blurring of academic and administrative roles
- iv. Consequent lack of time to develop a full research programme based on the considerable networking and related contacts established across the school
- v. Lack of time to develop a proper targetted programme of academic publishing
- vi. Consequent inability to develop more collaborative activities within the University in relation to teaching and research

#### 3.2.2

The Department has given insufficient attention to the assertion within the University and general academic world of its substantial role in policy and practice related research and related activities.

### *3.2.3 Substantial administrative weaknesses in relation to:*

- i. Connecting adequately to all University systems
- ii. Establishing University systems which fully accommodate the diverse needs of part-time students
- iii. The consequences for management of the necessary commitment of core staff to all of teaching, routine administration and external roles of enormous value to the University
- iv. Lack of business planning framework for occasional sources of income
- v. Room allocation and booking systems, where academic staff are having to take a disproportionate responsibility and part-time students may feel disadvantaged.

### *3.3 Opportunities for development*

- i. The Department has a critical role in relation to analysis of the social problems likely to stem from the current global economic and environmental crises and to contribute to the formation of policy to respond to them
- ii. There is potential for the development of a Faculty-based Doctoral level of provision, encompassing a range of inter-locking fields of interest
- iii. The Department can play an exemplary role in relation to the University's mission to develop its part-time study portfolio
- iv. Collaboration with other, local, education institutions where Youth and Community courses are developing, and to maintain a leading role.
- v. Collaboration at all levels across the Faculty to optimise resources, using the excellent initiative of the sandwich course design for the BA Politics Economics and Policy and in related areas of admin. Support

### *3.4 Threats*

- i. Competition from the emergent non-university HE sector
- ii. Uncertain future demand for Irish Youth and Community workers.
- iii. High dependency on very small group of permanent staff and consequent risks relating to health and potential absences

- iv. Dependence for funding of core activity on a wide range of income streams with varying degrees of security
- v. Part-time students reporting on experiences of unequal access to university facilities

### *3.5 Recommendations*

- i. Maintain and develop the B.Soc.Sc. programmes with shared administration across the Faculty for placement administration to ensure employability choices
- ii. Celebrate the contribution of part-time students who bring immediate work experience into the student mix
- iii. Ensure a differential weighting of FTE-related resources to ensure adequate services for part-time and non-traditional students
- iv. Consider a level of enhanced Faculty Administration between Dept and Central services to ensure smooth communications and effective exam and financial support
- v. Consider options for regularization of status of part-time teaching/placement staff
- vi. Explore with the Registrar's office difficulties in student registration and fee payment. In particular, consider part-time students' ability to make DD incremental payments of fees.
- vii. Introduce shared business planning systems to account for income and expenditure from occasional external sources
- viii. Engage across the Faculty to contribute to the existing pilot Doctoral arrangements within the Society and Space Platform and seek leadership for this initiative
- ix. Develop a Department Research Plan

### **4. Assessors' final word.**

We have been privileged to be involved in the past as External Examiners and were delighted to be invited to re-evaluate the whole delivery of the Maynooth programme of courses. We were given clear and professional information, met with a range of stakeholders and felt under no pressure from staff to reach any particular conclusions. Our findings are offered as a positive critique of a complex system of education and professional training of which Maynooth can be duly proud. We hope our recommendations will be of use.

---

**Professor David Byrne**  
**External Reviewer**

---

**Ms Lydia Meryll**  
**External Reviewer**

---

**Ms Liz Sullivan**  
**External Stakeholder**

---

**Professor Jim Walsh**  
**Internal Reviewer**

---

**Professor Tom Collins**  
**Internal Reviewer**