

Quality Promotion Sub-Committee

Draft Minutes of the meeting of 30 November 2010

Present: Professor Jim Walsh (Chair), Mr. Cathal McCauley, Dr Tom O'Connor, Mr. Aengus Ó Maoláin, Dr Richard Watson (Secretary).

Apologies: Professor Tom Collins, Dr Honor Fagan, Dr Bernard Mahon, Mr. Colm Nelson, Professor Ray O'Neill, Professor Rowena Pecchenino, Dr David Redmond,

1. Minutes and Notes of meeting of 3 November 2010

The draft minutes and notes of this meeting had been circulated and were accepted.

2. Matters arising

Under 2, it was announced that the second student representative to serve on the Sub-Committee is Mr Robert Nixon.

3. Self Assessment Report from the Department of French

The QPSC reviewed the draft Self Assessment Report (SAR) of the Department of French. The Sub-Committee welcomed the engagement of the Department in the process and the evident willingness to take part in self evaluation. There are three main recommendations and many detailed comments: most are made as suggestions with a view to improving the document.

The Sub-Committee recognises that the Department is, as stated in the Introduction to the report, one of the most venerable in the University, and wishes it to be one of the most valued, but it fears that some of the views expressed, or the manner in which they are expressed, might be counterproductive to the objective of deriving the maximum benefit for the Department out of the quality review process. There are various instances throughout the document where complaints are made about matters which affect every Department in the university; the External Peer Reviewers cannot be expected to express any views about some of these matters, and the inclusion of such complaints in this report weakens the impact of complaints concerning matters about which the Reviewers might be expected to make strong recommendations. Three examples are provided by the comments made in various sections concerning examination marks, the effects of examining three times a year, and the support of Ph.D. students. In each of these areas there are agreed and widely accepted processes, and if objections are to be raised to these processes, they can be made through various channels such as letters to the Faculties or the Academic Council: a Self Assessment Report is not a suitable document for conveying such objections. Again, the Department may have grounds for complaints about the administrative support it receives: it does not help to repeat these complaints so often throughout the document. There should be some acknowledgement of various mitigating factors:

- it is the case that the University requires some administrative input from every member of staff in order to function, but this is a burden shared by all;
- the context in which the post of Executive Assistant was not filled was the Employment Control Framework, under which it was impossible to renew the contract of the incumbent, and there was some provision for assistance;
- at present, within the School, two Executive Assistants are providing equal support to three Departments with a smaller total number of staff than some Departments with but one Executive Assistant.

In short, the first recommendation of the Sub-Committee is that the content and tone of some parts of the report be modified.

Second, some more account might be taken of the student perspective. For example, there seems to be no commentary on examinations, or reports from external examiners, nor is there much mention of student numbers, Pass/Fail rates, and progression from first to second year.

Third, the Sub-Committee would welcome an additional section which would address the future of the Department, indicate where it sees itself going, and make four or five recommendations for actions to help achieve its goals, with some distinction between actions that it can undertake within the current allocation of resources and actions that may require assistance from the University. In the case of the latter it would be helpful to indicate how the department may be able to assist the University to overcome the current and future constraints on additional resources.

There follows many detailed suggestions which it is hoped might improve the document.

Section 1

It was thought that one, rather than many, of the first members of staff in Maynooth had been Professors at the Sorbonne; and the language which superseded French in the 1860s was English, not Irish. The section might benefit from reordering the material, to consider perhaps with subsection headings history, staff, students, exchange programmes and visiting French writers. It was questioned if the reference to the performance of the Executive Assistant is appropriate in this section.

Section 2

Clarification of the minimum requirement for entry mentioned in 2.1.2 would be welcome: is it a C3 at higher level in French at Leaving Certificate? If this is the case, as was thought by the QPSC, then not everyone would agree that this is “a fairly basic level”: not every Department can insist on such a requirement and still maintain a

reasonable number of entrants. It was pointed out with reference to the same paragraph that students might be inclined to work but unable to find it.

Section 3

It would be desirable to include in the main body of the Self Assessment Report, or in an Appendix, the actual numbers of students, pass-fail rates and progression rates from first to second year for each of the last five years; the Director of Quality undertook to obtain accurate figures from the Registrar and supply tables to Professor Krobb. The Sub-Committee welcomed the realistic approach to weaker students described in 3.2.2. Some interest was expressed in the work associated with the long essay described in 3.5.3: is the double marking “blind”, and does the external examiner mark every essay or simply those with widely differing marks in order to adjudicate? It was remarked that the possibility mentioned in the same subsection of setting a range of topics might be explored in discussions with other departments which already do so. The Sub-Committee would also encourage the amalgamation of modules with 2.5 ECTS weightings mentioned in 3.6, since this would facilitate students in combining modules.

Section 4

It was thought that this section would cohere better with the rest of the Self Assessment Report if it were rewritten in the third person. In 4.1, the reference to funding of MA students to travel to research days in France is perhaps a little misleading: the University would not have had to “scrape together” a sum of money which might be managed within the departmental budget. In 4.3, the material on named Ph.D. students and their progress to date should be omitted, as it is a requirement of the review process that the work of individuals is not subject to comment; and some mention of the structured Ph.D. and recently introduced codes of practice would be welcome.

Section 5

This section provides evidence of an admirable dedication to research within the Department, and a remarkable openness to collaboration within and external to the University. There are some very general questions that might be raised in this context, and perhaps usefully discussed within the department and with the external reviewers. Given the unpredictable numbers of postgraduates, the link between teaching and research, and the lack of choice in undergraduate courses, is there a case for concentrating even more on undergraduate teaching, or for even more collaboration within the university and with departments in other universities? These are difficult questions, and attention to them should not be deflected by consideration of university wide problems.

Section 6

This section would benefit by some prioritisation and a modification of tone. It is the Department of French which is being reviewed, and it is not necessary for the Department to review, or indeed pass comment on, every unit providing support in the University; no doubt some have a more important role to play in regard to the Department than others, and should accordingly receive more consideration. It is also not necessary to make a critical evaluation of each support unit: there is room for some collegiality and a less negative approach. For example, the phrase “is in contact with” in the very first line might be replaced by “interacts with”. In 6.2, the mention of distance detracts from the preceding, broadly positive, remarks. Has the Library been made aware of the slowness of the book-ordering process described in 6.5, and given an opportunity to respond? In 6.10, it would be helpful if instances of cumbersome and inefficient dealings were provided; and there seems to be a disproportion between the alleged considerable additional burden imposed by a cumbersome introduction of new Ph.D. programmes, and the not so considerable number of actual Ph.D. students in the Department. In 6.13, the name of the office is no longer “Personnel Office”, but “Human Resources Office”, and subsection 6.17 should refer to the Centre for Teaching and Learning, and not to a nonexistent office.

Section 7

The Sub-Committee was very impressed by the work described in this section

Section 8

Is it intended to append the student questionnaires, and to provide some indication of the methodology used to collect the views of the students? And is there a mechanism for providing student feedback on an ongoing basis?

4. IUQB visit concerning *National guidelines of good practice for the approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards*

The Director of Quality announced that an IUQB group, consisting of Professor Jim Gosling and Dr Teresa Lee, are to visit Maynooth on 8 December 2010 and will hold meetings with three sets of interested parties on the above topic, as part of the preparations of another *Good Practice* booklet.

5. Peer Review Groups for forthcoming reviews

The document was noted.

6. Resignation

The Secretary informed the meeting that Professor Margaret Kelleher had resigned from the QPSC, due to the many demands on her time and attention. Fortunately, she is willing to continue as an Internal Reviewer on an occasional basis, and in

particular she will be available for the forthcoming review of the Department of Philosophy. The Secretary was instructed to convey to Professor Kelleher the regrets of the Sub-Committee at her resignation, and to express appreciation of and thanks for all her service to the QPSC over the years. The Secretary was requested also to request the President to appoint a replacement for Professor Kelleher on the QPSC.

7. AOB

None.