19 – 21 November 2008

Department of Economics, Finance and Accounting: Peer Review Group Report

After reading the Self-Assessment a Peer Review Group consisting of Professors Daniel Hamermesh, University of Texas at Austin and Peter Smith, University of York and External Stakeholder Mairead Foley, KPMG made a site visit to NUIM to speak with staff members and members of the University Community. Our overall sense of the Department's current status is that it is on the right track and is doing the things that need to be done to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and to improve the research profile of the Department. We applaud the changes that have been made to the Department over the last year and can confirm that this view is supported by the vast majority of the staff. Despite this encouraging trend, there are a substantial number of new initiatives and changes that could be made, with many of these entailing no additional resources. We outline these below and make other comments on the Department.

I. Teaching and Learning

A. Undergraduate Programmes

1. It is essential that any student in any business-related discipline have a sound grounding in economics and finance. Thus the central administration of NUIM needs to ensure that even students enrolled in other departments that offer business-related programs are also enrolled in the core areas of economics, finance and quantitative methods. Without this requirement the University runs the risk of producing graduates who have a superficial knowledge of their field but who, at the end of the day, lack the basic knowledge and ability to think analytically that will last them over an entire career.
2. Offerings for first-year students are fairly standard, and we do not comment on their content here. The Department must, however, focus on offering second- and third-year courses that attract students and that "turn them on" to economics. We have substantial concerns about the fall-off of interest in economics courses after the first year. No doubt part is due to the analytical difficulty of the subject. Part too, however, may be due to the failure to convince students of both the relevance and excitement of the subject. This "selling" should be done partly in the first-year courses, partly by having a set of advanced courses that appeal to students from a career viewpoint and a general intellectual viewpoint.

   Economics is not boring—it is analytical, but it can deal in an analytical way with topics that are both relevant and exciting. To attract students—to maintain enrolments—new courses should be added, and some of the existing courses might be deleted. Thus, for examples, courses in managerial economics,

economics of sports, economics of gambling and risk, demographic economics, and many others that staff should be able to create, might be instituted. The new game theory course, so long as it is applied and taught well, is a commendable step in this direction.

3. More small group tutorials are essential at all levels, particularly in the more theoretical and quantitative second- and third-year courses. While the Department has progressed in this area in the first-year courses, that progress must be extended. This may take additional resources, either from additional staff or by asking for more teaching effort from existing academic staff.
4. One of the very positive forward steps in the Department has been the employment of full-time tutors. These enthusiastic and knowledgeable junior academic staff members add to the educational experience of undergraduates. This program could be modified and expanded by employing MA students and even the best third-year students as part-time tutors or at least as graders. This could allow the necessary expansion of tutorials, both directly and indirectly, as graders' time could substitute for that of permanent academic staff so that the latter could then be freed up to offer more tutorials.
5. The uniform offerings of Moodle provide a convenient and flexible form for higher education. Staff should not, however, lose sight of the importance of live interaction/development of ideas during lecture and tutorial time. Prepared material is a complement, not a substitute, for the real-time development of ideas and concepts and lecturer-student interaction.
6. The Department already complies with the soon-to-be-instituted requirement of the University for formal student evaluation of instruction. These evaluations are a useful adjunct to other methods of assessment, but all users need to be aware that the informational content of quantitative assessments is only at the top and bottom extremes of teaching quality. Their quantitative information is not very helpful for most classes, but informal student comments can provide all academic staff with useful guidance.
7. Instructional quality is enhanced by peer review, particularly by direct observation of instruction by experienced peers. It is essential that the Department Head and/or other senior academic staff observe each academic staff member's teaching at least once per year and report on it in a constructive way that will enhance the staff member's teaching quality. For academic staff members in their first two years of teaching more than one visit per annum is desirable.
8. While most classrooms used for instruction have computers and projectors, not all do especially some of the areas for small group teaching. The continued reliance by some staff on basic lecturing technology such as chalk on blackboard or acetate on overhead projectors is an outmoded practice that should be reviewed. All staff should become familiar with the newer technologies and adopt them into their teaching. These larger classes need to be in rooms that allow students to see simultaneously both a computer display and what the instructor is writing. This is near the frontier of instructional technology and is more than just a fad—it enhances learning.

9. Econometrics and statistics are both theoretical and applied subjects. At both the undergraduate and MA levels their applied nature thus makes it essential that students receive instruction in the analysis of data and in the use of statistical software packages. Econometrics classes need tutorials and/or assignments that require the student to use the techniques that are being taught in lectures. A student graduating with an economic or finance degree should be able to formulate a hypothesis, take a set of data, test that hypothesis and write up the results in a convincing and clear manner.
10. Students should graduate with the background and experience that allow them to write logically, clearly and succinctly. It is not clear what the best approach for ensuring this goal is achieved is, but the undergraduate thesis as currently constituted (essentially a 15-page term paper) may be the best possible, given the demands from coursework on students' time. The effectiveness of this instructional device could be enhanced by requiring the student to have chosen a supervisor and thesis topic near the end of his/her second year—that would give him/her time to work out the idea over the summer and proceed full-throttle on it during the Autumn term.
11. Internships can add a degree of work experience and context for the teaching that students receive. Students that we spoke to asked about the possibility that a programme of in-course internships could be provided or more assistance given in finding vacation work.. As an example, there are programmes such as these which competitor institutions run in conjunction with employers in the accounting area. Development of internships could be expected to be an aid in student recruitment. We understand that there is a concern that as degree courses are only 3 years long, the academic content would suffer if internships were catered for within the academic year. It should be possible to accommodate both by organising internships that fall largely outside the academic terms eg from May to September in the 2nd year.
12. It is good practice for student assessment to include elements of continuous evaluation. Members of the Department should consider a range of alternative forms of continuous assessment to the widely used multiple choice test, especially in more advanced courses.
13. Career planning should be of concern to students and they should receive an appropriate degree of support. Ideas for improving the provision at Maynooth could include more interaction with professional societies, Alumni Associations and the Civil Service, increased visits from potential employers (perhaps through a student society) and increased interaction with the college Careers Office.
14. The sustainability of all degrees offered by the Department could be enhanced by additional recruitment of students from overseas. This will require targeting of individual countries and maybe regions and is likely to be enhanced by visits by academic staff, perhaps in conjunction to meetings involving alumni.

B. M.A. M. ACC and Ph.D.

1. The MA and PhD programmes are an important source of resources to the Department as well as providing more challenging teaching in specialist subject areas. There is the potential for additional enrolment from part-time students and from those working part time but enrolled as full-time students. As a result, it makes sense to organise the teaching to be at a time that would accommodate these students. However, we wonder if the current arrangement of three hour lecture classes is too intensive for the students and could instead be replaced by 1.5 hour classes. The principle of retaining a late start for outside students could be retained with a 5.30pm start.
2. There seemed to be some evidence of unevenness in the mathematics background of the MA students, and we suggest that additional tutorial classes, especially in the mathematics required for finance, for all students would aid progress.
3. It was agreed by a number of staff that we spoke to that the MA programme needs about 40 students a year to be sustainable and that increased numbers of overseas students would further aid its sustainability. The new programmes that are proposed in the finance area should help in recruitment. Recruitment visits overseas in conjunction with those for the undergraduate programmes (see I.A.14, above) will also be required to raise numbers towards a sustainable level.
4. We applaud the introduction of the Masters in Accounting is a welcome addition to the Accounting Programme. It puts Maynooth on an equal footing with its peers in providing courses for accountancy students that maximise their exemptions in their professional examinations.
5. All of the PhD students that we spoke to were very appreciative of the supportive environment provided by the academic staff. They all spoke highly of the supervision they had received, but they also expressed appreciation for the extra help and advice they had been offered by other members of the Department. We applaud this commitment to an albeit small programme but one which is producing good Ph.D. graduates.
6. We also applaud the new Dublin-wide PhD programme and the extensive coursework provision. This programme has filled the gap that a number of the earlier students had identified in their experience and has reduced the need for research students to take coursework elsewhere in Europe. The presence of the programme also means that the Department does not have the need for a critical mass for research students in any one research area, as the students can become part of a large group across Dublin. This expanded breadth should be an aid to recruitment.
7. From our discussions we found that, although students were very happy with the Ph.D. courses, there was interest from some students in a small-credit research resources course. This probably, by necessity, would require local provision.

II. Staffing and Research

A. It is crucial to recognise the connection between teaching and staffing, as is demonstrated in the self-assessment document. The credibility of the provision of teaching programmes from undergraduate through to Ph.D. level depends on having research-active well-trained staff providing the key elements of the programme. Thus the rebalancing of the staff profile across the three areas of activity that is taking place is important. This also allows for a more equal balance of teaching load across staff. We support the continued attention that this rebalancing has in the future plans of the Department.

B. The development of Accounting as part of the Department's structure both at a teaching and research level is clearly an important part of the recent history of the Department. The demand for degrees that include an element of accounting is clearly strong at the undergraduate level and developing at the postgraduate level. Embedding the accounting activity requires that the staff can also contribute to the research activity of the Department. We would thus encourage the development of the staff through Ph.D. study. We would support further research-based activities in the accounting area, such as inviting visiting researchers perhaps whose work is on the interface between accounting and economics and finance.

C. In a similar vein, we support the plans for hiring more staff in the Accounting area. One way of providing a resource case for such an additional appointment would be the introduction of the planned Conversion Diploma. This appears to be likely to be successful in terms of student recruitment, as staff have a clear idea of the possible sources of students and the extent of competition. It is clear that any additional programme such as this will require increased full-time permanent staffing given the current level of staffing in the Accounting area.

D. With a view to the sustainability of the Department in terms of student demand, we think that existing staff should consider whether new courses and programmes could be mounted which might be attractive to students at both the undergraduate and postgraduate level. Some suggestions at the undergraduate level are mentioned above (I.A.2)

E. Many of the staff that we spoke to confirmed that the environment in the Department is very collegial and conducive for research productivity.

F. Research support in terms of specific research expenses, including travel money, the cost of computer software and data has been good. A well-funded and well attended seminar programme is also a shop window for the research of the staff as well as providing interaction with external researchers. We found that staff are appreciative of the individual research support that they receive through the Head of Department. We are concerned about the future of these important resources in the light of budgetary issues.

G. Other potential sources of additional funds to support research are external to the Department. Thus we think that application for external research grant support should be encouraged. Many potential sources of funds are common across disciplines and we would urge the College to examine the information and support that it provides to individual academics and how it might support the application for research funds where the application process is especially burdensome, such as in applying for funds from the European Commission.

H. By its nature each research project proceeds at a different pace, and with a different timetable, from each other. So does the process of generating research ideas. It is thus unreasonable to set quotas of research output for academic staff. Nonetheless, it would be irresponsible not to expect a flow of research from staff: A substantial part of the job of an academic must be the expansion of knowledge. And evidence of the expansion of knowledge in the economics profession is the publication of articles in refereed scientific journals—economics is an article-based discipline.

   Taking these considerations into account, it is reasonable to expect researchers who have been pursuing academic careers for more than two or three years to be exhibiting a flow of publications in refereed journals. Flows may differ; and while economists disagree to some extent about journal rankings, most would agree that it is very difficult to publish in the top five general journals. We do not expect publication there, but that would be desirable and should be highly rewarded. Over a period of years, however, publishing at least one paper in a good second-level journal every other year, and one article in a lower-level journal, a policy journal or a local journal every year, should be a reasonable minimal expectation if an academic staff member is to be viewed as fulfilling the research part of his/her assignment.

I. It is essential that University officials realize the unique nature of the professional reward structure in economics, and that the Department Head be able to convey those officials' understanding of that realization to academic staff. Books are not generally rewarded in this profession, and none should be expected of staff. Similarly, the frequent publication of articles in very low-ranked journals does not enhance the academic reputation of the author or the University. What matters in the economics and finance professions is the publication of articles in major journals, either in the few very top general journals, those general journals ranked slightly lower, or in the leading specialized sub-field journals.

J. An active researcher who is publishing according to the criteria discussed above deserves promotion. Promotion is both a reward to those who have produced scholarly work and an incentive to encourage active research and publication by other staff.

   The most important general criterion for promotion is that the staff member shall have demonstrated a continuing commitment to a lifelong career of active scholarship. Many specific criteria are possible. One reasonable minimal specific criterion for promotion is the publication of two or three articles in the group of general journals ranked just below the very top few plus three or four publications in other refereed journals.

III. Other issues

A. Many staff indicated to us their appreciation of the work of the Department administrative staff, who perform very well under pressure of work. Evidence was presented that, as a result of the rapid and large expansion of the Department over recent years, additional administrative support is required. We think that a minimum of an extra half a full-time equivalent member of administrative staff is required. This is a minimum, because the delivery of the accounting degrees alone requires additional administrative support. It would be the case that, if our proposals on internships, amongst others, were taken up, further administrative support would be required to make them successful.

B. We note the work of the Department Advisory Board. This seemed to us to be a very useful way by which the Department could receive ideas from potential employers of graduates as well as industry stakeholders. Given the diversity of the potential employers of the Department's graduates, we suggest that two separate Advisory Boards would be useful (one in economics, and one in accounting and finance. These could be linked to the areas of employment of graduates.

IV. Conclusion

Overall the Department is on the right track and is moving ahead. There are, of course, problems, but nearly all of them can be solved with good will and new resources. Even without the latter, however, the majority of our concerns about the Department can be addressed and are soluble.

Professor Daniel Hamermesh **External Reviewer**	**Professor Peter Smith** **External Reviewer**	**Ms Mairead Foley** **External Stakeholder**
Professor Jim Walsh **Internal Reviewer**	**Dr David Redmond** **Internal Reviewer**	