

Quality Review of the Department of Education

National University of Ireland Maynooth

13th – 15th October 2008

PEER REVIEW REPORT

Peer Review Group

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1. Introduction

At the time of writing the Education Department is responsible for the teaching and learning of one hundred and eighty full-time students and two hundred and eighty-two part-time students. In the department there are eleven full time, and thirty-three associate, members of staff. Three full-time administrative assistants and two part-time administrative staff assist with the administrative work of the department and one technician is employed within the department. The Education Department offers a wide range of programmes in pre-service and in-service education. Initial teacher education is a major area of activity for the department: the concurrent undergraduate degree in science education has recently been introduced in addition to the well established PGDE programme.

The department also provides significant numbers of programmes at Masters' and post-graduate diploma level. A taught professional doctorate programme is jointly offered with the Department of Adult and Community Education. Programmes offered by the department are heavily over-subscribed: there is significant demand therefore from prospective students for the learning opportunities offered by the department.

The Education Department also has a significant research profile which was made evident to the review team during the review visit. Members of staff within the department also have a huge and continuously active engagement within the professional field.

2. Teaching, Learning and Assessment

There is a rich range of courses and it was evident to the reviewers that there has been significant change and development within the programmes offered by the education department, with five of the programmes being developed in the last five years. The latest programme, the BSc (science education) is a departure into undergraduate ITE and this provides an interesting set of challenges in the short to medium term in terms of content and structures.

Curriculum design

It is evident that the course teams have given significant thought to the content of courses. It was reported at many of the staff meetings that the on-going review of course content and intimations of possibilities for a

shift in emphasis, for example in teaching design, had been galvanised by the need to change to a modular system. Course teams took this opportunity to make significant changes to the structure, content and methodology of the new modules. It is also obvious that the content of courses is grounded in a critical standpoint on what the foundations for effective professional practice are.

Course handbooks give a clear indication of content and aims and objectives identified in the handbooks are linked to the content of modules. Whilst evaluative standpoints typically differ among staff members, it is obvious that agreements have been reached in terms of general approaches and course content is coherent. There is much evidence that significant work has been done to reach collective agreement about aims and objectives as revealed in meetings between members of the review team and students. It is also clear that students are given the opportunity to meet and think through differences in perspectives as appropriate to their level of study. The courses marry theoretical perspectives and experience in the practicum. It was very clear in meetings with Diploma and Masters' students that courses facilitated the development of critical perspectives on practice and policy in schools and the school system. The reviewers found that these students were enabled through their work on the departments' programmes to deepen their understanding of their professional practice and felt very confident that courses contributed significantly to their standing in schools and to their ability to apply successfully for promotion. The pattern of school visits in the PGDE and PGDGC courses, it was obvious from meetings with staff and students, aids considerably the linking of the development of personal professional evaluative and theoretical standpoints and the development of skills and capabilities necessary for effective practice. This was stated also in external examiners' reports.

Teaching

It is evident that the department has developed and actively engages with innovation and change. The use of Moodle has been an important innovation and it was obvious in meetings between reviewers and students that students were very aware of how and when they could make use of Moodle and it was evident that they also valued it greatly. The change in emphasis in the promotion of competence and ability in the use of ICT in the classroom is another example of constructive changes to courses. This change in approach now engages students in an active and dynamic way in developing their teaching ability through these media.

The DIVIATE programme is another example of innovation in teaching in the department and students have been highly enthusiastic about this aspect of their course. It was evident throughout meetings that course content is research informed and staff research was integrated into programmes.

The development of the resource unit in its current manifestation has been very useful and very much valued by the students. It is housed within easy access of teaching rooms and students are supported very well: technology resources are a significant strength in the unit.

Staff members and student representatives emphasised that courses, because of the modularisation process, had gained added coherence and cohesion and that additional changes to teaching approaches resulted in more active learning on the part of students. Students on the PGDE course were particularly enthused by the emphasis on active participation which they noted as a significantly welcome change from their previous experiences in HE. The reviewers found that diploma and masters' students were expected to participate actively in class and course content and methodology facilitated this, as indeed did the approach to learning and teaching adopted by class tutors. Active participation is also encouraged by the practice of encouraging students to follow preferred options and to work in groups of students with similar professional interests. A range of experiences and learning opportunities is provided in classes and the use of visiting speakers, for example, is much appreciated by students.

The employment of associate staff to supervise students on the PGDE in schools and provide pedagogy classes has provided these students with the opportunity to learn from those who have had recent experience of the practicum. Meeting with associate staff has confirmed that efforts are made to ensure that these staff members have regular contact with permanent departmental staff members and with one another in order to inform practices in supporting students and assessing them in schools.

Assessment

The reviewers found that a range of assessment methods is used. There has been some movement away from final summative examinations towards more coursework and there is some evidence of some team assessment work. The development of the modular system has provided opportunities for more collaborative work on the development of marking schemes and the self-evaluation document reports that there has been

exploration of anonymous marking. During meetings with staff the reviewers found that there is significant awareness of the difficulties that assessment of school experience presents and it was evident that all those involved were very aware of this and respected efforts to engage with the difficulties in providing for reliability that such forms of assessment bring.

Programme evaluation and review

The reviewers found much evidence of in-depth evaluation of courses. This took a range of forms, all involving students in reviewing content and methodology. There was also significant evidence that evaluation was used consistently to make changes in subsequent courses. This was a consistent finding of the reviewers and the department is congratulated for the adoption of this active stance to evaluation and review.

Student support

The students were universally complimentary about the levels of student support in the department. They feel that tutors take a personal interest in each student and are available almost at all times for them. This is a significant characteristic of the department and is a significant indication of the quality of the programmes within the department.

Resourcing within the department

The reviewers are aware that the department, in common with many academic units across the HE sector, is working within an environment where resourcing levels are reduced and where resources, once lost, are not replaced. Many of the constraints on available levels of resources are extra-institutional. The review panel regrets the apparent reduction in resources within the Education Department, whilst recognising that similar situations have arisen across the university sector in general.

Research and Scholarship

A key part of the department's mission is to engage in research and scholarship. The self-evaluation document sets out the research activity

of the department at five main levels and these will be used to structure this section of the report.

Student Research

This section reports traditional PhD research and the taught doctoral programme, the Ed.D introduced by the department three years ago as a very interesting initiative in inter-departmental co-operation between the Education department and the department of Adult and Community Education.

As the self-evaluation document makes clear, the students undertaking doctoral level studies in Education tend to be mid career professionals who have a Masters rather than the more traditional social science route from first degree, PhD and early career research fellowships. To some extent this makes doctoral students in education a potentially isolated group. They study within the department and to date have not undertaken joint research training with other students in the Social Science Faculty or the University as a whole. While this is understandable, it is a pity that the potential of the Graduate School has not yet been realised as far as Education students are concerned. Participation in Graduate School Provision could increase the range of research methods to which students are exposed, encourage contact with students beyond the department who are studying similar topics and expose students to social science theories which may help inform their studies. Moreover, given the pressure on staff resources mentioned below, there may be economies of scale in research methods training and in generic skills such as literature searches and thesis writing which would be helpful.

The Ed.D students and staff indicated the benefits of inter-departmental collaboration in interviews with the reviewers and so the department might find it helpful to think through how these benefits could be extended to traditional PhD students.

Individual Staff Research

The reviewers were impressed by the ways in which staff's own research fed directly into teaching. We were given direct examples of this in terms of PGDGC and M.Ed. (GC), the use of information technology in PGDE and in leadership and management. At a time where there is increasing dual labour market in education in UK universities between those who teach on initial teacher education programmes and those who research, Maynooth is to be commended for the natural way in which research informs teaching and teaching informs research.

About half the staff are currently registered for PhDs and this is obviously to be encouraged. Studying for a PhD and holding down a

demanding post in the department is no easy task. Course leaders are entitled to one term's study leave for every six terms but the small size of the department and the current situation of staff shortage mean that staff can be reluctant to make use of this facility. Staff fees are not paid for those staff studying in other institutions.

Education as a key aspect of public policy has a strong applied focus and this was evident in the bulk of staff research. This can sometimes lead to concentrating on issues affecting particular national systems with a tendency to ignore the global nature of many of the problems affecting education systems in advanced economies. It was therefore very pleasing to learn of the international connections and invitations to present papers overseas of many staff. These ranged from general participation and presentation at major generic conferences such as the European Educational Research Association and the American Educational Research Association to more subject or discipline specific presentations. Many of the staff publications listed in the self -evaluation document are understandably in Irish journals and edited collections published in Ireland. A further strategic development for research might be to publish in international journals.

While some staff said that they felt well supported in their research there did not seem to be a formal induction or mentoring process for new members of staff. In a small department it may be that formal systems are not required and that the general expectation that staff will do research is somehow picked up. Yet staff new to research need mentoring in terms of conference attendance and publication plans and strategies and we feel that a more explicit mentoring system would pay dividends and help to ensure that problems with thesis completion, publication disappointments and grant applications were identified early and action plans developed. We were not made aware of any staff development and review systems or of career planning for staff, apart from PMDS

Research at Departmental and Inter-Departmental Level

The major project conducted by the department has been Teaching and Learning for the 21st Century. The substantive phase of this project has now come to an end although there will be a dissemination phase for some time to come. This is one of the few major funded projects in the department – a reflection to some extent of the scarcity and competitiveness of funding for educational research.

The appointment of a research manager, shared with the department of adult and continuing education is an imaginative response to the opportunity to seek research funding. The manager has prepared a

summary of research themes which both departments have in common and liaises with University Research Office to identify likely sources of funding in terms of particular themes. We were also made aware of the major research and development project Combating Diseases of Poverty Consortium involving Anthropology, Immunology and Education. This research fed into teacher education and a Development Education week will take place, as it has done for the last 15 years. The Dissolving Boundaries Project was also described to us and again there is a link with teacher education through a particular member of staff. Not all research projects necessarily feed directly into initial teacher education of course, but it is commendable that where there are clear messages arising from particular projects they link back into teaching.

Leadership and Management

The department aims to operate collegially on a model of distributed leadership. Individual staff take responsibility for course leadership and this has involved a considerable amount of work with the arrival of modularisation and semesterisation. Many staff welcomed this model and were justifiably proud of the work of course development teams. Some staff were concerned that too much routine administrative work was now being done by academic staff. The reviewers were not aware of a mechanism that enabled an overview of taught programmes and the identification of overlap or duplication. It may be that in a small department this is done informally and we are aware that the two course leaders in the separate leadership and management courses are discussing opportunity for synergies. We would suggest however, that these matters are too important to be left to chance and the Department sets aside a specific time each year to explore the range of course provision, including option modules to maximise efficiency.

The department has a large number of Associate Staff, visiting students on school placement, teaching pedagogy in specific disciplines and as specialists in particular programmes. The reviewers met a good cross-section of Associate Staff and all spoke highly of the induction and support they received. They seemed well aware of the commitment to activity based learning and of some of the research being undertaken.

The department is aware of the need to manage risks and needs to develop a risk register.

Strategic Plan, we would suggest is too long and vague. It needs to be more succinct with clearly identifiable targets and responsibilities for

meeting these clearly identified. In short it needs to become a working document which directly shapes and informs staff meetings.

Recommendations

The Self-Evaluation Document

The self-evaluation document provides valuable information about the context of the department and what staff see as its current strengths and weaknesses. It has been the product of a great deal of consultation. While the document identifies some key issues, shared by many education departments, such as workload, accommodation and teaching and learning issues we feel it significantly underplays its strengths.

- For example it does not do justice to the public service work of many members of the department through membership of national committees. We would strongly recommend an appendix listing these.
- It made no mention of the conference celebrating the 10 years of guidance and counselling in Maynooth at which an opportunity to track the career paths of past students was undertaken and a dvd of these produced.
- There is no indication of the extent and volume of international research connections and invited keynote presentations overseas
- The Department's planned action in relation to the strategic plan is included in the self-evaluation document. A more concise list of targets, and deadlines for completion of intended actions, would have been beneficial.

Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Curriculum design

The reviewers congratulate the department on the proactive way in which they have engaged with change and development. It is highly beneficial that there has been increased collaboration between staff members. The reviewers are aware that some work has been done in developing

modules that are shared by students from different courses and recommend that

- further exploration is undertaken by the department on developing modules that can be shared across programmes, taking into account issues of levels and suitability of content.

Teaching

The reviewers found that Moodle was used extensively throughout the courses offered by the department and where it was actively employed was significantly appreciated by students. There was some indication that students considered it could have been more actively used as a learning medium in some areas. The reviewers recommend that

- the department audit the use of Moodle in courses to evaluate the extent to which it is being used consistently in all areas.

There was significant evidence and departmental staff members make every attempt to cater for the individual needs of students enrolled on courses in the department. On the masters' programme for example it appears common practice for cohorts to be divided into small groups so that the students are able to explore areas that particularly interested them. This is laudatory but the reviewers recommend

- that, given that some of the resultant groups of students are very small, the department reflect on the sustainability of this approach, particularly in the context of the increasing demands on staff.

Assessment

The reviewers commend the department for exploring the possibility of employing anonymous marking procedures and recommend that

- the department continue to develop this approach to assessment where appropriate.

The reviewers also note that there have been developments in promoting collaborative approaches to assessment and recommend that

- the department consider developing this further in terms of double marking and/or moderation processes.

Programme evaluation and review

The reviewers found that evaluation in courses and programmes took a wide range of forms. It was evident that some of these processes took

considerable time and effort on the part of staff and students. The reviewers recommend that

- whilst evaluation is an integral part of working with students and is on-going, the department should consider developing a standard data capture tool that would provide a common set of evaluative measures across programmes.

Student support

The levels to which students feel supported in their work are highly commendable. However there must be a question about the long term sustainability of the particular and often individual approaches to student support, given the many demands on staff time. The reviewers noted that there were some interesting developments in the department in the use of peer support in some programmes.

The reviewers recommend that

- further exploration could be done in this area to alleviate some of the pressure on staff time without detriment to the highly supportive environment provided by the department.

Resourcing within the department

Financial constraints may reduce the likelihood of any increase in the resourcing levels of the department and the reviewers in this situation recommend that

- the department explores the possibility of further collaboration with other units and departments in teaching programmes

Research and Scholarship

There can be tensions between devoting energy to the uncertain business of bidding for large scale research grants and the pursuit of individual research. We would encourage the department to be flexible here and avoid dichotomising the research strategy as either individual research or collaborative work. Both are needed and both are valuable. The benefits of collaborative work are the building up of a critical mass of researchers, inducting inexperienced staff in the realities of research, perhaps attaching research studentships and research fellowships to projects and

so increasing departmental staffing. Some research interests are not of this kind, however, and individual research resulting in high profile conference presentation and publications is clearly valuable.

The reviewers recommend that the departments should:

- Seek ways of including PhD and Ed.D students in broader social science research training provision in the University and avoid duplication of provision.
- More actively manage staff members who are studying for PhDs to ensure steady progress and the taking of study leave.
- Develop a research mentoring scheme so that new staff have a guide to help them on beginning research, on a publication strategy and on career development.
- Encourage staff to publish in international journals.
- The Department consider devising a strategy for publishing or otherwise disseminating the research outcomes from Master or PhD theses. This might be achieved, for example, via joint articles in journals involving supervisors and students, or developing a series of Working Papers that could be made available electronically.
- Avoid dichotomising collaborative and individual research and seek to expand and develop the research manager role.
- Sustain the clear interconnections between research and teaching.

In general the department needs to be more explicit about its many strengths, citing evidence of them. We noted that the President's Report for 2006-07 does not seem to reflect fully the considerable work undertaken by members of the department.

Leadership and Management

The department aims to operate collegially on a model of distributed leadership. Individual staff take responsibility for course leadership and this has involved a considerable amount of work with the arrival of modularisation and semesterisation. This is commendable but distributed leadership can mean that there is no coherent overview of activities, workload, risk. We therefore recommend :

- A reformulation of the strategic plan into a shorter and more precise shape so that it becomes a live planning tool.

- The development of a mechanism that enables an overview of taught programmes and the identification of overlap or duplication.
- The setting up of a risk register.

Professor Pamela Munn External Reviewer	Dr Margaret Reynolds External Reviewer	Mr Seán Ashe External Stakeholder
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