

**National University of Ireland, Maynooth**

**Quality Review: Education Department**

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*Peer Review Visit 30 March to 1 April 2003*

We have welcomed the opportunity to participate in the Quality Review of the Education Department of National University of Ireland, Maynooth. We are grateful to the President, Professor W J Smyth, the Registrar, Dr David Redmond and to the Quality Promotion Office for their help and support during this event. We are also grateful to Professor John Coolahan and the staff and students of the Education Department for their collaboration and participation in our discussions. Their willingness and openness in participating in this review enabled it to be a pleasurable occasion.

The following comments are offered in a constructive and supportive manner and we hope that these will contribute to the ongoing development of this Department.

**1. The Mission of the Education Department**

The Education Department holds a significant and prominent place in Irish education, and a reputation for high standards internationally. It has achieved a prominence and a place of significance within the teaching profession in Ireland and it engages a large number of teachers and other educators in its academic and professional activities. This Department has a reputation of being innovative and at the leading edge of thinking in university education provision.

The Department certainly has major strengths, not least in the good relationships that it forms with students and teachers. The Education Department is clearly inspired by a set of values which permeate all of its work. This is evident from the relationships of staff and students to the Department, and is tangible in discussing the ways in which all who are associated with the Department reflect on its work. The University and Department are encouraged to express these values and ideals which underpin the

work of the Department and have done so over many years. This “values-led approach” to education is underplayed in the documentation. The basis of the University has been consistently related to a set of values for inspiring society and raising students to distinction through education. It would be appropriate for these to be stated as part of the strength of the Education Department at NUI Maynooth and should feature in a more confident and specific way.

The international context of the Department is important. Staff in the Department have many significant links and areas of professional and academic contact. While the Head of Department contributes in a major way to the international scene through his work with organisations such as the OECD and the EC, it is noted, that the international profile of the department overall, in terms of publications, attendance at conferences etc in arenas of international significance, would benefit from wider exposure. The balance of energy in the Department might be redistributed in this way. However, the reviewers are aware that this is not unusual for Education Departments in Ireland. The reviewers are also aware that the national profile of the Education Department is very high and that many of its staff contribute significantly to the education debate and to policy-making at a national level.

In the documentation it might have been appropriate to be more explicit about the outreach activities of the Department and how it sees itself in relation to its collaborators and competitors. The reviewers are aware that the Education Departments of all universities in the Republic have only limited control over their student intake, as the overall and institutional quota of places for the Higher Diploma in Education is determined nationally by the Department of Education and Science and the Higher Education Authority. In relation however to other courses, and to its research and community agenda, the Department is encouraged to consider setting out its own strategic plan in which the relevant educational environment is surveyed.

## **2. Strategic Direction**

The leadership in the Department is effective and the Head of Department is widely respected in Irish education. The current leadership is heavily dependent on the charismatic and dynamic leadership of Professor John Coolahan. No praise is sufficiently strong for the charismatic nature of the leadership of Professor John Coolahan. This is legendary and exemplary.

The strategic direction (see pages 12/13 et seq) of the Department is clearly very important and is implicit in many of the initiatives taken to providing a good basis for developments. There is, however, a need to articulate and systematise many of the aspects of the Department. The range of initiatives which are mentioned do not in themselves constitute a strategic direction. It is recommended that a Departmental Strategic Plan be developed with a more clearly stated vision and a systematic way of stating the practices and activities within the Department. (Many of the current practices are well considered and appropriate, but they are not systematised. An example is the current negotiated approach to workload planning. The proposed Research Project on “Teaching and Learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” may offer some enlightenment in this area). It would be expected that planning of the Education Department would flow from and be a key component of the University’s Strategic Plan.

The University’s Strategic Plan shows the relatively small size of the Department (354 FTE’s) – see page 18 of Strategic Plan. However, as mentioned earlier, the reviewers are aware that the Department has only limited control over its own development. It is expected that H.Dip numbers will continue to be determined at national level for the foreseeable future and that individual universities will have no control over the numbers of H.Dip places allocated to each institution. However, the numbers admitted to further professional development courses and other post-graduate courses (e.g. H.D.E.M.; M.Ed. etc) is a matter for the Department itself and it is suggested that a comprehensive strategic development plan for the Department be drawn up. It is noted that the University’s Strategic Plan envisages the integration of the Education Department with the Department of Adult Education to form a School of Education – we see this as an important structural development which should be encouraged as part of a systematic planning exercise over the next five years.

The range of activities in teaching is in danger of being atomised. There is a significant spread across a very wide range of courses relative to the number of staff. This is heavily dependent on goodwill, but needs to be regulated and systematised. This fragmentation can also contribute to difficulties such as difficulties with course cohesion and over-assessment (see later).

The research agenda does not easily relate directly to the teaching which takes place in the Department and tends to be rather personalised and fragmented. The

reviewers are aware that this is not unusual in Education Departments in Ireland but would suggest that the development of a more focused approach to the research agenda of the Department and the establishment of research teams as emphasised in the University's Strategic Plan might be timely. When planning such teams, the Department should allow for the integration of part-time staff with experienced researchers. Opportunities might also be taken for expanding the research base including research with professional groups. (The Department has an interesting track record of this kind of work but this needs to be sustained over longer periods of time). The proposed new research project, *Teaching and Learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, provides an opportunity in this regard.

Some attention might be given to establishing a development fund (say around 5,000 euros) for use by part-time staff so that they, too, might become more fully part of the community of scholars which epitomises the inclusive nature of the Department.

It might be expected that the University's interest in developing technology would be a significant driver for development in the Department of Education, including developments related to distance teaching and the establishment of off-campus developments. Some attention might be given in the departmental planning for scenarios in which there are increased student numbers, but not necessarily based on campus.

### **3. Departmental Size and Structure**

The Education Department is a relatively small Department. This question of scale is important in terms of the range of work which can be undertaken. Within such a small Department there is a clear need for setting priorities for academic and professional work so that the significant impact of the Department can be felt in the wider education system.

The balance of full-time and part-time staff needs to be considered. The range of adjunct staff can lead to a rather fragmented style of Department and to student experiences which are also in danger of being fragmented. For H. Dip. Students there is an important matter of methods programmes being followed into school practice. While this is being addressed there is a need for some rapid development activity in this field. It is recognised that this may be part of a wider national issue, but the Department is encouraged to consider what it believes to be "best practice" in

this area and to pursue this with conviction. The approach being taken this year to ensuring co-ordination between general teaching methods, subject methods and teaching practice is warmly welcomed and favourably commented on by staff, students and teachers. This work needs to be formally articulated

The links with schools are cordial and well established. While we recognise that there is a long tradition in all Education Departments in Ireland of dependence on schools for the placing of H.Dip. students, there would be much to be said for establishing a more confident and systematic relationship with schools, if this were possible. This should incorporate aspects of assessment, and schools should be aware of their role and the expectations for developing these important partnerships. Some attention should also be given to informing schools in which students have worked of the final results of students on programmes.

#### **4. Administrative and Technical Support Arrangements**

The reviewers are aware of the brevity of this section but this should not imply a lack of concern for what is clearly a vital and integral part of the effectiveness and efficient operation of the Department.

There is a strong commitment of support within the Department from a dedicated and experienced administrative and technical staff. This is an effective system which is well managed and works well. The equipment used is up-to-date and well maintained and managed. Some thought might be given to having records of previous students managed centrally by the Registry of the university.

The Department is served exceptionally well in this area both in terms of quality and quantity of support. The work in ICT is of a very high standard and this demonstrates a clear commitment to methods of teaching and ways of dealing with new technologies.

The dedicated allocation of administrative staff is a major benefit to the Department. The continuity and commitment of administrative, technical and secretarial staff is a key to the efficient and successful service which they offer for both staff and students.

## **5. Staffing**

The academic staffing in the Department has increased steadily since 1996. There are undoubtedly good relationships within the Department and with the students in the university and with teachers in Ireland. The Department is widely recognised as having academic and professional strengths among its staff members.

A number of staff have been appointed since 1996, and this is proving to be a strong base of staff who will serve the University over the next decade. In certain areas of the Department there may be advantage in looking for succession planning in the years ahead.

The staff are highly committed to teaching which is all undertaken at post-graduate level. Some attention needs to be given, however, to teaching at the highest levels, including PhD supervision. The growing experience of the more recently appointed staff will be a significant asset in this area. At present there is a tendency for the Department to be stretched by the range of work offered at the level of the Higher Diploma and the Masters Programmes, and the balance of work in these areas needs to be carefully developed and managed.

There is a perception within the Department of a need for additional staff. However, the staff-student ratio (c. 20 to 1) is about average for a department in an Arts Faculty and is at least as generous as the staff student ratio in other Education Departments in Ireland. We are however aware that the individual supervision of the H.Dip in Ed. students places specific and at times, intense demands on the staff of Education Departments. However we suggest that the issue of perceived understaffing might be addressed by giving attention to the large number of small classes which absorb large amounts of staff time. The number of contact hours worked by staff seem to be too high, and this needs to be managed down by a rethinking of matters such as programme design, increased student numbers, reduction of time on assessment, and the effective use of technologies, even for academic counselling. Such a rethinking would provide an opportunity to rethink the balance between (student) self-directed learning and staff teaching.

It is recommended that a staff workload model is developed for the Department as part of an approach to systematising the management of the Department.

The Department would benefit from developing approaches to support the present Head of Department through sharing of action arising from the vision and ideas being developed in the university to benefit the teaching profession in Ireland. This may lead to appointing clearly designated co-ordinators and managers for significant programmes and projects, and setting out terms of reference for them.

The rate of turnover of staff needs to be considered. The full-time members of staff have a relatively low rate of turnover. The adjunct staff is a stable group. This combination represents a stable and contented staff. Attention has to be given to ensure the Department maintains an interesting and exciting community of scholars. With small staff numbers there is always a danger of academic isolation and lack of peer motivation in specific disciplines of education. While at present there are no signs of this some attention might be given to encouraging professional and academic contacts which will be intellectually sustaining and academically invigorating for staff.

Attention needs to be given to the balance of full-time and part-time staff recognising that the participation of part-time staff in policy making and research in the Department also needs to be reviewed.

A more systematic approach might be taken to issues of staff development which should be considered within a framework of priorities and plans for the Department. While we noted that some members of the full-time staff have taken advantage of sabbatical leave in recent years to upskill and that most full-time staff attend conferences and seminars relevant to their area of expertise, some attention should also be given to supporting the ongoing professional development of part-time staff.

## **6. The Balance of Activities**

Some attention needs to be given to the range of activities undertaken in the Department. Currently the range of activities is impressive in scope, but this is probably managed at the cost of long working hours and considerable dedication from many staff. The class contact hours for staff appear very high, and it is recommended that over an identified period of time they be brought into line with national norms. This should be part of the workload planning element of the recommended departmental strategic plan.

A great deal of work is undertaken with the Higher Diploma (164 FTE's) and the Masters Programmes with relatively low numbers undertaking PhD (5) or MLitt (4). If the Department was to create a more focussed agenda for research, and increase the potential pool of applicants from masters programmes, it may be possible to attract increased number of students who might then undertake higher degrees, and particularly PhD's.

Regarding the research agenda (see page 7) the overall strategy for research needs to be more focused and coherent. While there are a range of very interesting projects undertaken by students at masters level, the department would benefit from creating focal points or domains of research activity which would avoid the possibility of extending the academic and professional interests of staff across too many disparate areas. Some attention could be given to developing an agenda which offers direction and standards in relation to research. The approach to developing large projects is noted and in certain circumstances can be of benefit, but for the Department as a whole it may not be sufficient.

The identification of the research project proposal (page 142) is welcomed, although this may benefit from identifying several models of teacher education rather than to consider limitations in the style of teacher education (e.g. matters such as site based teacher education; problem based learning; transformative approaches to teacher education etc might be built into the proposal)

## **7. Student Feedback**

*The Department has been assiduous in collecting information from student feedback. The nature of this feedback is generally helpful although there are areas in which the generalized responses do not allow ease of interpretation and therefore purpose of action. It is suggested that there is a review of the questions asked so that appropriate data might be gathered which will impact on the teaching programmes.* Student Evaluation should continue to be a routine feature of the work of the Department and should be carried out on an annual basis for all programmes of study.

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Programme evaluations emphasise the strengths of work undertaken in schools and the significant areas for development in the university based elements of the programmes. It is worth noting that the evidence which has been collected is generally reflected in the “Key Concerns” for each programme. There are occasions however when this may not be so (e.g. in the H. Dip Ed. there is a concern about the timing of the programme).

One of the significant and helpful features of the programmes is the appointment of external examiners. On certain occasions these examiners operate across all campuses of NUI. Where such appointments extend across other Universities there is a need to ensure that the programmes of Maynooth are given due attention. Because they are generally of a high calibre there can be a process established which overlooks some of the salient developments required in a programme. It is important to note that some of the key issues raised by students are not necessarily picked up by external examiners. Useful guidance and comprehensive advice of external examiners are of central importance to the Department.

*There is a general concern with assessment. This clearly needs some attention at a policy level and would benefit from input from external examiners. It is recommended that the Department see this as a focal point for analysis and development. It is suggested that this area of activity be articulated within a departmental assessment policy, and that this be used as the standard, not only for the philosophy of the assessment but for its practical application. In particular the assessment of the H. Dip Ed and the timing of assignments and projects for practising teachers needs attention.*

*It is recommended that the Department sets out a policy on assessment, and in the light of this reviews its practices. This would have the advantages of avoiding many "ad hoc" changes in programmes, and would offer a principled way of reflecting on the approaches to assessment. This may form part of the Strategic Plan for the Department. Where the Department is concerned with outreach activities, these need to be planned with a resource base in mind.*

## **8. Aspirations Towards being a School or Faculty of Education**

It is noted that the Education Department in accordance with the University's Strategic Plan envisages part of its evolution as leading towards being a school or

faculty in its own right. There are several aspects of the Department which would need to be addressed as it sought this status. Among these would be:

### **8.1 The size and shape of the Faculty or School**

Normally in a Faculty or School there would be various Departments. The size of this Department at present does not easily lend itself to devolution into smaller units of a size and scale appropriate to a university. A coming together with the Department of Adult and Continuing Education and the addition of a Teaching and Learning Service for the support of university staff would significantly change the scope of the work of the School or Faculty, and would form the basis of a significant unit with a critical mass for the range of its activities.

During such a significant structural change for the Department the high quality of provision and the close relationships of the Department should not be lost. In addition there should be some thought given to the structural developments which would support and enhance

***Outreach Activities***

***Research***

***Relationships with other professional and academic groups.***

(This is a matter which would require further analysis and this was outwith the scope of the Departmental Review. The development of a School or Faculty should be more than the sum of its parts.)

## **9 Leadership**

We have already adverted earlier in this report, to the leadership provided in this Department by its current head, Professor John Coolahan. If the Department were to develop towards a Faculty or School one would expect several professors offering academic and professional leadership. This is a matter which would need to be considered with care in the evolution towards a School or Faculty. There would be demands in the leadership of a School or Faculty in transition which would require different approaches to that which can operate effectively in a smaller more cohesive department.

### **9.1 Resources**

There is a need to consider the resource base for a School or Faculty. At present there are very good resources available to the Education Department in terms of

accommodation and information technology infrastructure. The physical accommodation is exceptionally suitable for its purpose and is impressive. This is an excellent aspect of the Department, and would be substantially enhanced in an expansion to form a School. This is particularly true of the outreach activities of the Department.

## **9.2 Strategic Advantage**

There needs to be a discussion and analysis about the strategic advantage of this Department becoming part of a School or Faculty.

It is recommend that the evolution towards a different structural arrangement is a 3/4 year project for this Department.

Regarding research in the Department some attention should be given to the place of research not only in the Department but in the university more generally. In the UK there may emerge a set of arrangements which will target certain universities for research. Were this to happen in Ireland, there could be a danger that in a small department, such as the Department of Education might be excluded from research practices. Some attention should be given to regional networking of the Department of Education for research. This networking might include both other universities and key organisations and agencies related to education. The way in which research is organised might help focus on the place of research in the Department.

One model of research would be to infuse the Department, its teaching and staff development with this activity. Alternatively a centre for research or for research related themes might emerge from a strategic look at research across the university. In considering this matter inter-departmental research, and research using electronic methods might be considered.

The emphasis of this Department on research for policy development is an honourable and important aspect of educational research. We recognise that in developing this approach in the past two decades, the Education Department in Maynooth raised the credibility of and respect for university Education Departments among national policy makers and politicians and we salute Professor Coolahan for his vision in this regard.

## **9. Conclusions**

The Education Department at Maynooth has a deservedly high reputation in Irish education. If it is to maintain this high profile and reputation it will build on its considerable strengths which include

- **The relationships which the Department has with the teaching profession**
- **The relationships that staff have with current students**
- **Promoting the values based vision and mission of the Department in the face of a “systems driven” education system**
- **Effective leadership among school principals and in the education system more generally**

The Department has been effective in collecting evidence regarding the perceptions of it. It has however to be realistic about its aspirations. The Department undoubtedly has a significant future and will continue to make an impact in Irish education if it seeks to sharpen its strategic vision and mission and pursue this by appointing staff of quality and energy.

## **10. Recommendations**

It is recommended that the Department considers the following issues as part of its development planning

- 10.1 The University is encouraged to offer professional guidance and academic advice in expressing with clarity and conviction the values which imbue the University with justice and care, excellence in human development and service to the wider community in Ireland and beyond.
- 10.2 Consideration should be given to the place of NUI Maynooth in the wider scheme of collaboration and competition with other Universities. This strategic direction is likely to be an important feature of future planning for the Department of Education.
- 10.3 It is recommended that there is a clear statement of principles and practice which are articulated in a departmental Strategic Plan. This should

systematise many of the current effective practices and would act as a point of reference for developing the Department in the medium term.

- 10.4 There would be value within the Strategic Plan of having well argued policies in relation to

**curriculum support**  
**assessment**  
**partnerships with schools**  
**research**

- 10.5 Part-time staff should have access to development funding, say to a level of 5,000 Euros per year.
- 10.6 Some attention should be given to the formalisation and systematisation of many procedures and practices which are currently dealt with in more personalised ways.
- 10.7 The relationships with schools would benefit from further consideration to look at the possibilities of a more confident partnership which is professionally driven, and may even have a contractual basis.
- 10.8 There should be a review of workload planning in the Department to ensure a system of equity and balance of work.
- 10.9 Attention should be given to developing a community of scholars through international links and activities (such as conferences and projects overseas).
- 10.10 Specific attention should be given to prepare a Strategic Plan for research in the Department.
- 10.11 A planning process should be put in place within the University over a three or four year period to prepare for developing a School or Faculty which will incorporate the Department of Education as well as the Department of Adult and Continuing Education and possibly the Teaching & Learning Service.

10.12 Some attention should be given to developing national policies for teacher education in areas such as

- **partnership with schools**
- **regional policies for research**
- **assessment practices**

10.13 The Department should establish assessment policy which identifies assessment within the processes of learning and teaching.

10.14 The Department should undertake a review of some central curricular concerns such as

- **using September for Dip H.E. students in schools**
- **improving assessment practices wherever possible**
- **engaging in planned staff development activity for staff, including part-time staff.**