



NUI MAYNOOTH

Ólúscail na hÉireann Má Nuad

Quality Review of the Department of English

March 2010

Peer Review Report

Peer Review Group:

External Reviewers:

**Professor Adrian Frazier,
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National University of Ireland, Maynooth

REVIEW OF
THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND,
MAYNOOTH

FINAL REPORT

7 May 2010

This report arises from a visit by a review team to the English Department, NUI Maynooth, 29-31 March 2010. The Department had already prepared and submitted a 'Self Assessment Report' that, with other documentation, was made available to the review team in advance of the visit.

The review team consisted of Professor Norman Vance (Sussex), Professor Adrian Frazier (NUI Galway), Professor Rowena Pecchenino (NUI Maynooth), and Dr. Frank Mulligan (NUI Maynooth).

The report is structured to cover the following main topics

1. Aims and Objectives
2. Organization and management
3. Programmes and Instruction
4. Scholarship and Research
5. Overview

1. Aims and Objectives

The Department of English has clear and easily accessible aims and objectives.

- Research: to create conditions so that its staff can continue to produce regularly and at the present high standard, and to promote the fact that the Department is a 'national centre of excellence' in Irish and Postcolonial Studies.
- Teaching: Given the currently unfavourable staff/student ratio, to continue to deliver a unified and coherent curriculum through lecture and a limited element of small-group teaching, so that students become acquainted with the major historical periods and forms of English literature, with modern Irish literature, with theory and criticism, and with world literature. The Department aims to make innovative & extensive use of 'Moodle,' teaching assistants, and a professional 'Learning Resource Officer.'
- Postgraduate: The department aims to discover ways to recruit and retain its best students for postgraduate work, especially with a view to expanding the number of doctoral students. The new 'Honours English' track (MH114) is one step in this direction.

2. Organization and management

The Department has a clear system of management, in which all 13 permanent members of staff have a role, as coordinated by the head of department.

Just as the administrative work of the department is distributed among the staff, the teaching is shared out, so that each member of staff has precisely the same number of undergraduate, and postgraduate, contact hours.

3. Programmes and Instruction

The primary task of the English Department is delivering the BA programme. Five out of every seven contact hours of staff members are spent on undergraduate teaching; the remainder is dedicated to work on the taught postgraduate courses, the MA in 20th Century Irish Writing and the MA in Culture, Empire, and Postcolonialism. Through its membership in the School of English, Media and Theatre Studies, the Department has an affiliation with the MA in Dramatherapy, which is co-ordinated by a faculty member on a fixed-term contract.

The Department has introduced a specially designed programme for a newly-recruited and highly qualified group of honours students (MH114, now in its second year).

For First-Year students, the Department has recently devised 'Criticism and Research' (EN150), with a common readings, common lesson plans, but delivered through small-groups by Teaching Assistants with regular writing required.

4. Scholarship and Research

The permanent members of staff, thirteen in all, have published seventeen major monographs. All members of the department appear to be research-active.

5. Overview

The research profile of teaching faculty, concentrated mainly in Irish and Postcolonial Studies, is extraordinarily impressive, teaching is extremely professional, and we particularly commend the impressively high proportion of mature students being taught. But there can be no doubt that the staff-student ratio in the Department, reported in the Self-Assessment Report as 39.6 to 1 in 2008-9, is appalling, the worst we have ever come across.

Typical staff-student ratios for English departments internationally would be 11:1 in North America, 17:1 in the UK. The OECD minimum for the subject is 17.1. Irish figures are harder to come by. Our impression is that TCD ratios would be like the UK norm; UCD figures not much over 20:1; and the rest of the NUI in the upper twenties. Obviously, the NUI Maynooth English Department ratios are badly out of line with these norms. Who suffers? The students, in their development of transferable skills during their three years of undergraduate education.

The Department has responded creatively and strategically to the challenge: remarkable ingenuity has recently been expended on devising a concentrated up-to-date curriculum which accommodates unpredictably large numbers of students but also permits quality teaching in an atmosphere of research and makes available research time.

We had some initial concerns that the emphasis in this curriculum on current faculty research strengths in Postcolonial Studies, already becoming a contested term, might soon render it out-of-date, but we were reassured that, like the participating faculty, it was sufficiently flexible to adapt to the constantly-changing intellectual climate.

But, despite the cleverly-designed curriculum, the very adverse staff-student ratio has serious costs. We note without surprise, as the Department has noted, that the evidence of student surveys in 2009 makes it clear that 'Students enrolled in the

denominated entry programme (MH114) who are allowed to take special modules with limited enrolments (EN173 and EN174) are far more satisfied with their experience and are more positive in their assessment than those enrolled in the main, large-lecture classes.’ (Self-Assessment Report, Appendix 4, p.3) Bought-in assistance is provided to help with the provision of a certain amount of small-group teaching, and with otherwise completely unsustainable marking-loads, but the work of organising, training and monitoring such assistance is itself very time-consuming, and the necessary divorce between teaching and marking is not ideal from the point of view of monitoring and sustaining individual student progress.

The heart and life of the modern discipline is in lively critical discussion and the development of critical, analytical and communication skills, both written and oral, but all of these require more small-group teaching – and in smaller groups - than can possibly be provided at present. The seminar on Kate Chopin that we attended, while excellent and impressively conducted, with carefully-formulated questions to focus discussion, was really a lecture-seminar in which a substantial quantity of material had to be presented before any discussion could take place. The lecture on Strindberg we attended was also excellent, well-contextualised and very professionally delivered to a large audience, but the work of such an extreme and controversial figure cried out for seminar discussion and critique rather than simply monologic exposition, no matter how accomplished.

The development of ‘Moodle’ as an on-line discussion forum for each module and a shared teaching resource for students and faculty, and the use of weekly on-line quizzes counting modestly towards assessment as a way of stimulating and monitoring attentiveness to lectures, are interesting innovations designed in part to offset some of the problems caused by under-staffing, but we had the impression that the quizzes in particular had had a rather mixed reception both among students and faculty, and the ending of the Moodle quizzes next year for logistical reasons was greeted with relief as well as regret. We met with three different groups of students. Two groups were unanimous that the Moodle quizzes were ‘an essential learning tool’ and offered the ambitious student ‘points for the taking.’ The members of a third group (MH114 students) were equally adamant that this form of assessment was a trivial nuisance.

While faculty were commendably willing to see perplexed or anxious students on an individual basis in office-hours or after lectures, the sheer weight of student numbers and the commuting habits of much of the student body seemed to present discouraging practical difficulties and perhaps deterred some students from seeking the help they needed. It was clear that invaluable and much-appreciated individual support, particularly for essay-writing problems, was provided by Dr Sinead Kennedy, the Learning Resource Officer. We were told repeatedly about queues of students outside her door, but we note that her appointment is only part-time.

The best and ablest students will acquire and develop appropriate skills regardless of staffing difficulties, and perhaps no system yet devised can significantly help the very weakest or idlest students, but with such a poor staff-student ratio the middle-ranking students inevitably tend to lose out. Despite heroic endeavours such as the carefully-planned and well-delivered first-year course ‘Criticism and Research’ (EN150), supported by well-integrated seminars, and a commendable determination to increase small-group teaching year on year despite all the constraints, it is difficult under present conditions to ensure that by the time they graduate all or even most Maynooth students in English will have the highly-transferable writing,

communication and critical-analytical skills employers of graduates in English might reasonably expect.

While the streamlined and concentrated curriculum works wonders in giving students both some historical coverage and an introduction to contemporary theoretical perspectives we had some concerns that, particularly for those who might wish to go on to teach in secondary schools, the teaching of pre-twentieth-century material, mainly in the second year, was unavoidably rather restricted and perhaps in consequence over-thematised. A more optionalised curriculum in the second and third year, while more costly to deliver and so perhaps unaffordable under present conditions, would give more scope to students who wished to know more about some of the more traditional areas of the discipline, such as early modern literature, or eighteenth-century or romantic or Victorian literature or American literature. It could also provide more opportunities for testing theoretical perspectives against actual literary texts.

In the current economic climate there seems little or no prospect in the near future of a substantial increase in permanent staff or even of short-term contracted staff. But limiting the number of students is another way to improve the staff-student ratio. We recommend that serious thought should be given at Faculty and College level to the possibility of reducing the large and effectively uncontrolled numbers who opt for English by requiring a higher leaving-certificate attainment in English for all those seeking to pursue English courses at Maynooth. If the situation could be eased by some measure such as this, and administrative chores correspondingly reduced, it would not then be too difficult or unmanageable for faculty to increase their contact hours (currently rather low) proportionately, to sustain more small-group teaching without significant loss of protected research time.

The other problem at least partly attributable to the staff-student ratio and the all-absorbing concerns of undergraduate teaching provision seemed to be relatively low research-student numbers, despite the very impressive research standing of both senior and junior faculty and the availability of several MA programmes which could channel students into research. There was provision for all permanent members of faculty to participate in MA as well as undergraduate teaching, which we very much welcomed, and it was entirely natural and appropriate that these very focused programmes should reflect faculty research strengths, but we wondered whether, particularly with a less-pressured staffing situation, there would be scope to explore a range of options which might be more attractive to a wider range of students. Some current MA students with whom we met requested that seminar meetings continue throughout the twelve weeks of the semester, and this too might have the effect of fostering a desire to continue for further study, and of enhancing or acquiring the skills to do so.

While there is a good chance of fostering and developing additional home-grown future MA and Ph.D. students through the recently-instituted MH114 denominated-entry degree pathway, as hoped, this source of supply could and should be supplemented by attracting more research students from outside the College and even outside the country. Funding is a problem here, and we appreciate that competition for the IRCHSS studentships and the small number of modest Maynooth Hume graduate scholarships is extremely keen. But we suggest thought should be given to the possibility of converting funds currently available to buy-in teaching assistance into postgraduate teaching fellowships or bursaries, to be made available on a competitive basis. This should attract some very good students and more

generally advertise and stimulate interest in pursuing doctoral work in English at Maynooth.

It seemed to us as outsiders that there might be scope for increasing research-student numbers in English in conjunction with the new multi-institutional research institute *An Foras Feasa*, specialising in digital humanities, but the precise relationship between the two bodies was not entirely clear to us nor, it appeared, to many in the Department. It might be possible to bring the work of *An Foras Feasa* and of the English Department closer together by providing opportunities within the MA programmes for addressing some of the issues relating to digital humanities. A seminar series for MA and PhD students might also be held on the premises of the research institute and organised in a fashion to overlap with the interests of the *An Foras Feasa* graduate students.

We were pleased to meet one research student working on an eighteenth-century topic who had found excellent eighteenth-century materials available in the Russell Library. Because of Maynooth's own history and distinctive role in Irish society and its historical links with the old Irish colleges in continental Europe from Salamanca to Louvain there are some unique and apparently under-used resources on the premises to support literary and cultural-historical research in earlier periods. There is also early-modern and indeed medieval expertise available in the College in sister-disciplines such as History and Philosophy which could help to sustain work in such areas. But current staffing constraints seem to have contributed to the elimination of pre-Renaissance literature from the English curriculum, interesting and valuable in itself and something which could also strengthen and sustain the perhaps slightly beleaguered teaching of early-modern writing.

We realise that new inter-departmental collaborations are never easy administratively, may possibly need to wait until more favourable times, and probably need to be addressed at Faculty and College rather than departmental level, but we also noted that there was already a shared appointment in Film between English and Media Studies and that the prospect of geographical proximity seemed likely to foster further co-operation when the new building was available. Given the normal NUI pattern of joint-honours degrees, we felt that there could be opportunities for co-operation in developing interdisciplinary study with bridging courses embedded in some of the more common combinations such as English and History (possibly something like 'Political and Cultural Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century'). At present the two halves of such degrees are formally unconnected. There seemed also to be opportunities for interdepartmental teaching on interdisciplinary courses currently provided by English alone: the excellent first-year 'History of Ideas' course offered in the MH114 strand seemed a case in point: History, Politics and Philosophy students could well benefit from such a course and colleagues in the relevant departments might well be interested in contributing to it. It would of course also be a natural bridging course for students hoping to graduate in - say - English and Philosophy.

The self-assessment report included a useful technicolour appendix graphically presenting and analysing information gleaned from two student surveys and reporting on action taken in the light of them. But it appeared that there was no regular gauging of student opinion on course-provision through standard end-of-module Student Evaluation Questionnaires (SEQs) of the kind that are now more or less mandatory in many universities and are an expected part of Quality Assurance procedures in the UK. To take just one example, we felt that statistically significant

SEQ evidence about the Moodle quizzes would have been more helpful to us than the confusing and contradictory messages we got from talking to different groups of students.

Recommendations:

Primary:

1. Take steps to limit the intake of students to English in the omnibus arts degree, with a target of achieving a maximum 24:1 staff/student ratio before the next quality review.
2. Deploy the part-time teaching budget to create several advertised 4-year teaching fellowships, in order to recruit Ph.D. students.
3. Establish the Learning Resource Officer as a permanent position, full-time if possible.
4. Regularly sample student opinion in a systematic way in order to gather evidence for the ongoing improvement of the educational programme.

Secondary:

1. Explore the possibility of interdisciplinary linking courses, in which faculty expertise and time could be shared between English, History, Classics, Modern Languages, and Media Studies (for instance).
2. Maintain the high-degree of staff and student literacy with tools like 'Moodle' through any future transition to more small-group teaching.
3. Continue to refine (by trial and error) the BA and MA curricula, both in relation to the inclusion of representative critical/theoretical texts, and in exploring ways of addressing or sampling different areas and periods of literary achievement and scholarly development in English.

Comments on the Methodology of the Review Process

1. The opportunity to meet a good range of undergraduate and graduate students and every member of teaching faculty and also administrative and support staff was very welcome and very useful to us.
2. The participation in the review process of two senior Maynooth faculty from outside the Department was in principle helpful but in practice it might have been better to involve people in more intellectually adjacent Departments.
3. It was good, and very interesting, to have a brief opportunity to visit the splendid Russell Library but had time permitted it would perhaps have been helpful to have had the chance to develop a better sense of ordinary undergraduate library provision and support.

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