

# Quality Implementation Plan

## Department of English, NUI Maynooth

This plan was approved following a meeting of the President and Head of Department on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2010

### Comments by the Department on Review Process

The Department generally found the Quality Review process to be greatly streamlined and simplified since our last experience, and this was widely welcomed. We also found that the reviewers were incisive, constructive, and made a number of very useful suggestions in a number of areas. Central to the value of the reviewers' contributions was their firm grasp of the extent to which departmental staff-student ratio badly out of line both with international indicators, and with much of the rest of the institution, constitutes a very real structural limitation on the work of the Department. Indeed, it was noted that the Department's internationally-recognised research record, and the quality of its undergraduate teaching, was achieved against considerable odds in this regard; what is more, the reviewers commented helpfully on steps that have been taken to work with this current situation. Indeed, many of the key recommendations in the report revolve around a recognition of this basic factor.

A summary of the recommendations as offered by the reviewers is as follows:

#### 1. Primary:

- 1.1 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.
- 1.2 Deploy the part-time teaching budget to create several advertised 4-year teaching fellowships, in order to recruit Ph.D. students.
- 1.3 Establish the Learning Resource Officer as a permanent position, full-time if possible.
- 1.4 Regularly sample student opinion in a systematic way in order to gather evidence for the ongoing improvement of the educational programme.

#### 2. Secondary:

- 2.1 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).
- 2.2 Maintain the high-degree of staff and student literacy with tools like 'Moodle' through any future transition to more small-group teaching.
- 2.3 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.

## **A. Recommendations which the Department could implement only if additional resources are provided by the University**

- 1.1 *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.*

*Comment:* This is the single most serious challenge facing the English Department, and the factor – as noted by the Quality Review’s Final Report – that shapes almost every aspect of the Department’s work. The Reviewers’ comments on this are worth quoting in full:

*“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.” (p. 4)*

Since this report appeared, the annual *Sunday Times* University of the Year league table rated NUI Maynooth in last place among the Irish universities; the factor that had the greatest single bearing on that ranking was staff-student ratio, in which the NUI Maynooth scored lowest in the sector as a whole.

*Action:* It is clear that this kind of staff-student ratio is not sustainable if NUI Maynooth is to maintain quality of teaching and research. Given this sectoral context, NUI Maynooth should seek a derogation from current staff reduction objectives (including the moratorium on new appointments) as a means of establishing a measure of sectoral equity that recognises the University’s rapid growth over the past decade. The English Department (and other Departments with similar imbalances) should be the target recipients of any new posts created in this manner.

Some other actions, or possible actions, are as follows:

- *Extending the contract of the Learning Resource Officer.*  
See 1.3 below
- *Extending the Contract of the School Lecturer in Film Studies:* Again, in an innovative move, the School of English, Media and Theatre Studies made an appointment at Lecturer level across the School as a

whole, in the area of film studies. The holder of this post currently teaches across the School (as well as doing administrative work in both English and Media). This provides a new level of flexibility in terms of his role as an academic. The contract expires at the end of the current academic year. If this were to happen, the staff-student ratio in English would deteriorate further. As an action resulting from the meeting, the Head of Department is to urge the University's HR officer to extend the contract beyond August 2012.

- *No Increase in Student Numbers:* The other side of the staff-student ratio equation is, of course, student numbers. At the meeting, the Head of Department was given an assurance that there will be no increase in student numbers in the immediate future.
- *Achieving a Target of No Class Larger than 200:* In parallel with a process underway in the Teaching and Learning Committee, the meeting explored more radical ways in which it might be possible to improve student experience by reducing very large class sizes. With new appointments, it would become possible to offer English as effectively two, mutually exclusive (for timetable purposes) – and English 1 and an English 2, as it were. These may or may not be differentiated in terms of content or approach (for example, one strand might concentrate more closely on Irish and World literature, the other on a more canonical English literature).

On the issue of student intake, some steps have already been taken in this direction with the introduction of new subjects in the omnibus Arts degree. The Department will continue to work actively with the Admissions Office and the Teaching and Learning Committee to develop innovative ways of shaping student intake in ways that spread student numbers more equally across the institution, thereby also addressing the other side of the staff-student ratio equation.

These matters have been brought before the Academic Staffing Committee; they are also under active consideration by the Teaching and Learning Committee. The Department is taking an active role in making decisions on staffing and the related issue of student intake through the Academic Staffing Committee.

### 1.3 *Establish the Learning Resource Officer as a permanent position, full-time if possible.*

*Comment:* The position of Learning Resource Officer was created with SIF funding in 2007. This initial SIF funding was to make possible the piloting of initiatives in teaching that could subsequently be mainstreamed if they proved successful. The Learning Resource Officer (LRO) has since proven to be an integral and necessary element in the student learning experience in a Department with relatively low numbers of staff, and relatively high student numbers.

The LRO runs a drop-in service for students, providing extra assistance on academic matters, basic skills such as writing and research, help with essays, direction to counselling services, pastoral care, and many other areas. The large cohort of mature students (mentioned favourably by the reviewers, p.4) are particularly reliant on the LRO; the same is true of students entering Maynooth through the Access programme. In short, running the English Department without this post is now almost unimaginable. LRO also liaises with staff colleagues in co-ordinating use of resources such as Moodle, of which we make great use.

*Action:* The contract for the Learning Resource Officer terminates at the end of 2011-12. As an action resulting from the meeting, the Head of Department has consulted with the University's HR officer about extending the contract beyond the academic year 2011-2012 and indeed establishing it as a permanent position, full-time if possible. A decision is still pending.

#### *1.4 Regularly sample student opinion in a systematic way in order to gather evidence for the ongoing improvement of the educational programme.*

*Comment:* This is an area that has been the victim of adverse staff-student ratios; large student numbers (over 1100 undergraduates) and relatively low staff numbers make regular surveys unduly time-consuming.

*Action:* The Dean of Teaching and Learning, and the Teaching and Learning Committee, are currently in the advanced stages of exploring technologies for administering centralised student surveys and a tool for regular student surveys is currently under development by the Teaching and Learning Office. Rather than each department developing survey tools, it is more efficient to centralise this function. When introduced, it will provide the English Department with the technical support needed to carry out the systematic gathering of student opinion. Work is on-going to ensure that standardised student survey tools are suitable for English Department modules in which more than one lecturer is responsible for a given module.

## **B. Recommendations which the Department could implement unaided:**

The Department will explore one of the recommendations of the reviewers, with a view to implementing it (1.2) and will be able to implement all of the secondary recommendations (2.1, 2.2, and 2.3).

### *1.2 Deploy the part-time teaching budget to create several advertised 4-year teaching fellowships, in order to recruit Ph.D. students.*

*Comment:* This was a creative idea offered by one of the reviewers, and it has already been the subject of informal discussion in the Department. Given the extent of the Department's reliance on occasional, hourly-paid faculty, there is certainly a *prima facie* case for consolidating that expenditure in one or more teaching fellowships. However, the success or otherwise of this suggestion will be in the detail; for instance, in the extent to which current occasional staff teaching, using a number of individuals, does not depend upon simultaneous teaching hours. It may also be important to consider the relevant labour legislation in this area.

*Action:* The Department commits itself to exploring this option with a view to implementing it if practical. This appears to be an excellent idea, and the Department has been exploring it, in the first instance internally, next seeking advice from HR and Graduate Studies. The proposal has been brought to Academic Council by the Research Office. The English Department has supported the initiative. If successful, it may be a model to roll out throughout the rest of the institution.

In addition, the Department is at an advanced stage of developing innovative options (in the first instance, running workshops for Second Level students) to raise non-Exchequer funds that could be put towards creating more postgraduate scholarships.

### *2. 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).*

*Comment:* There has already been some interdisciplinary linking of modules in the MA programmes. In the current year, the Department is undertaking an extensive review of its taught MA programmes, part of which will consider the possibility of allowing students to exchange modules with cognate disciplines. The possibilities for this sort of work are more limited at undergraduate level, given the restrictions imposed by a timetable that must cater for multiple subject combinations. However, the new dynamic within the School of English, Media and Theatre Studies may allow for the possibilities of interdisciplinary linking of module components. This matter will be tabled at the first meeting of the School as a whole in the current Semester.

*Action:* The Department is to make the interdisciplinary linkages a priority in the re-design of the MA programmes, and explore interdisciplinary

linkages within the School context in the first instance. A complete structural re-design of programme offerings is underway at MA level.

2.2 *Maintain the high-degree of staff and student literacy with tools like 'Moodle' through any future transition to more small-group teaching.*

*Comment:* As the reviewers note, Moodle has become central to the functioning of the Department. Indeed, the one module that is exclusively delivered through small-group teaching (EN150 in First Year) makes extensive use of Moodle in delivery of course materials, tutor feedback, and other key functions. There is an argument to be made that some aspects of Moodle work better with small groups.

*Action:* Moodle is now integral to the functioning of the Department. Facilitation of its use will be an on-going priority.

2.3 *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.*

*Comment:* In 2008-9, the English Department introduced an undergraduate programme that had undergone the most extensive redesign in more than twenty years. The current year sees the first cohort of students to enter this redesigned syllabus complete the full degree cycle. As such, the Department views the undergraduate syllabus this year as being in a period of consolidation. Likewise, the accelerated introduction of the structured PhD programme this year means that new structures are currently being rolled out for the teaching of research students.

*Action:* The English Department has set out the revision of its MA programmes as one of its principal targets for the 2010-11 academic year. . It is currently undertaking a complete re-design of the M.A. programmes, with a view to producing structures that are more flexible, truly modular, and accommodating of interdisciplinary initiatives.

Other programmes will be kept under review, and amended as necessary

**C. Recommendations which the Department could implement only with assistance from other bodies within the University and without cost implications**

*Not applicable.*

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**Professor Tom Collins  
President**

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**Professor Chris Morash  
Head of Department**