



NUI MAYNOOTH
Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY

QUALITY REVIEW 1996

PEER REVIEW REPORT 1996

*Quality Assurance Audit
External Assessors Report*

Department of Geography
St. Patrick's College, Maynooth

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This review was completed before the enactment of the Universities Act, 1997. At that time this department was formally part of St. Patrick's College Maynooth.

1. PREFACE

At the start of this report, we would wish to register a strong recognition of our own positionality as 'outsiders' from the frameworks and processes of Irish universities. It has been our intention, therefore, to avoid in this exercise spurious comparisons with the UK framework within which we both work and with which we are very familiar. Audits of research and teaching in the UK have been carried out under very specific guidelines, the details of which are not appropriate as specific comparators with the audit exercise covered in this report. We have therefore sought to draw only on the general experience gained from these audits. Moreover, we recognise that the administrative and funding frameworks provided by NUI and HEA differ markedly from those with which we work. Maynooth's Geography department works essentially within a Joint Honours system and enjoys a less favourable level of funding than equivalent UK departments. We have sought to assess quality assurance within these limitations.

Our overwhelming impression of the Geography department is that its performance is impressive in all areas. We would wish to state at the outset that academic staff in the department are of high quality, and that those students who we encountered were articulate, knowledgeable and thoughtful. We congratulate the department on the production of an excellent self-assessment report within a very limited timeframe. IT IS WITHIN THIS BROAD CONTEXT OF SATISFACTION THAT ANY ENSUING COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS SHOULD BE RECEIVED.

2. PROCEDURES

In undertaking this audit we have carried out the following procedures:

- (i) read and analysed the department's "self-assessment report" (2 volumes) sent 10 days in advance
- (ii) met with the head of department, Professor Jim Walsh
- (iii) met with available teaching staff in the department, either individually or in small groups with analogous teaching and research interests
- (iv) met with technical staff in the department
- (v) met with a group of students, ranging from Year 2 undergraduates, to Ph.D. students
- (vi) inspected teaching and computing facilities used by Geography staff and students
- (vii) inspected office and teaching spaces dedicated to Geography in Rhetoric House

* THE TIME PERIOD ALLOCATED TO TASKS (ii)-(vii), EFFECTIVELY 24 HOURS, WAS INSUFFICIENT FOR A PROPERLY THOUGHTFUL AND INVESTIGATIVE AUDIT. WE RECOMMEND THAT MORE TIME BE ALLOCATED TO THE VISITS OF ASSESSORS TO MAYNOOTH.

Our work would also have been enhanced by more formal facilities for note-taking and summary.

* WE RECOMMEND THAT SECRETARIAL AND/OR WORD PROCESSING FACILITIES BE MADE AVAILABLE TO EXTERNAL ASSESSORS DURING THEIR VISIT.

We would also wish to record that the role of external assessors in undertaking a quality assurance audit is as yet relatively unclear. In UK assessments, there is typically a specific pattern or agenda to be followed. To some extent, the as yet "experimental" auditing process in Ireland means that we were left somewhat to create our own agenda. Given the time constraints, this focused on three main tasks, each emphasising the assurance of quality in the department:

- (i) to provide a filter for the information provided in the department's self-assessment report.
- (ii) to undertake a general evaluation of quality assurance, covering issues of staffing, teaching, research, administration and resources.
- (iii) to provide helpful suggestions from fellow professional geographers.

We undertook these tasks without being entirely sure of our jurisdiction.

* WE RECOMMEND THAT SERIOUS FURTHER CONSIDERATION BE GIVEN TO PRODUCING FIRM GUIDELINES FOR EXTERNAL ASSESSORS

In addition we were considerably hampered, particularly in task (i), by a lack of independent evidence with which to evaluate both what was written in the self-assessment report, and what was told to us in interviews with staff. Many of the self-assessment claims were comparative in nature, and yet data on the cost, resource base, student numbers, teaching

duties and research performance in other NUI Geography departments were unavailable to us.

* WE RECOMMEND THAT A BROAD COMPARATIVE DATABASE BE ESTABLISHED WHICH PERMITS DEPARTMENTS TO BE CROSS-CORRELATED BOTH WITHIN NUI COLLEGES AND BETWEEN THEM.

Other independent evidence - for example samples of student work, and external examiners' reports - was also unavailable to us. Such evidence, alongside relevant College reports (we were presented with copies of 'Towards The Next Century' during our visit) should whenever possible be made available prior to the visit.

Finally, we had no information as to procedures by which we would be given feedback, both on the quality of our assessment work and (more importantly) on what action is to be taken on the recommendations in this report.

* WE RECOMMEND THAT FIRM PROCEDURES BE SET IN PLACE TO ASSESS THE ACTIONS ARISING FROM QUALITY ASSURANCE AUDITS.

3. CONTEXT - GEOGRAPHY AT MAYNOOTH

Before proceeding to a detailed discussion of individual elements of departmental performance, we think it appropriate to record what we see as the essential context in which the work of the department is set:

- (i) the department is characterised by having undergone a period of rapid growth in the tasks it performs
- (ii) the expansion of student numbers at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels has not been matched by sufficient additional resourcing to prevent a very significant rise in student-staff ratios and a very significant fall in FTE-budget ratios. In any case, the department appears already to have been operating in a low budget environment.
- (iii) the department receives no specific "science funding" despite the growth of its teaching and research activities in physical geography. In addition it receives relatively small grants for equipment. As a result, some strands of geographical teaching and learning - notably in physical geography, remote sensing and computer-based techniques and G.I.S. - are being offered without an appropriate equipment base.
- (iv) the level of support staff has been outstripped by the growth in student numbers, and is now inadequate for the expanded state of the department.

Despite these handicaps, the department is made up of a band of dedicated, hardworking and often innovative staff who work well together, and who have kept the ship afloat with increasingly pressured workloads. They continue to be admired and respected by their students, and they have not only maintained departmental standards wherever possible, but also continued to modify their undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in such a way that they accrete more student numbers. Indeed they are in part responsible for some of their own growth pressures because in moments of collective enthusiasm they have willingly agreed to course changes and start-ups which have added yet more student numbers.

It would be difficult to conceive of a department which has experienced such a growth in teaching duties that did not concomitantly experience pressure on its collective time and resources for research. The self-assessment report paints a rosy picture in this regard, pointing to a considerable throughput of research funds. These are, however, unevenly spread through the department, and there is a questioning of whether research is sufficiently focused in international terms.

In summary then we see a department which has reached an important cross-roads.

THE DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY HAS BECOME STRETCHED TO ITS LIMITS (AND PERHAPS BEYOND).IT HAS BECOME DEPENDENT ON TEMPORARY RESOURCES AND IT WOULD BE EXTREMELY UNWISE TO ADD ANY FURTHER DUTIES TO ITS PRESENT PORTFOLIO. INDEED OUR ASSESSMENT SUGGESTS A STRATEGY WHICH BOTH SEEKS TO ATTRACT ADDITIONAL RESOURCES INTO THE DEPARTMENT AND SEEKS TO REDUCE THE SCOPE OF ITS TASKLOAD BY

INTRODUCING COLLABORATIVE SELECTIVITY INTO ITS FOCI FOR TEACHING AND RESEARCH.

We now proceed to comment on individual elements of quality assurance within the department.

4. STAFFING

We are entirely satisfied with quality assurance procedures for the appointment of new staff. Indeed, we are encouraged by the ability of the department to attract high quality applicants for recently advertised posts. There are, however, two aspects of staff affairs where more could be done to ensure quality assurance through the introduction of appropriate and rigorous procedures:

(i) staff review and development - we are encouraged by the proposals in the self-assessment document to instigate a staff review procedure. We regard this both a constructive practice for staff members and an appropriate method of quality assurance.

* WE RECOMMEND THAT STAFF REVIEW AND DEVELOPMENT BE MADE AN ESTABLISHED COMPULSORY PRACTICE ON AN ANNUAL BASIS.

We envisage that staff review will constitute a rolling programme of development, evaluating the previous year, proposing aspirations for the coming year, and assessing any training or other resource needs which are apposite to the fulfilment of these aspirations.

There are however, downstream issues from staff review and development which will need to be dealt with at College level. In particular, staff whose quality of performance is highlighted by staff review and development procedures will expect this highlighted performance to be recognized in parallel procedures dealing with staff promotion and incentive. Such recognition is perhaps most difficult for those at Senior Lecturer level for whom the prospects of further promotion often seem remote.

* WE RECOMMEND THAT THE COLLEGE INVESTIGATE THE POSSIBILITY OF INTRODUCING A LIMITED NUMBER OF PERFORMANCE-RELATED AND DISCRETIONARY SALARY INCREMENTS AT THE TOP OF THE SENIOR LECTURER SCALE.

(ii) staff training - we note that there have been some recent improvements in the provision of staff training, but our assessment is that these remain at a relatively low level. Quality assurance in teaching will only be satisfactory if a rigorous programme of staff training is put in place. Training might be compulsory for the induction of new staff and for inexperienced Ph.D. supervisors. It might also be strongly promoted for all staff having to teach large class sizes but inexperienced in computer assisted learning and other large group teaching techniques.

* WE RECOMMEND A THOROUGH REVIEW OF STAFF TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES IN THE COLLEGE WITH A VIEW TO ENHANCING THE LEVEL AND SCOPE OF AVAILABLE TRAINING

5. TEACHING

Here we have a number of comments to make, both about the planning and delivery of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, and about the nature of course assessment and liaison.

(i) undergraduate teaching programme - the quality of undergraduate teaching is evidently much appreciated by the students concerned. With a relatively small staff, the department covers wide swathes of geography, and has sought to update its programme continuously so as to cover emerging sub-disciplines and new emphases within the subject. As the boundaries of the subject of Geography expand, it has become increasingly difficult to maintain an undergraduate programme which keeps touch with all of those boundaries. IT IS OUR VIEW THAT IT WOULD BE UNWISE TO ALLOW THE UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMME TO GROW ANY FURTHER WITHOUT FIRST MAKING GOOD THE RESOURCE DEFICITS HIGHLIGHTED IN THIS REPORT. INDEED WE WOULD SUGGEST A RATIONALISATION OF THE EXISTING PROGRAMME.

Whilst we recognise the importance of being able to offer Geography as a Major subject under a newly modularised degree scheme, we suggest that the department consider ways of reducing its undergraduate workload in order to release more research time. Such moves might entail:

- a restriction on numbers of students taking Geography courses
- adjustments to course content, for example by identifying more core material and reducing option teaching by reducing the number of option courses or reducing the length of option courses
- teaching courses corporately (i.e. several staff contribute to a course) or consecutively (i.e. one member of staff teach a course one year, another the next)
- blocking teaching into one part of the year so as to release blocks of time for research
- eliminating or reducing time-consuming elements of the programme (e.g. formal thesis and long essays)

* WE RECOMMEND THAT THE DEPARTMENT BE INVITED TO DISCUSS WAYS OF RATIONALISING ITS UNDERGRADUATE TEACHING PROGRAMME WITH A VIEW TO DEVELOPING A STRATEGY FOR EMPLOYING THE BEST AVAILABLE RESOURCES IN THE MOST EFFICIENT MANNER COMPATIBLE WITH QUALITY ASSURANCE GOALS.

We note with some anxiety that practicals, the oversight of tutorials, and the quality assurance of postgraduate teaching are currently the responsibility of a Senior Demonstrator whose temporary contract is based on "soft" money which is only renewed annually. We applaud the model of using a Senior Demonstrator in this way; it clearly releases staff time for other tasks. However, quality assurance cannot rest on temporary provision.

* WE RECOMMEND THAT EVERY POSSIBLE EFFORT IS MADE TO PLACE THE SENIOR DEMONSTRATOR POST ONTO A NON- TEMPORARY FOOTING

We make this final observation on undergraduate teaching:

Module outlines are presented to students in a variety of formats (Self-Assessment Review, Appendices). We understand that these are to be standardised and we support this development. We suggest that module outlines in future include a statement describing the aims and objectives of the module within the context of the course as a whole.

(ii) postgraduate programmes - the healthy expansion of effort into postgraduate teaching and supervision has added further burdens of workload and resource needs. The postgraduate programme is relatively new and has been resourcefully introduced, but the requirement for a quality assured Ph.D. level programme raises a number of issues

- adequate funding for graduate students
- adequate research training for research students
- adequate supervisory arrangements for research students
- adequate guidelines on the expectations for Ph.D. students and supervisors

* WE RECOMMEND THAT THE DEPARTMENT SERIOUSLY CONSIDER THE ESTABLISHMENT OF PROCEDURES FOR DUAL SUPERVISION OF GRADUATE STUDENTS, FOR SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS HURDLES AT THE END OF YEARS 1 AND 2, FOR APPROPRIATE EQUIPPING OF ALL Ph.D. STUDENTS, AND FOR THE COMMUNICATION OF FORMAL EXPECTATIONS TO BE MADE OF BOTH GRADUATE STUDENTS AND SUPERVISORS.

* WE RECOMMEND THAT THE COLLEGE CONSIDER THE ESTABLISHMENT OF COLLEGE-WIDE COMPETITIVE BURSARIES FOR Ph.D. STUDENTS, AND THE PROVISION OF COLLEGE-WIDE RESEARCH TRAINING FOR POSTGRADUATES.

(iii) course assessments - the relatively new system of course evaluations has made a good start in the provision of an appropriate quality assurance procedure in this respect. However, a number of questions remain:

- shouldn't this be an annual procedure?
 - can the questionnaires be improved by adding space for qualitative comments to the data requests which currently predominate?
 - what are the outcomes of these surveys (are they fed into staff review and development procedures; can a summary of subsequent decisions/actions be publicised to students)?
 - shouldn't course assessments be extended to cover postgraduate courses and the Ph.D. programme?
- WE RECOMMEND THAT THE DEPARTMENT SERIOUSLY CONSIDERS STEPS TO MAKE COURSE ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES MORE RIGOROUS

(iv) formal liaison with students - the current informal system of liaison with students appears to work well, but quality assurance typically involves a two-way flow of communication between staff and students, and this tends to require formal, timetabled, publicized and minuted meetings with students at all levels. The department might also like to consider the idea of student representatives at staff meetings (taking care to reserve items of confidential business for the end of the meeting).

* WE RECOMMEND THAT THE DEPARTMENT SERIOUSLY CONSIDERS STEPS TO ESTABLISH FORMAL LIAISON PROCEDURES WITH ITS STUDENTS

6. RESEARCH

In assessing the quality assurance of research in the department, we felt somewhat ill at-ease with the lack of guidelines (as discussed in 2. PROCEDURES). There is a danger here of bringing UK criteria to bear on a situation where an "Irish" component is very significant. Also, the documentation provided for us did not specify the exact goal(s) of research. Is it driven by the need for income generation, feedback into teaching programmes, college-level objectives, some vague university norm, or more specific goals? It is difficult to assess the quality of research, or quality assurance procedures without a firmer indication of these objectives.

Our qualitative view of the self-assessment document relates to the tangible criteria of research grants and research publications. In gross terms the level of grant-winning seems very satisfactory. It is, however, unevenly spread with nearly half of the total value attributable to one member of staff. The list of publications is also respectable. However, we are used to an evaluation system which discounts less formal publications and valorises articles in refereed international journals. By these criteria, the publications performance is far less satisfactory. We would not wish to adjudicate between the importance of 'local' Irish research and publication, and the international publication of research carried out principally in Ireland. Clearly both have their place. We would, however, issue the warning that our own experience suggests that future assessments of research performance are likely to give

increasing focus to international reputations for research and publication.

* WE RECOMMEND THAT THE DEPARTMENT REVIEW THIS MATTER URGENTLY WITH A VIEW TO PRIORITISING THE NEED FOR INTERNATIONAL PUBLICATION IN A WAY THAT IS COMMENSURATE WITH THE INTEGRITY OF INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE DECISIONS ABOUT SCHOLARSHIP.

We note the existence of a near-market research arm in the College - the Centre for Local and Regional Development - in which members of the Geography department have played a leading role. However, we would keenly suggest that the department would benefit from the establishment of one or more umbrella status 'research centres', by which the representation of the research specialisms of the department would be strongly aided. What we have in mind here is the increasing need for collective joint research in order to develop a collective research profile for the department. Such collective work needs to grow organically, but can be helped greatly by the device of a research centre.

* WE RECOMMEND THAT THE DEPARTMENT GIVES SERIOUS AND URGENT CONSIDERATION TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ONE OR MORE RESEARCH CENTRES.

Finally, it was put to us that there is considerable pressure from the College for Geography staff members to engage in consultancy work as a way of generating income for the College. It is now widely regarded as equitable to share the profits from such consultancy between the College and the department concerned.

* WE RECOMMEND THAT THE COLLEGE INVESTIGATE THE ISSUE OF SHARING CONSULTANCY INCOME WITH THE DEPARTMENT(S) CONCERNED.

7. ADMINISTRATION

The quality of past and present management in the department is very evident from the information gleaned in this exercise. There are, however, four issues which we would wish to raise under this heading:

(i) headship of departments - we understand that heads of departments are currently appointed in Maynooth 'for life'. We consider this to be a hindrance to quality assurance and we would suggest that this issue is broached in the drawing up of new statutes for the College. Could heads of departments not be appointed for a fixed term (say five years) with the appointments being potentially renewable? Clearly, current heads would want to ensure that they did not lose their professional status when stepping aside from the headship.

* WE RECOMMEND THAT THE COLLEGE UNDERTAKE AN URGENT REVIEW OF THE PRACTICE OF APPOINTING HEADS OF DEPARTMENTS "FOR LIFE".

(ii) administrative devolution - the administrative tasks in the Geography department are already well delegated. However, we feel that there might be some scope for a further delegation of responsibility along with administration. For example, by delegating responsibility for undergraduate and postgraduate affairs to a Head of Undergraduate Studies and Head of Postgraduate Studies respectively, the administrative and responsibility loads on a head of department could be rationalised to issues of personnel, finance, research, forward planning and external liaison.

* WE RECOMMEND THAT THE DEPARTMENT GIVES SERIOUS CONSIDERATION TO A DELEGATION OF RESPONSIBILITIES FOR UNDERGRADUATE AND POSTGRADUATE AFFAIRS.

(iii) administrative overload - as noted in section 1, the department has outgrown its technical support. In particular the Executive Assistant appears overloaded such that the Head of Department and other teaching staff have to spend too much time on basic administrative tasks. A strategic but relatively inexpensive resourcing of this area could free considerable staff time for research.

* WE RECOMMEND THAT THE COLLEGE MAKE EVERY EFFORT TO FUND A JUNIOR PART-TIME SECRETARIAL POST IN THE DEPARTMENT.

This would allow the Executive Assistant to carry out tasks. currently undertaken by teaching staff.

(iv) mission statement - the relatively recent appointment of a new Head of Department seems a good time to reformulate the department's mission statement. The goals listed in the self-assessment document are a good start, but our view is that the department would benefit from a much more specifically focused mission statement with far less room for ad hoc accretion of teaching and research duties.

* WE RECOMMEND THAT THE DEPARTMENT AGREE A CLOSELY FOCUSED MISSION STATEMENT WHICH REFLECTS AIMS OF RATIONALISING TEACHING AND COLLECTIVISING RESEARCH DISCUSSED ABOVE.

8. RESOURCES

Some resource issues have already been discussed, but during our visit, three areas of resource insufficiency were brought to our attention:

(i) teaching space - some very basic and inexpensive upgrading of teaching spaces, to ensure that each had a suitable podium or dais and that each was compatible with the need to use multiple visual aids, would greatly benefit the quality of teaching. Perhaps more problematic is the totally inadequate nature of the physical geography 'laboratory' which in terms of space and equipment is not at a level required for undergraduate level teaching of physical geography.

(ii) computing - there are problems with growing access to sufficient machines to carry out basic practical teaching

(iii) library - the quality and scope of teaching is now being directly affected by the lack of adequate library materials

The College will be well aware of these issues, and we feel that specific recommendations in these areas are outwith our jurisdiction. However, we do make one strong recommendation which would beneficially affect the resource position of the Geography department. In our experience, all Geography departments have successfully negotiated a level of funding which reflects the fact that part of their teaching is in the scientific area of physical geography. As science-level funding is higher than social science/arts, such funding makes direct allowance for laboratory equipment and consumer needs commensurate with science teaching as well as for the cost of Demonstration for practical teaching. Our view is that ONE-THIRD of Geography teaching in Maynooth constitutes physical geography and that the department should be funded accordingly so that the quality of physical geography and computer-based learning can be assured.

* WE RECOMMEND THAT THE COLLEGE SEEKS TO FUND THE GEOGRAPHY DEPARTMENT ON A ONE-THIRD SCIENCE AND TWO-THIRDS ARTS BASIS, IN RECOGNITION THAT TOTAL FUNDING AT AN ARTS LEVEL IS ANOMALOUS IN THAT IT FAILS TO PROVIDE ADEQUATE RESOURCES FOR PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY.

9. CONCLUSIONS: THE INHIBITORS OF QUALITY

In identifying the 'overload' factor in the Geography department, we do not seek to attribute blame or to present a uni-directional response. We suggest that the situation results from two symbiotic and complex factors.

(i) an under-resourcing in staff and equipment (although the staff have been doing a magnificent job with what they have).

(ii) an overstretching by the department themselves (through their willingness to take on additional tasks).

A future strategy for Geography must therefore combine:

- * A MAXIMISING OF AVAVAILABLE RESOURCES - the task of the College
- * A RATIONALISING OF TEACHING AND RESEARCH IN ORDER TO MEET SPECIFIC AND SELECTIVE GOALS - the task of the Department.

The self-assessment document shows an awareness of these factors, and a willingness to move forward. By the time of the next Quality Assurance Audit, we anticipate that both the College and the Department will want to be in a position to show that they have acted on the need for this combined strategy.