



NUI MAYNOOTH

Ollscoil na hÉireann Mhá Nuad

Quality Review of the Department of German

2 – 4 March 2010

Peer Review Report

Peer Review Group:

External Reviewers:

**Professor Paul Bishop,
University of Glasgow;**

**Professor Britta Hufeisen,
Technische Universität Darmstadt.**

Internal Reviewers:

**Dr Honor Fagan,
Dean of Graduate Studies, NUIM;**

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Peer Review Report:
German Department NUI Maynooth
Paul Bishop & Britta Hufeisen

1. Introduction

This Report is based on the documentation provided by the Department of German and the evidence gathered during our visit on site from 2-4 March 2010. The documentation consisted of a 51-page Quality Assessment Report (plus 528-page Appendix), produced in line with the guidelines of the Quality Review Process, written by the four permanent members of staff of the Department. We were also provided with a document entitled ‘The NUI Maynooth Approach to Quality Assurance and Enhancement’. Our visit enabled us to meet with the Department as a whole, on an individual basis with each staff member, with its tutors, postgraduates, and undergraduates, and with major stakeholders in the Faculty. Information and support during the visit was provided by the Quality Promotion Office, and two Senior Members of the Faculty. In terms of frankness, openness, and access to information and material, the Review was conducted in a commendable and exemplary fashion. The visit itself was extremely useful in terms of information-gathering, sharing good practice, and reflective discussions; and it would be no exaggeration to say it was a pleasure to have been a part of this Review.

The German Department at NUI Maynooth enjoys an extremely positive reputation nationally (across Ireland), internationally, and (as became clear during the visit) internally as well. Clearly it is a major advantage for the Department to be recognized both locally and universally, and the reviewers hope that their Report will contribute to sustaining and enhancing this reputation for teaching and research excellence. This is especially the case, now the Department is poised to play a leading role in the recently established SMLLC (School of Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures) in Maynooth, and there was a palpable sense of excitement about the opportunities offered by the School among the members of the Department. Within

the context of Quality Review, Quality Assurance, and Quality Promotion, it is important to recognize that the achievements of the Department of German lie in both its teaching and its research; as the preamble to ‘The NUI Maynooth Approach to Quality Assurance and Enhancement’ realizes, ‘high quality teaching and research are inextricably intertwined’, and the Department of German, in fact, bears out this very principle. Accordingly, the recommendations to follow in the conclusion of this Report are essentially directed to the Faculty and to the University to help, support, and sustain the Department in its dual excellence in teaching and research.

Whilst developing its dual strengths in teaching and in research, the Department also carries out a huge amount of administrative work. In this respect, it is not necessarily unusual in higher education to see an increasing burden of administration falling onto academic shoulders, but nor is it a development that should be regarded with complacency. Despite the increase in administration, and the vigorous activity in terms of teaching and research, it was surprising and gratifying to see the enormous enthusiasm and energy with which the Department participates in interdisciplinary cooperation with other departments in Maynooth, and not simply with other language departments. For the reviewers it was impressive to see the willingness of colleagues to take on extra work in the form of teaching activities outside of the curriculum specific to the German Department, and the efforts made by colleagues to anchor the study of German within the context of overall provision for undergraduates in the Faculty deserve to be noted.

At the same time, the reviewers formed the strong view that the German Department is a department that cares for its students. Across all undergraduate years and among the postgraduate students, strong appreciation was expressed for the ease of access to members of the Department, and there is no doubt that extracurricular activities, such as the regular German *Stammtisch*, foster a strong sense of community and enhance the environment of learning. Obviously, students will not necessarily be aware of the sacrifice of time made by members of the Department to create such an atmosphere and to keep such activities going, but colleagues in German should be reassured that the student community recognizes and appreciates their commitment.

In short, there is excellent communication between the individual members of the Department, between the Department and colleagues in cognate disciplines,

between the Department and the Faculty in general; indeed, across the University. The existence of this culture, on which no price can be put, ties in with the excellence in teaching and in research to produce the combination of extremely positive student evaluation (present in the statistics available in the Report and confirmed also in meetings with students) and a remarkably strong reputation within the local academic community and the broader (inter)national context.

2. Response to Self-Assessment

In the opinion of both reviewers, the Self-Assessment Report prepared by the Department of German is very well-written: it is open, realistic, and also pragmatic, as well as being aware of the inevitable existence of areas for improvement. Clear and careful consideration is given to ways in which these areas might be tackled. Taken as a whole, the entire Self-Assessment Report demonstrates how solution-oriented the Department is in its thinking and in its practice. The Department has met the recommendations of the last review, and it has found interesting and helpful ways in which to do so. By meeting the challenges with which it has been presented, it has become one of the most successful German Departments in Ireland (and beyond).

The Department offers a wide range of courses in language, applied linguistics literature, and cultural studies, teaching on various programmes and options at the undergraduate and graduate level (Masters, PhD). On the undergraduate level, it would doubtless be even more successful, if timetabling restrictions did not prevent certain subject combinations. For instance, both reviewers noticed that interested students who enrol in Philosophy and German in the first year, would not, for timetabling reasons, be able to continue with Philosophy and take German courses in the second and third years.

The reviewers welcome departmental practice to open courses to students of other departments, by offering interdisciplinary modules in literature in translation and film studies, and in the view of the reviewers it is commendable to maintain standards within German by asking students of German to read and discuss the literature in question in the original, and not in the translation. Clearly there is a range of possible views about the evolution of teaching German in the future, and whilst not

wishing to impose any particular model on the Department at NUI Maynooth, the reviewers felt that the right balance was currently being struck.

Furthermore, the reviewers welcomed the transformation of the Departmental Research Colloquium into the SMLLC Research Colloquium, thus expanding it to students of other foreign languages, which would offer the opportunity of extending the scope and broadening the basis of the feeling among the graduate students of belonging to a team that shares similar goals. Especially in view of the newly-established School of Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, this Colloquium would serve as a common ground for joint activities with and for the graduates (see also below in the section, 'Recommendations'), and build on the happy experiences of the current graduate cohort.

Across the board, the Department of German has been successful in developing a general teaching and learning strategy which is supported by all its members. This is one of the key reasons that explains why the Department has been so successful, and its supportive and nurturing culture is evaluated very highly by students of all years. In the reviewers' meetings with them (years 1, 2, and 3/4), it quickly became clear that the students valued each department member's efforts to help them through their programmes, and significantly, they also acknowledged that their own efforts might not always be adequate (in other words, the students acknowledged both the support they are given *and* their need to take responsibility for their own learning process). The Department has responded well to the challenges with which it has been presented, and has sought — and found — constructive proposals and solutions, such as the 'attendance-rule' or the 'language-fail' rule, both of which are sound instruments of monitoring and improving students' learning outcomes, despite the heavy administrative burden involved. Equally, maintaining current participation numbers in language classes at a low level by offering parallel language classes, in order to foster and encourage constructive language learning and teaching, may bring good results, but inevitably exacts a heavy commitment from all members of the Department.

The Department of German has responded positively to existing hurdles, such as the variable quality of students' competencies, which results in mixed ability classes. Such classes present a particular challenge, in terms of how to provide an

appropriate response to the level of experience and performance among the undergraduate cohort. Colleagues in the Department are well aware of the fact that concentrating on less well performing students might put at risk the progress achieved by better performing students, although the challenge presented by the reluctance of some students to assume responsibility for their own learning is being tackled by the close guidance offered to students where necessary. As in other areas, it is a question of achieving a delicate balance, and the reviewers' impression, supported by the evidence of the external examiners' reports, was that this balance is being struck.

From the meeting with graduate students, it emerged that they regard themselves as being guided and supported very well, and the suggestions that were made in terms of enhancing the level of support they receive relate largely to the visibility of certain areas of support (see below in the section, 'Recommendations').

The research activities of the German Department are intensive and successful; the publication lists of the Department's members are impressive and exhaustive. Due to diverging research interests, the scope of publications is wide and covers a comprehensive range of topics and areas. Colleagues in the Department not only publish books and articles in peer-reviewed journals, but also attend and organise international conferences in order to discuss their latest research with their colleagues. Due to the high level of collegiality and the willingness of colleagues to step up and provide cover for each other on a reciprocal basis, it is possible for single department members to travel and undertake research trips for short intervals in order to concentrate on a publication, to help the design a new course, or otherwise to share the burden of administration. It should be noted, however, that funding for research trips and sabbatical arrangements are considerably less generous than at comparable institutions: the current high-level performance should not be taken by the University for granted, and this is an area where the University could, with relatively small implications in terms of resources, support and assist the Department in maintaining and enhancing its research activities. In this regard, the reviewers would like to express the concern that administrative burdens could undermine opportunities for fruitful research, simply because current arrangements do not leave sufficient time available for research.

Overall, the members of the German Department are active — indeed, proactive — in taking on additional tasks or in responding to calls for ideas (such as the recently introduced ‘Generic Skills’ module). One key component for the success of the Department in this and other respects must surely be the collegial atmosphere within the Department, its strong sense of ‘team spirit’ and its system of rotating leadership. Through sharing work and responsibility, and helping each other out when a department member needs assistance in order to travel or to fulfil a task, an excellent culture of communication and reciprocal support has evolved, reflected in the system of rotational leadership and sharing responsibility on an equal basis. Members of the Department also take advantage of the opportunities for professional development, using training opportunities offered by the University to develop and enhance the skills-base available within the Department.

Discussion with colleagues from History and from the Language Centre supported the impression formed by the reviewers that communication and cooperation with other units within the Faculty and the University are working well, and that where difficulties arise, they are solved in a pragmatic and solution-oriented fashion. (The problem of timetabling has already been mentioned.) Equally, student feedback is very positive and confirms the experiences of the reviewers when meeting the students in small groups.

3. Conclusions

The conclusions from our reading of the Self-Assessment document, and following the talks, discussions, and meetings held during the visit to the campus, may be summarized as follows:

- Despite the decrease in financial and human resources, the Department of German maintains an impressive record in teaching and research, and executes a large number of administrative tasks, which have earned it a deserved reputation for excellence.
- It is clear that colleagues have been responding to the challenge of changes in the higher education sector in general and in a local context with innovation and creativity, but steps must be taken to ensure that this remains the case.

- Innovation in research and teaching are only possible when periods for regeneration are provided, and a clear sense emerged that members of the Department felt in need of greater institutional support.

- In particular, it is a matter for concern that, due to financial and administrative reasons (e.g. repeat exams in summer), it is impossible to arrange a regular scheme of sabbatical leave.

- Mixed ability classes present a particular set of challenges, at NUI Maynooth as in other institutions, and the Department has a strategy in place to deal with this issue, including the following measures:
 - attendance rules
 - technical fail
 - above all, a strong encouragement to students to spend year abroad (either as a teaching assistant or through attendance at a German-speaking university)

4. Recommendations

The reviewers wish to list several recommendations which they feel might be considered by the Department, by the Faculty, by other units, and by the University.

4.1. Department

1. The reviewers would support the Department, if it decided to reapply for a DAAD-Lektorat (or other similarly funded) post. Applying for such a post would involve comparatively minimal financial cost (appr. €25,000 per annum), but gaining a maximum impact (= a full-time position) in improving teaching-provision and support for students. Of course this recommendation would need to be considered by the University as well as the Department. At the same time, the reviewers noted the excellent work carried out by the Austrian Lektorat, and would urge that every effort be made to protect this precious teaching and cultural resource.

2. Within the context of the School of Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, it is recommended that active consideration be given to the possibility of establishing an extended Postgraduate Colloquium for training in research, teaching, and professional skills (including MAs), which would build on and give greater visibility to already existing efforts to provide support and guidance, so that graduate students develop a sense of a common endeavour and purpose as they work towards their MA, M. Litt. or PhD.

3. Against the backdrop of their already successful work in this area, the members of the Department are encouraged to continue their efforts to integrate even further their research into their teaching (e.g. theory of translation, linguistics), where this is practicable. Students welcome this insight into backgrounds and/or possible future areas of work at an early stage.

4. The use of electronic media can and should be implemented and intensified, but the reviewers are well aware, as members of the Department are, that in language-learning and teaching literature/culture there is no effective substitute for person-to-person contact and for using the language and discussing (inter)cultural issues with native speakers and experienced practitioners. Correspondingly, electronic media will largely have a role in providing additional practice for autonomous learning or offering a means for such exercises as pronunciation or listening comprehension. The learning-platform Moodle could serve as a source of information to coordinate further the use of such media, in a way that would also be welcomed by students.

5. The reviewers congratulate the members of the Department on their efforts to maintain academic standards such as attendance rules, the ‘technical fail’ rule, and recommend that such policies continue, for as long the Department considers them to be viable. After all, lowering expectations or softening guidelines would inevitably lead to a lower level of language competence, and of linguistic and literary competencies, which would in turn lower the Department’s reputation in teaching and research. At the same time, the Department is realistic about what can be achieved across a three-year degree, not least where a period abroad is not a compulsory part of the curriculum.

6. The Department is encouraged to keep up its current persistence in pro-active initiatives in approaching other departments and programmes to enhance and strengthen the presence of German within the academic programmes and the campus life of NUI Maynooth.

4.2. Faculty

1. The reviewers recommend that every effort be made to maintain the good working relations among colleagues within the context of the new School of Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures.

2. The introduction of the School of Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures will allow for a reorganisation of room allocation, including appropriate accommodation for secretarial and administrative support staff (as well as respecting Health & Safety implications of current document storage), as well as accommodation for part-time teaching staff. One specific desideratum that might easily be met would be the creation of dedicated German Seminar Room.

4.3. Other institutions

Cooperation with the Language Centre, a natural partner of departments of foreign languages, is professional and efficient. At the same time, the question arises whether the existing one contact-hour per week which the Learning Centre is providing for the German language modules would be integrated more usefully into the learning process of the students, if integrated into one of the courses of the German Department (for instance, as an additional conversation opportunity or an additional grammar class). At the same time, this would mean that funding for this contact hour would be transferred to the German Department. The creation of a School of Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures might also give rise to fresh opportunities for reconfiguring the relationship between the Language Centre and the various language departments, to the mutual benefit of all parties concerned.

4.4. University

1. With the introduction of the School of Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, there will be fresh opportunities in research and teaching, but it is not quite so clear that administration will be reduced. In this context, it would be counterproductive for the University to consider a reduction in administrative positions, simply because it is felt that the merger might create administrative synergies; on the contrary, new administrative burdens could well arise from new tasks following the merger. How administrative responsibilities are shared and divided across the administrative support staff will require careful consideration, and the reviewers' recommendation would be to ensure that all parties be fully consulted in the development of a new administrative structure.

2. The reviewers are firmly of the view that creating a stable working environment for secure and sensible planning will result in a constantly high performance. Too many or hasty changes in administration or programmes, which do not leave (enough) time for progress and development, would, on the other hand, inevitably result in frustration or even burnout, which would be detrimental to this high-performing department.

3. In order to fulfil its tasks appropriately, a department needs reliable support services such as a functioning library. Aside from the objective fact of the comparatively low budget allocated for the purchase of German materials, the reviewers gained the impression that, in addition, colleagues felt that book acquisition and book cataloguing procedures in the University Library took longer than might be expected, with the result that purchased books are not readily available for use in teaching and research. Although it was not possible, within the constraints of the timetable for the visit, to meet a representative of the Library to discuss these issues, clearly a research-led university would wish its library service to operate at maximum level of efficiency.

4. In order to make language-learning possible, reliable and stable provision of teaching accommodation are vital, including a designated Postgraduate Seminar Room. This would also include teaching or seminar rooms which can be heated; the

reviewers did not expect to see seminar rooms (in the annexe) which were used by classes, despite temperatures around 0 degrees and despite the fact that there is no effective heating.

5. German is a popular combination subject for certain areas such as history, philosophy, music, law, or business. Due to timetabling constraints, only a few of these very useful combinations are possible after year 1. The reviewers would recommend that the University investigate the possibility of extending the range of subjects available for combination with German, especially those which would be taken by students (such as Law or Philosophy).

6. The University might also consider raising awareness in other departments that 5 ECTS can be taken in other subjects and that the inclusion of languages enhances any programme, especially in respect of the employability of students. It would be disappointing if, as seems to be the case, not all departments encourage their students to take these 5 ECTS outside their own departments, and do not support them in seeking an opportunity to gain insight into other useful disciplines that might broaden the students' horizons.

Finally, at a time of structural change in the presence maintained by modern foreign languages in general and German in particular in universities in Ireland (and indeed in the UK), the reviewers were gratified to see that the senior representatives of the University whom they had the opportunity of meeting in the course of their review were well apprised of the significance of modern languages and cultures for a twenty-first-century curriculum and were, moreover, committed to maintaining and enhancing the activities of the German Department at NUI Maynooth. Thus there exists, with minimum implications in terms of resource, a real opportunity for NUI Maynooth to secure for the future what, in the shape of its Department of German, it already has: a centre of excellence in German studies.

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