



NUI MAYNOOTH

Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

DEPARTMENT OF GERMAN

QUALITY REVIEW 2000

PEER REVIEW REPORT 2000

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND MAYNOOTH
GERMAN DEPARTMENT
Quality Review Report May 2000
by
Professor Eoin Bourke, National University of Ireland, Galway
and
Professor Peter Lutzeier, University of Surrey UK

Section 1 Introduction

The Quality Promotion Unit of the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, approached the two external assessors, Professors Bourke and Lutzeier, and invited them to undertake a quality review of the German Department at NUIM. The external assessors understood that the quality review exercise was meant to be a procedure in accordance with the Universities Act 1997. The review takes a developmental approach and is aimed at quality improvement. It consists of two key elements: a self-evaluation of the Department and the peer-group assessment.

The assessors received the substantial self-assessment report by the German Department before their visit of the University. Upon their arrival further basic information on the University and the Arts Faculty were made available in the base room.

On the evening prior to the two-day assessment, the external assessors were welcomed by the President of the University, the Vice-President of the University and the QPU representative on the peer review group. The President stressed that the exercise should encompass all aspects of the work of the Department. At the same time, some key issues from the point of view of the University were identified: the quality and standard of the programmes, the question of student numbers and the issue of a Chair for the German Department. During the two-day visit the assessors then had the privilege to meet the Head of Department, full-time and part-time staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students and they were given a full tour of the facilities.

The whole review was handled in an open and constructive atmosphere. Academic staff, administrative staff and students were extremely helpful and came forward with useful information. The assessors are also grateful for the pleasant hospitality of the University and enjoyable social functions in the evenings.

As far as the assessors are concerned, the visit went well. Documentation was relatively complete and the actual schedule of the visit made sure that strengths and weaknesses of the Department could be identified. It was unfortunate that the meetings with individual staff members were overshadowed by one topic: the issue of leadership and management structures in the German Department. This, however, did not distract the external assessors from their view that they had seen a Department of considerable strength and potential for the future.

In the short time at their disposal, the assessors might have received some impressions that were not wholly accurate. It is possible, therefore, that some of our proposals are redundant insofar as they have already been implemented.

Section 2 Evaluation according to the Criteria for Self-Assessment

2.1 Undergraduate Course issues

2.1.1 Course aims and objectives

The assessors broadly agree with the stated aims, but feel that the aims should incorporate a statement on the introduction to comprehensive information on ALL German speaking countries rather than just "... to introduce them to German history, writing and thought in a comprehensive way ..." (p.20). German is currently the or at least one of the national languages in Austria, Germany, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg and Switzerland and different cultures can be found in all of these countries. This accounts for German as the most widely spoken language in the EU in terms of speakers with the language as their native language and, because of historical and geographical reasons, it points to the important role for German in the future EU expansion into Central and Eastern Europe. Students should be made aware of all this and it would help to counteract the dangerous stereotype 'German equals Germany'.

The objectives fit the stated aims of an academic programme with high standards. The objectives do not mention any vocational orientation, whilst the Head of Department indicated in her interview that she was looking for some additional input such as 'Business German'.

2.1.2 Course content

Year 1 covers all the areas which one would expect in a programme of the stated aims and objectives.

Year 2 has one course on Area Studies (Landeskunde) which is a mere option and itself confined to the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich. This strikes the assessors as too little an element of the vast curriculum of Area Studies of the German speaking countries. The way forward could be to try to integrate some Area Studies topics into the language/conversation based classes and to ask the Austrian Lektor/Lektorin to offer at least one optional course on Austria. This could make the language classes more varied and interesting and would certainly employ the Austrian Lektor/Lektorin according to one of his/her presumed strengths. As Lektors usually have an MA in Literature or Linguistics, they could also contribute a lecture or seminar on their field of interest. This would enhance their sense of value and purpose.

The offer of a Dutch option in year 2 is an excellent addition to the programme. The similarity in the structure of the two languages Dutch and German can help to raise the awareness of grammatical structures in German.

The anticipated move in year 3 towards a combination of compulsory and optional courses is supported by the external assessors.

The assessors note that the German Department has shown to be highly responsive to changing needs for the programme and to realistic demands by the students. A new flexible undergraduate structure is being implemented and the combination of compulsory core courses and options is clearly popular with the students.

The idea of a grammatical progression is carried through in the language classes in a convincing way. The assessors sympathise with the Department's decision to keep options on Middle High German and this is seen as a clear sign of high academic standards and ambitions.

The assessors highly recommend that the Department, with the help of the other modern Languages, should spearhead in the Arts Faculty a designated 4-year BA International course. This programme should include an integrated period abroad in year 3. Students should be recruited with the clear understanding that they are expected to spend some time in a German speaking country. Students saw the period abroad as a natural element of any Modern Language programme.

The Department should adopt a clear policy towards the use of the target language German. Students favoured the use of German for all the language/linguistics classes right from the beginning.

Employers rightly expect language students to be good communicators. Students must have the chance to practise communicative skills throughout the programme. Courses should therefore include student presentations in year 1, 2 and 3. Students were in favour of this idea and suggested that Socrates tandem partners could be deployed to help out with German formulations.

The lack of any translation course from German into English was noticed. Such a course makes sense in professional terms and can be an important vehicle for additional learning outcomes. Amongst them are the proper use of dictionaries and the discussion of grammatical structures. Students were in general in favour of more translation classes. They suggested that the students themselves could select and pool translation texts to ensure that they are of interest to their age group.

Students felt that three tutorials per literature piece were not enough. This should be taken on board in the literature classes.

Conversation classes should include more varied, non-traditional topics such as “humour” and more input and suggestions by the students should be sought.

The Department may want to consider for its weaker students the provision of a revision course at the beginning of the first year.

2.1.3 Course information

The assessors missed a Departmental handbook. Such a handbook should cover all relevant information on the Department plus some more detailed information on individual courses. The handbook should be handed out to students on their arrival and would ideally be electronically available well in advance of the academic year in the form of a German Dept. Home Page on www.may.ie. This would also help foreign students on a Socrates exchange.

2.1.4 Course delivery

Numbers are small enough to engage students in class. Judging by students’ remarks the lecturers are highly committed and very enthusiastic about the topics of their teaching. Tutorials provide a welcome chance to cater for individual needs and different abilities.

2.1.5 Course assessment

The mixture of gradual course assessment and written/oral examinations is good and seems to be working well. In order to boost attendance in year 2, the assessors suggest that the Faculty of Arts at NUI Maynooth consider the adoption of a policy similar to that of NUI Galway in awarding an average of second and third year marks in final year, if it is to the benefit of the student. In other words, the second year mark is factored in only if it is better than the third year mark. This should provide a clear incentive for students to attend classes in year 2. In addition, a well advertised policy

of assigning a significant proportion of the year's marking (e.g. 30%) to gradual course assessment would also help.

2.1.6 Course administration

The institution of year co-ordinators seems to be working. However, a transparent procedure for an overall review of programmes seems to be missing. A programme overseer, whether it be the Head of Department or someone else, should work closely with the year coordinators to ensure overall coherence. Final Year students could also provide important feedback on the coherence of the whole programme.

The assessors recommend that all courses should have a student evaluation on a regular basis. The students are also in favour of this.

Whilst staff is clearly approachable for students and operates an open door policy, full-time and part-time staff should introduce a formal, well advertised consultation hour. Also, a system of class reps should be reinstated as a fallback in case the informal complaints procedure does not function in each case.

2.1.7 The MA programme

The MA programme has some interesting vocational orientation. This seems to be taken up by the students, as far as one can tell by the topics chosen for the MA thesis. The assessors are concerned about the viability of the MA programme and would like to question whether classes should run with fewer than 5 students. The programme clearly deserves a proper marketing effort. A clarification as to what part-time mode means seems to be needed.

The assessors feel that students on the MA programme should not have to pay for hand-outs.

2.2 Communication

Management structures in the Department are not very transparent and therefore communication does not seem to work properly. In consequence of this, the considerable strengths of some of the staff are not utilised in the best possible way. It has to be said that staff morale is fairly low in some cases and there is a danger that staff will withdraw more and more from the day-to-day running of the Department. This is the single most pressing problem in the workings of the Department and must be addressed immediately.

The point seems to have been reached where an employee-relations officer or counsellor would be needed to meet with all permanent staff members together in a series of sessions for the purpose of having mutual grievances aired in a structured manner, misconceptions clarified and agreed methods of reconciliation worked out. Perceptions prevailing among staff members should be tested as to their accuracy/inaccuracy: for instance, that workloads are inequitably distributed, or that important information is being withheld. Where such perceptions are found to be of some substance, the problem should be rectified and a free flow of information from Head to staff members and vice versa be established. Calls for Papers should be distributed to all staff members by the executive assistant. We suggest that all staff members should subscribe to the mailing list <german-studies@mailbase.ac.uk> for research and conference information.

General Faculty and University information and instructions should be emailed directly to all staff members.

The assessors felt that at least one grievance was based on a misconception that could be very quickly cleared up: that research and publication funding comes out of the Departmental recurrent budget. Information as to University and NUI sources of research subsidies and publication grants should be disseminated clearly to all staff members.

Involvement of permanent members of staff in the academic and administrative running of the Department has to be increased. This includes the proper delegation of important tasks and duties on a routine basis. The assessors welcome the fact that agreement has been reached on holding staff meetings with clear agendas and minutes on a frequent and regular basis.

Decisions taken at meetings have to be carried through within an agreed time scale and staff members responsible for this have to be clearly identified. There should be an ongoing review of previous decisions to ensure that they are implemented.

The recurrent budget should be transparent to the permanent members of staff.

It should be looked at as to whether the pooling of funds for the part-time staff would allow the appointment of a more permanent staff (salaried Language Assistant) or at least of a research student position. The reliance on poorly paid part-time staff for carrying out essential language teaching seems very precarious. The high turnover of some of the part-time staff is highly unsatisfactory, not the least for quality assurance purposes.

The assessors think that leadership should come from an advertised new Chair in German. A Chair in German would give the Department the kind of recognition and standing internally and externally which it clearly deserves. All staff members agreed with this proposal.

The Chair should not automatically carry the duty of Head of Department. The idea of a three-yearly rotating Headship is already well established in Britain and is gradually becoming common practice on Irish campuses. It recognizes the fact that professors, chosen primarily for their outstanding academic performance, are not automatically the best administrators, and that Headships should not necessarily be for life and should make room for younger, more innovative colleagues. On the other hand, the involvement of all permanent staff members in turn will make them more appreciative of the ever-growing rigours of the task. They should be financially compensated in inverse proportion to their rank and/or rewarded after their three-year Headship by means of a one-semester sabbatical, as in the German Dept. UCD.

Communication between all Modern Languages Departments should be developed further. The Languages Departments together with the Language Centre should establish a Modern Languages Board and discuss relevant issues on a regular basis. Decisions should then be put forward to the Faculty level and beyond with a common voice.

2.3 Support services

• 2.3.1 Physical environment

It is obvious that a good physical environment is vital for the well-being of staff and students alike and for the creation of a corporate identity. The condition of the Arts

Building is not satisfactory for several reasons, causing staff morale and the quality of teaching to suffer. The assessors see the pleasant building for Physics and Chemistry as a positive and helpful sign for the University's foresight and understanding in this important area. The assessors' reasons for concern have been communicated in a detailed list of observations to the internal members of the Peer Review Panel and are to be forwarded to the relevant offices. We would welcome a thorough review of maintenance and cleaning in the Arts Building.

Office space is not adequate in several cases; for instance, some of the tutor rooms do not seem to meet the basic HEA recommendations, and conditions, for instance overheating in the tiny office for the executive assistant, can be unbearable. We are particularly concerned about the office for the part-time staff. The office can accommodate 4 people at most but seven keys have been distributed. There is only one computer, one email account and no printer. Whether the reason for these last mentioned inadequacies lie with the Department's management of its recurrent grant or elsewhere, we do feel that vital staff such as these tutors deserve a better treatment. We also understand that online registration is available to all students and staff, indicating that the lack of email for tutors might be due to communication difficulties within the Department.

Black boards and white boards are often not adequate. The set-up in the rooms assumes a full frontal style of teaching and therefore is not adequate for some elements of language teaching. Very often a seminar room with a large table and chairs around would be much better for students and staff.

The assessors see a clear need for a purpose-built modern languages building with a fully integrated language centre and TEFL provision and state of the art multi-media and computer facilities. This would be of obvious benefit to the University as a whole. Modern language competence is seen more and more as a vital part of "graduateness" and the University could lead the way with a new building and improved facilities.

2.3.2 Library

The library, whilst being a bright and pleasant building, has some shortcomings as well. The reference section on the ground floor has no seating and study area around it. The collection of German books is modest and the journals selection hardly satisfying.

2.3.3 Language Centre

A better integration of the excellent provision and SALL and CALL facilities of the Language Centre must be achieved. A prerequisite of this is that the Language Centre is adequately staffed. There is a clear need for one permanent post responsible for the development of multi-media language software. Classes which make use of such tools could liven up the learning experience of a language and should be properly assessed and credited for the student's programme. At the moment, students tend to treat language lab hours as extraneous to mainstream German. Such hours should be marked as an integral part of continuous assessment in order to impress upon the students the importance of full attendance.

2.3.4 Other services

The Department should assure adequate provision of accommodation and, where necessary, crèche facilities for the Austrian Lektor/Lektorin and the Dutch Harting

Scholar. This may simply need proper and timely liaison between the Department and the campus crèche.

It is not acceptable that MA tuition has to take place in most cases in lecturers' offices. We are assured that small rooms for teaching purposes are generally available. Therefore the Department should specify its timetabling and room allocation needs in a timely fashion.

Staff members pointed to a lack of overhead projectors in the classrooms. The provision for photocopying also seems to be highly inadequate. There should be at least one if not two shared machines specifically for the Modern Languages. This is an issue which a Modern Languages Board could usefully tackle. Also, a video set on a trolley should be made available for use in classes for audio-visual work. This, as well as a pool of cassette recorders, could possibly be funded from the recurrent grant.

2.4 Research

The assessors have found a very impressive research culture in the Department. All permanent staff members are highly productive in terms of publications and have achieved an excellent national/international standard of research. Some of them also play a prominent role in activating research on a national/international basis by hosting conferences and publishing collections of essays from their own and other Irish and British departments. It is all the more important, therefore, that the University fully recognizes the asset it has in the German Department and does all in its power to resolve the difficulties pertaining to staff relationships.

2.5 Staff development

As proven scholars, permanent members of staff should be facilitated in availing of the University's sabbatical leave scheme. The main factor preventing staff members from availing of the scheme seems to be the question of substitution payment. As a way of cutting or even eliminating substitution costs, we suggest that the Department adopt the system practised in the German Department of NUI Galway for some years now: sabbatical leave is taken for the calendar year as against the academic year, and a staff member who is due to go on a year's sabbatical leave takes on a double workload in the winter semester previous to it as well as in the spring semester after it. Teaching work that cannot be concentrated in one semester such as language teaching is shared out among the colleagues. Thus all members of staff ultimately benefit from this work-sharing arrangement.

Some staff complained about lack of funding for attendance at conferences and library visits abroad. This is clearly based on a misunderstanding, as there is a staff travel grant available to all staff members. NUI Maynooth might, in case such a facility does not yet exist, consider the additional establishment of a special research fund to aid particularly active researchers in giving papers at prestigious conferences abroad.

2.6 External relationships

Existing Socrates exchange programmes may be extended to useful staff exchanges. All staff is clearly prominent and active on a national or international level. They have well-established links with colleagues at all other Irish universities.

Section 3 Conclusions and Recommendations

The assessors have seen a Department with a great deal of potential for a bright future. Attractive programmes are delivered in a dedicated and enthusiastic manner. Pastoral care for students is good. An impressive research culture has been established. Immediate short term improvements are hindered by current internal divisions in the Department. This should be addressed and remedied in connection with the appointment of a Professor of German in combination with the introduction of rotating Headship.

Our recommendations are as follows:

3.1 For the University:

The University should approve of a Chair in German to be advertised nationally and internationally. A Chair in German would give the Department the kind of recognition and standing internally and externally which it deserves.

Professorship and Headship should not necessarily be invested in the same person. The practice of rotating Headship is recommended.

An external agent with skills in the area of counselling should be engaged by the Personnel Office to facilitate a series of sessions for the purpose of employee-relations improvement within the Department.

The University should, in consultation with staff representative associations, consider adopting a regular staff appraisal scheme, called staff development review.

The University should consider clarifying the role and functions of a Head of Department.

The German Department and the University should liaise on providing better conditions for the Department's part-time staff, as the University is committed to being a good employer. Part-time staff in the German Department currently gets £13 an hour and no sick leave. At the very least, we recommend that they be paid the senior tutorial hourly rate plus extra remuneration for the extensive marking that language-teaching always involves and which goes unacknowledged by rates of pay based on contact hours alone. The switching to the system of salaried Language Assistants as practised in the Languages Centre at UCC might be considered. In the interest of proper training the Department and/or the University should also consider paying the fees for participation in a language-teaching course for all tutors/Language Assistants prior to their taking up the post.

The University should press for the funding of a new modern languages building with a fully integrated language centre and TEFL provision and state-of-the-art multi-media and computer facilities. Such a building would not just cater for the Arts students but for students of all faculties in well-designed and well-administered courses in Applied Languages.

3.2 For the Department:

3.2.1 In terms of the management structure, the following should be considered:

- All staff should cooperate fully in any efforts made by the University management or the Personnel Office in resolving the difficulties being experienced between the Head and the staff members. If this is not done, both the excellent reputation of the Department and the respect felt by the students for the Department will inevitably suffer.
- Proper delegation of important tasks and duties should take place on a routine basis.
- Decisions taken at meetings have to be carried through.
- The recurrent Departmental budget should be transparent to the permanent members of staff.
- The pooling of funds for the part-time staff may allow the appointment of a more permanent staff or a research student position. The posts of tutor should in the long term be developed into those of salaried Language Assistants.
- Closer co-operation with the Language Centre and other Languages Departments is highly recommended.

3.2.2 In terms of teaching, the following should be considered:

- The Department should produce a comprehensive Departmental Handbook.
- The Department should, in consultation with other Departments and the Faculty, introduce a designated 4-year BA International programme. This programme should include an integrated period abroad in year 3.
- The Department should adopt a clear policy towards the use of the target language.
- Courses should include student presentations in year 1, 2 and 3.
- The Department may want to introduce a translation course from German into English. Conversation classes should include more varied, non-traditional topics.
- The Department may want to consider for its weaker students the provision of a revision course at the beginning of the first year.
- To boost flagging 2nd Year attendance rates the Department should, with the agreement of Faculty, award an average of second and third year marks in final year, if it is to the benefit of the student. Also the clear signalling of a substantial continuous assessment component in the year's mark should help.
- All courses should have a student evaluation on a regular basis.
- All staff should introduce a formal, well advertised consultation hour.