



**NUI MAYNOOTH**

Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

## **Quality Review of the Graduate Studies Office**

**25 – 26 November 2010**

### **Peer Review Report**

**Peer Review Group:**

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# **NUI Maynooth Graduate Studies Office Quality Review**

## **Introduction**

Ireland has made development of a knowledge economy a high priority with higher education playing a key role in meeting this national goal. As a result the relationships between higher education and government and society are evolving. This strong emphasis on a knowledge economy has resulted in increased financial support for higher education through national funding initiatives and agencies that have been created to establish guidelines and monitor quality in higher education. Significant attention has been placed on Graduate Studies with a target set to double the number of new PhD graduates from 2003 to 2013. There has also been a call to increase the international standing of Irish universities through their excellence in graduate education and in scholarship and research. In 2008 the government published *Building Ireland's Smart Economy – A Framework for Sustainable Economic Renewal* stressing the need for continued development of higher education and research to address national priorities in these difficult economic times.

## **NUI Maynooth and the Knowledge Economy of Ireland**

NUI Maynooth has responded to the national call to develop a knowledge economy and to the more recent goals set out in 2008 in *Building Ireland's Smart Economy – A Framework for Sustainable Economic Renewal* that stresses the need for continued development of higher education and research at the international level. One of the guiding principles for the development of the Strategic Plan for NUI Maynooth 2006-2011 was that the “*intellectual wealth we have at NUI Maynooth is a resource that can and should be nurtured. It is also a responsibility for the University to apply this wealth for the overall good of society – at community, regional, national and international levels.*” p11.

In a February 2005 *Institutional Quality Review of NUI Maynooth*, the EUA suggested that NUIM review and focus its research activities to areas of strength or areas where the University would like to develop strength and wrote that this would increase high quality research at Maynooth helping to increase Maynooth's international profile. The HEA report concluded with areas for special attention in the further development of quality at Maynooth. One of the areas identified was focused on research and advised that “*Future research strengths will depend to a large degree on success in developing PhD and post-doc activity ... Attention needs to be paid to the conditions in which many of these young researchers currently work. The University may also need to develop a more explicit strategy to bring suitable students to post-graduate and PhD levels in selected fields.* HEA report.

Maynooth intends to become nationally and internationally recognized for high quality graduate education and as a driver for research. To realize these goals NUIM has instituted several far-reaching changes in their Graduate Studies. Of the nine strategic goals of the Strategic Plan 2006-2011, two of them deal directly with graduate education and research. A third related goal focuses on research that, as indicated above, will depend on developing PhD and post-doc activity. The Key Strategic Goals are to:

- 2 Refine and enhance our taught postgraduate activities.
- 3 Grow and enhance our postgraduate research activities in line with national objectives.
4. Develop research activity such that the University will be clearly recognized as a leading research-led liberal arts and science institution by 2011.

To realize these goals NUIM has instituted several far-reaching changes in Graduate Studies. A description of this restructuring is found later in this review in section *I. Organization, Management and Governance*.

As seen in the Self-Assessment Report and in the *NUI Maynooth Strategic Plan Addendum for period 2009-2014*, much progress has been made towards achieving these goals. These achievements have depended upon the service and support of the Graduate Studies Office.

### **Self- Assessment Report**

This is the first time since the restructuring of Graduate Studies at NUI Maynooth that a Quality Review of the Graduate Studies Office has taken place. As stated in the Self-Assessment *“The timing of this current review is fortunate in that it is occurring three years into the establishment of the separate office, in the third year of the current dean’s stewardship, and post the IRIU report. Therefore, in the context of this timeframe, it is very useful to assess progress towards objectives and the overall quality of service, with a view to establishing whether the current configuration of the Graduate Studies Office is the optimum one for best delivery of its services”*

The Self-Assessment Report is a well organized and clearly presented document providing a wide-ranging analysis of the Graduate Studies Office’s administrative support to all Graduate Studies activities at NUIM. In addition to the text, inclusion of figures presenting data in graphic form was very helpful in assessing current and changing conditions. The SWOT analysis was an important summation of the information presented throughout the Self-Assessment Report. As judged from numerous conversations during the campus visit, the self-assessment report is consistent with the perceived quality of service and support provided by the Graduate Studies Office.

The Graduate Studies Office is responsible for providing administrative support for all

graduate related activities at NUI Maynooth. The Graduate Studies Office operates within the context of the Graduate School and in support of the Dean of the Graduate School and interacts with many other offices of the University. Therefore it is not surprising, and may be inevitable, that in places within the Self-Assessment Report some of the activities and responsibilities of other units are presented with those of the Graduate Studies Office. Evidence of the difficulty of reviewing the responsibilities and performance of the Graduate Studies Office as separate from these activities in other units was encountered frequently during the campus visit. In some instances this is likely a good sign since many of the activities of the Graduate Studies Office are collaborative efforts with other offices and a seamless delivery of services is ideal. However, at times confusion about which office is responsible for a task can present difficulties for students or staff needing information or support and not knowing where to turn. By necessity this review takes into consideration the greater context of the Graduate Studies Office and examines some of these relationships, however, it is directed to the quality performance of the Graduate Studies Office and is not intended as a review of other units.

Most areas considered in this review were addressed in the Self-Assessment Report and when referring to specific areas this report uses the corresponding headings of the Self-Assessment Report written in italics.

### ***I. Organization, Management and Governance***

The rationale for the restructuring of Graduate Studies at Maynooth is given below as it appears in the Self-Assessment Report.

*“A key strategic decision was made in 2008 by the Academic Council that NUI Maynooth would have one Graduate School that would provide the framework through which the University policy and strategy on graduate education would be implemented. In order to achieve the ambitions embedded in the Strategic Plan 2006-11, and in particular in Strategic Goals 2 and 3, the University in 2008/9 set up the new organizational structure of one Graduate School to support and implement the delivery of the vision and targets of NUI Maynooth graduate education. Given NUI Maynooth’s size, the decision was made that administrative resources appropriate to scale would be better employed at central university level through the Graduate Studies Office, rather than at faculty level. NUI Maynooth Graduate School was set up to create a clear identity and presence and to provide the framework through which the University policy and strategy could be implemented and the Graduate Studies Office was to support the development of the Graduate School. The single school model recognizes the diversity that exists across departments and faculties. It caters for flexibility, but ensures that NUI Maynooth avoids a proliferation of different rules and regulations, or a re-inventing of wheels across the three faculties.” The establishment of the Graduate School was followed towards the end of 2008 by a strategy document on graduate studies – Graduate Studies at NUI Maynooth: Strategy and Policies, which was then adopted by Academic Council in January 2009. (See Appendix 1) This document sets out the rationale, goals and tasks of the Graduate School. The role of the Graduate Studies Office is to provide administrative support for the Graduate School.”*

*The Dean of the Graduate School* is the manager of the Graduate Studies Office and reports jointly to the Vice-President for Research and the Registrar. Reflecting the fundamental role of the Graduate School, the Dean of the Graduate School is one of the thirteen senior executive officers of the university and a member of Academic Council.

The Dean of the Graduate School chairs two important governance committees, the Graduate Studies Subcommittee and the Graduate Feedback Council. The Graduate Studies Office organizes and supports these committees.

*The Graduate Studies Subcommittee of Academic Council* was formed to develop strategy for graduate Studies and to ensure the quality of programmes and the graduate student experience at NUI Maynooth. Recognizing that conflicts and tensions may arise as major changes in Graduate Studies take place, the Graduate Studies Subcommittee also “manages these tensions and provides constructive ways forward for the Graduate School in the context.” (Self-Assessment Report, p 7) Overall this important committee has been extremely effective in the development of Graduate Studies, however, from conversations during the campus visit it is clear that tensions over the implementation of certain issues remain. Some of these issues and how they affect the workings of the Graduate Studies Office are discussed later in *IV. Service and Support to Departments and Institutes* and *VII. Policy Formulation and Implementation*.

*The Graduate Feedback Council* was instituted to give graduate students a structure to discuss their concerns, expectations and priorities, together and with the Dean of the Graduate School, the Faculty Deans and others. Formation of a body for input and feedback from students about their experience and issues as graduate students is important and commendable. As noted in the Self-Assessment Report and heard in meetings with students and others during the visit, the Feedback Council is becoming an important voice for students, and will no doubt become even more valuable when its activities are more widely known.

## ***II. The Graduate Studies Office***

The Dean of the Graduate School serves on a number of high-level administrative committees within the University as well as several outside committees. A list of 11 of the Dean’s major responsibilities is provided. One of the Dean’s responsibilities is to direct the work and manage the Graduate Studies Office. The Graduate Studies Office in turn supports the Dean’s other major responsibilities.

The office has four staff positions with two Graduate Study Officers and two Executive Assistants, however, the funding for these positions and the individuals in these positions have been in a state of flux. Some of these positions were funded by external sources and have reverted to University funding. Two of the four positions are on contract basis. These factors and the increasing and evolving responsibilities of the Graduate Studies Office have resulted in staff turnover. Changes in staff present opportunities to hire

individuals best suited to the positions in the current Graduate Studies Office, but turnover also requires time for the hires to develop experience in the position, to become integrated into the office team and to establish productive relationships with students, other offices, departments and institutes, and with external agencies. Not surprisingly, some of these uncertainties and new responsibilities have on occasion created tension within the Graduate Studies Office.

Detailed descriptions of the roles and responsibilities of the Graduate Studies Office and the individual members of staff make it clear that they serve many roles and have varied responsibilities that are changing and will continue to change in the foreseeable future. Table I shows that even factoring in scale and number of students, the number of staff in the Graduate Studies office at Maynooth is lower than that of other Irish Universities. The heavy workload of the staff in the Graduate Studies Office was noted in several conversations during the campus visit. Examples of comments heard about the Graduate Studies Office during the visit were “they are stressed”, “office is understaffed”, “not many people”, “very stretched”, “limited resources”, “need more staff” “under pressure”. In short, information in the Self-Assessment Report and opinions expressed by many people in different conversations, support the view that the Graduate Studies Office is understaffed. A well-staffed professional Graduate Studies Office is crucial for meetings the Strategic Goals of the University for graduate education and research.

### ***III. Strategic Objectives of the Graduate School.***

*The NUI Maynooth Strategic Plan 2006-20011* identified two goals for graduate education and research and a third on research. In the *Graduate Studies at NUI Maynooth: Strategies and Policies 2009* publication, the objectives of the Graduate School to obtain these strategic goals were developed and are presented in Tables 2 and 3 on pages 16 and 17 of the Self-Assessment Report. In the *NUI Maynooth Strategic Plan, Addendum for period 2009-2014* these strategic goals have remained essentially the same with increased emphasis on further developing Maynooth’s national and international standing in graduate education and research with Strategic Goal 2, *to become a national leader in the provision of taught postgraduate programmes in targeted areas*, and Strategic Goal 3 *to provide graduate education programmes of international standing*.

In this section of the Self-Assessment Report, progress on meeting these objectives is described. Some of these objectives have been completed and impressive strides on others have been made in a relatively short period of time. It is difficult to separate out the role the Graduate Studies Office has played in each of these objectives. However, it is clear that the success in meeting these strategic objectives has depended on the quality of the service and support of the Graduate Studies Office. The Graduate Studies Office has been intimately involved in the research, the development and implementation and tracking of progress for each of the major objectives. Development, implementation and support of several new policies and programmes are discussed later in this review in section VII. *Policy Formulation and Implementation*.

During the campus visit it was found that equally important effects of other significant changes presented in this section of the Self-Assessment Report were frequently under recognized when considering the increased workload of the Graduate Studies Office. From information given in Figures 1-5, it can be seen that along with changes in policies and programmes, there has been a major increase in the number of total graduate students and changes in the composition of the graduate student population at NUI Maynooth in the last 5 years. In 2004//2005 graduate students made up 18% of the total students. This portion grew to 22% in 2009/2010 at the same time that the undergraduate student population continued to increase. Graduate students make up 22% of the total students, up from 18% in 2004-5. In 2009/10 there were 1,788 graduate students, an increase of 60% since 2004/2005. The biggest growth was seen in part-time students who made up 12% of the total in 2004/5 and 34% in 2009/10. The number of students in taught graduate programmes has increased 80% between, 2004/05 and 2009/10. Research masters students have declined slightly while the number of PhD students has increased 40% in 5 years. NUI Maynooth can take pride in the fact that the number of new PhDs completed has doubled during this time. Two new professional doctoral programmes have been introduced, 9 new research programmes and the number of taught masters programmes has increased over 70% reaching 88 in 8 years. These increases in the number of graduate students and programmes have been made possible by major commitments of resources by the University and from national funding sources. In addition it should not be underestimated the extent to which these changes have been possible because of the creative energy, strategic thinking, collaborative efforts, and the tremendous amount of hard work by the Departments and Institutes, the academic staff, the Graduate Studies Office and administrative staff in other offices, the Dean of the Graduate School and the higher administration.

### **Service and Support to Departments and Institutes, to Students and to the Dean of the Graduate School**

In preparation for the Self-Assessment Report questionnaires were designed and administered online in April of 2010 to solicit the views of students and academic staff about the support and service provided by the Graduate Studies Office. Another survey was administered to members of an outside working group on PAC strategy. Quantitative data and individual comments from these surveys are presented in the report. Conversations that took place with many people during the 2-day campus visit paint a picture that is generally consistent with the Self-Assessment Report demonstrating that staff members in the Graduate Studies Office have a realistic view of their accomplishments and the progress that has been made and are able to identify problems and work to solve them.

Despite any issues people have with the Graduate Studies Office, particular individuals and the staff in general were praised and described as “patient and accommodating”, “friendly”, “very good”, “nice people to deal with”, “easy to work with”, “helpful” and “supportive”.

#### *IV. Service and Support to Departments and Institutes*

As seen in Figure 6 of the Self-Assessment Report, people in the Departments and Institutes reported that their level of satisfaction of the support and service from the Graduate Studies Office is good in most areas while in others areas such as “response to questions and concerns” and “level of knowledge of staff” close to 50% of the respondents rate the service as very good to excellent. In contrast, “ability to anticipate your needs” and “ability to resolve issues on PAC” were thought to be problematic. This survey was carried out in the spring of 2010. Several conversations during the campus visit revealed that some of the services with major problems are seen as having improved significantly. PAC, the on-line Postgraduate Application Centre, is a good example of this. After it was introduced there were problems and general dissatisfaction by academic staff and by students with PAC. Results from the survey of people in Departments and Institutes show that only about 15% of the respondents found the Graduate Studies Office staff’s ability to resolve issues on PAC to be excellent or very good with approximately an equal number finding service below average to poor. A phrase heard during the campus visit that seemed to sum up the views of many was that “the PAC system was user unfriendly”. Interestingly, for the same question 50% of the students responded that they found the staff’s “ability to resolve issues on PAC” to be very good to excellent. The Graduate Studies Office has introduced a number of improvements and offered training sessions for users. Although there is still room for improvement, the majority of students and faculty recognize and appreciate the improvements that have taken place. Issues around PAC can also serve as a good example of another reality. The Graduate Studies Office cannot fix this problem by itself since the decision to adopt and share in the PAC service was made by the Registrar on the advice of the Dean of Graduate Studies and in a national context of many other universities sharing the service. Sharing of services can be advantageous for all units, but shared responsibility and constant communication are needed as the system is optimized.

A major value derived from Figures 6 and 10 is that these figures supply baseline data to measure how well the Graduate Studies Office is doing in some important areas of service. The quantitative data takes feedback beyond the level of anecdotal experiences and identifies the problems that most need attention. Subsequent surveys administered at later times will make it possible to assess the success of the actions taken to address specific issues.

In other areas of responsibility of the Graduate Studies Office, specifically in the implementation of new policies and practices around the Taught Masters, Structured PhD Programmes and the PhD Research Student Supervisory Policy the problems seem to be more complex. For these policies to be implemented the amount of paperwork has escalated and in some cases hardcopy is duplicated with electronic copy. There is also an increase in workload for the Departments and Institutes to meet the University’s Strategic Goals and the Irish Universities Quality Board Guidelines. This includes the introduction of required generic/transferrable and subject/specialist taught modules and the new Supervisory Policy for PhD students and the associated record keeping mandated by the policy. Some members of academic staff reported general satisfaction with the service



and support of the Graduate Studies Office in these areas and are looking forward to additional service and support as interdisciplinary programmes and cross-school initiatives are established. Favorable comments about the benefits to students of the Supervisory Panels were also heard in meetings with members of the academic staff, however, even those individuals who think the Structured PhD adds considerable value to graduate education, expressed displeasure with the increase in bureaucracy.

During the visit other members of academic staff reported problems in some areas and frequently expressed general frustration. Remarks were made about lack of accuracy, clarity and the occurrence of contradictory information in important published or web material. Displeasure with unrealistic lead time for critical deadlines, poor communications between the Graduate Studies Office and the faculties, excess burdens on academic staff within Departments and Institutes, conflicting scheduling of generic skills modules and need for greater flexibility to meet the national requirements in a discipline specific manner was heard. Some of these problem areas seem to be improving and many people praised the Graduate Studies Office for introducing workshops to present the newly adopted policies and for continuing to work to improve literature from the office, cutting down on the requests for redundant materials and giving greater lead-time and reminders of important deadlines. Although further work needs to be done to address problem areas in service and support some of the dissatisfaction associated with the Graduate Studies Office appears to be secondary to larger concerns that some Departments have about the new structure of Graduate Studies, new programmes and policies, and loss of autonomy in certain spheres for the Departments and Institutes. These issues are significant and may be, at least in part, responsible for delays in successfully completing the implementation of some policies and in furthering the University's goals for graduate studies at Maynooth.

Additional discussion of this aspect of implementation is dealt with later in this report in section *VII. Policy Formulation and Implementation*.

Although important problem areas are reported and discussed here, people in the Departments and Institutes remain overall positive about the service and support received from members of the administrative staff in the Graduate Studies Office and their desire and willingness to address areas of concern.

### ***V. Service and Support to Students***

Recent survey data presented in the Self-Assessment Report reflect general student satisfaction with the Graduate Studies Office. The degree of satisfaction was not uniform among the service and support areas evaluated, with 5 areas: Response to your questions; Timeliness of our response; Level of knowledge of our staff; Our website; and Our ability to resolve issues on PAC receiving at least 40% very good to excellent ratings. For an equal number of areas: Interaction with you on your... ; Generic skills programme; Internal scholarship support; Tuition Bursary support; and External scholarship support, 20-30% of the students responded that the service was poor (Figure 10). During the campus visit conversations during an open-ended meeting with about 20 self-selected

students suggested that the individuals present had similar thoughts, both positive and negative, about the services provided by the Graduate Studies Office as those reported in Figure 10. Although there are still areas where service needs to be improved such as the handling of fees, remarks heard during discussions with the students were generally positive and characterized the staff members as being very helpful with individual problems. Students also pointed out that in many areas service was very good, had improved in other areas, or is being seriously addressed with these efforts having a positive effect. Several positive remarks were made about the Graduate School website and the development of booklets and policy documents by the Graduate Studies Office.

As was seen with Figure 6 in the section on *Service to the Departments and Institutes*, the quantitative data in Figure 10 provide good baseline information on where the level of satisfaction is high and where it needs to be improved. These data would have been more informative if the number of responses was given to determine how widespread the opinions are. Furthermore, breaking this figure down into responses by different populations of students such as taught masters, research PhD students and part-time and evening students would increase the value by identifying which student population is most impacted by positive or negative experiences in each service area. Perhaps these data were collected but were not included in the Self-Assessment Report.

The support and service to graduate students shared between and among offices are discussed in *IX Integrating Services*.

Meetings with students revealed two important areas that were not addressed in the self-assessment report but seem to be some of the most pressing concerns for students. To a large extent, these issues are not directly within the remit of this review of the Graduate Studies Office. They are included here since they are of concern to graduate students and the students are looking to the Graduate Studies Office to do something about them.

1. Some students reported dissatisfaction with their experiences with the PhD Research Student Supervisory Policy. The two issues that are of the most concern to these students are the lack of a supporting panel in addition to their principal supervisor and delays in receiving feedback on their progress. As with all meetings of this nature it is not possible to know if these are the concerns of some of the students in attendance or if they are more widespread. However, these problems are not new as is evident from the IRIU report in March of 2010. That report states that *“The Team learned and read of good practices in many departments – students working as teaching assistants, regular meetings between supervisors and students, peer support groups among students, and seminars organised to instruct students about publication practices in their chosen field of study/research. However, such good practices were not applied consistently and serious deficiencies were revealed in some areas – only one supervisor assigned, unacceptable delays in receiving feedback from a supervisor”* (p16).

2. Considering the second issue caution must be taken once again when generalizing the opinions expressed by the assembled group to those of the general student population. Nevertheless, a strong consensus from the meeting was that graduate students are looking for greater connections with each other, with the Graduate School and the University and

are looking to the Graduate Studies Office to help facilitate these interactions. Again and again it was heard that graduate students want more opportunities and a common space to meet other graduate students through academic and social activities. One student commented that the generic modules were the only place to get to meet graduate students outside of one's department.

Two groups of students that feel particularly disenfranchised are the Irish students who did not do their undergraduate studies at Maynooth and international students. While acknowledging that there is an orientation on arrival, international students and Irish students coming from outside of Maynooth are looking for activities beyond the initial contact. Addressing this issue would help Maynooth attract more international students and non-Maynooth Irish students. The part time and evening students and taught master's students were not heard from directly, but in other conversations they were frequently mentioned as an important student population with their own needs and expectations. This student population is one that has grown considerably and is likely to continue to grow.

Students did not hesitate to make suggestions for things they would like the Graduate Studies Office to do for them. The following list of suggestions derives from conversations during the visit with students and non-students and from the Self-Assessment Report. Some of these suggestions would be relatively simple to enact and may have already been done, while other suggestions that are of high priority to students may require investments of money, space, or time.

### **Suggestions**

*~ Create a common interdisciplinary space for graduate students.*

A graduate student space would do much to give the students a sense community and of belonging and being a valued part of the University that is predominately an undergraduate campus. As discussed in the Self-Assessment Report (p 23), The Irish Universities Student Survey found that “*principal areas of negative feedback relate to ‘inadequate opportunities’ for interaction with other PhDs - the proportion with this view in NUI Maynooth (35%) is much higher than in the sector (21%) and may be due to the very limited amount of accommodation available for research students in some departments.*” Since students that feel most isolated appear to be the very students that the NUIM would like to be more successful with in recruitment the lack of such a space may be a considerable disadvantage.

*~ The Graduate Studies Office should sponsor more intellectual and social events for students.*

Events should be open to all graduate student populations, but some events may be directed at specific populations including part-time and evening students, non-Maynooth Irish students, and international students to meet their schedules, interests and needs. Several activities of this type take place, but the students expressed a strong interest in seeing more.

*~ Develop an E-portal for graduate students*

*~ Advertise seminars given in one department to students in other department with related interests.*

This would not only help students get to know each other, but may have the added benefit of stimulating interdisciplinary research. It should be easy to implement since it is already being done for staff.

*~ The staff in the Graduate Studies Office should use email to tell or remind students of important deadlines, funding opportunities and seminars.*

*~ If it has not already done so, in addition to the announcement on the website, the Graduate Studies Office should send out emails to all graduate students giving a brief message about the move and invite them to stop by and see the new office.*

*~ Provide a list on the Graduate School website of offices with links where students and staff can go for information about specific programmes, services and support that graduate students commonly need.*

This would go a long way in alleviating frustration and once created would likely save time for everyone. The information that people would find of greatest value would be where to find an office that can respond to students' questions when that service is not the responsibility of the Graduate Student Office.

As was pointed out by some of the students present, the Graduate Studies Office is doing many of these things and some of the information that students are looking for is found in very good print and on-line publications of the Graduate School. Nevertheless, whenever possible the Graduate Studies Office and its activities need to be made more visible to graduate students. The recent move of the office may make this easier.

## ***VI. Service and Support to the Dean of the Graduate School***

The Graduate Studies Office is responsible for supporting the Dean of the Graduate School, the Graduate Studies Subcommittee and the Graduate Student Feedback Council. In the last three years the office has evolved to support the restructuring of Graduate Studies at NUIM. Members of the administrative staff have assumed new responsibilities and staff turnover has resulted in new and different skills and expertise coming into the office. As might be expected with constant change, the Graduate Studies Office has experienced difficult times resulting in some tensions in the office. Nevertheless, much has been accomplished by the hard work of the staff and their pride in and excitement about being an essential part of the new structure for Graduate Studies at NUI Maynooth is well justified.

The SWOT analysis presented in the Quality Improvement Plan has several proposed actions, many of which will result in a work environment where staff have more time to focus on their responsibilities and to implement policies rather than devoting a great deal of time each day responding to problems that need immediate attention. Once some of

these proposed actions are accomplished, the office will run more efficiently, be able to more fully support the Dean and will improve working conditions and morale for all.

There are two major areas that need continued development in support of the Dean of the Graduate School and of the functioning of the Graduate Studies Office. They are addressed in the sections on *Information Management* and *Integrating Services*.

## ***VII. Policy Formulation and Implementation***

In the last three years an impressive array of new policies on graduate education have been formulated. The Graduate Studies Office has helped with the background research for these policies and in support of developing the policies. The office is also responsible for implementing these policies. To this end they have put procedures in place and produced several policy booklets and documents to explain the policies. There is a widespread internal and external view that these booklets, available on line and in print, are informative and useful. The Graduate Studies Office is also credited with being extremely helpful answering questions from students and academic staff regarding the policies.

Two principal areas where implementation of policies by the Graduate Studies Office have not been fully realized are discussed below.

1. As mentioned in *IV. Service and Support to Departments and Institutes* and in *V. Service to Students*, some departments have taken longer than most to implement certain policies. Areas that appear to be problematic in implementation are related to the taught generic and specific modules of the Structured PhD programme, the introduction of supporting panels in addition to the principal supervisor for PhD research students and monitoring of progress and feedback to students.

Restructuring the administration of postgraduate studies and bringing all three faculties together in a single Graduate School with a Graduate School Dean and a Graduate Studies Office at Maynooth has taken place concurrently with other changes in graduate education. There has also been an increase in the number of postgraduate students in taught programmes and research programmes. Another significant change has been the introduction of new supervisory policies regulating PhD research students in response to National Guidelines. These policies result in changes in the nature of the long-standing “master-apprentice” relationship between supervisors and PhD students and also changes in the relationships between the departments and faculties with the central administration on issues of graduate studies. In addition, these changes have taken place in an increasingly difficult economic climate. Change of this kind is rarely easy.

The graduate school office is improving and should continue to improve communication with Departments and Institutes and be as flexible as possible within the constraints of the policies to accommodate the needs of different departments, but if delay of implementation is the result of lack of acceptance of the policies, the Graduate Studies Office cannot be expected to solve these problems themselves. Rather, resolution of

these issues will rely on the continued communications of the Graduate School Dean with the Departments and Institutes and where appropriate, the assistance of the Graduate Studies Subcommittee of Academic Council.

2. The Graduate Studies Office is now involved in a review of the Taught Masters Programmes. Departments and Institutes bring forward proposals for new programmes following established procedures for development and acceptance of new programmes. From the Self-Assessment Report and from meetings during the campus visit, it was learned that the Graduate Studies Office frequently does not see a proposed programme until the Dean sees it on the agenda of the Academic Programmes Subcommittee. If informed earlier in the process, the Graduate Studies Office could be proactive in developing market research in advance of final development of programmes. Earlier consultation would also better position the Graduate Studies Office to quickly market and support new programmes once adopted.

### ***VIII. Information Management***

Record keeping and generation and analysis of data are activities that require continued development. The need for capturing and the professional management of data came up frequently in conversations. Not only is this important for establishing accurate baseline and longitudinal information relevant to graduate studies, but it also has predictive value necessary for strategic planning. Within the last few years there have been improvements in the management of graduate student records within the Graduate Studies Office and in coordination with other offices. Recently, NUIM purchased and developed a Research Student Module that was introduced on the ITS system. This has made it possible to collect data specific for graduate students some of which are important to fulfilling the *IUQB Guidelines on Good practice in the Organisation of PhD programmes in Irish Higher Education*.

Among Irish universities, Maynooth is seen as leading the way in several areas of the *Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Higher Education*. NUI Maynooth will play an important role when other universities start to initiate these practices and they will be looking to Maynooth to determine how successful the programmes are, what is working, and what is not. Information needed to answer these questions for planning purposes by other universities will in large part rely on quantitative data.

No one was openly critical of the performance of the Graduate Student Office in information management during the visit, but it was frequently heard that “it must get better”. This need for capturing additional information and professional management of data for the Graduate School was heard several times in different contexts. It was not clear at the time of the campus visit if the necessary expertise for additional information management responsibilities currently resides in the Graduate Studies Office. There are units within the University with principle responsible for information management. It would appear that it would be best if people in the Computer Centre could expand their role to provide more of these services to the Graduate School in addition to those they already provide.

### ***IX. Integrating Services***

Creation of the new structure of Graduate Studies has necessitated a number of changes in the relationships between the Office of Graduate Studies and several other offices and units. The integration of service supplied to Graduate Studies by the Graduate Studies Office and other units has worked well with some offices such as the Commercialisation Office. There is also a very positive working relationship developing with the Communications Office.

Much progress has been made in a short time and all involved seem sincere in their efforts to supply quality service and support to Graduate Studies at NUI Maynooth, however, in some areas support for the Graduate School and the graduate students seems to be considered an “add on” rather than a priority. This is a situation that must be addressed at the University level to ensure success of the restructured Graduate Studies at Maynooth. Greater coordination between the Graduate Studies Office and the International Office, Admissions, Records, Examinations, Graduations and ITS and Finance would enhance the service and support to Graduate Studies. The reporting relationships put in place when Graduate Studies was restructured and the Graduate School was created has resulted in a situation whereby several activities in service and support of the Graduate School are not managed by the Graduate Studies Office or the Dean.

There appears to be a strong consensus that these offices should not, at this time, be duplicated within the Graduate School. Therefore to optimize the support of Graduate Studies other methods of coordination of these services need to be put into practice. As the offices continue to work together more effective collaborations have been established with the Bursar’s Office and others. Frequent communications and continuation of regular meetings will provide even better service. The University should consider creating more formalized relationships with a designated person within each office to be responsible for service and support of graduate students. This person would communicate directly with a counterpart in the Graduate Studies Office and with the Dean assuring that service to graduate students is a priority at Maynooth.

### ***X. External Engagement and Interaction***

The Graduate Studies Office supports the role of the Dean of the Graduate School in several external activities and with regional and national agencies. Members of the administrative staff of the Graduate Studies Office also work with other universities and agencies. Results of a survey that the Graduate Studies Office sent to members of an external working group on PAC Strategy to assess the level of satisfaction with the services provided by Maynooth’s Graduate Studies Office are presented in Figure 13 of the Self-Assessment Report. The satisfaction seen is very high, with over 50% of the

respondents rating the service they received in each of the 8 areas as very good to excellent and in half of the areas 75% or more of the respondents reported very good to excellent service.

Phone conversations with representatives of national agencies during the campus visit reinforced the quantitative data with very positive remarks about working with the Graduate Studies Office directly and with the Dean who relies on support from the Graduate Studies Office. They were described as good citizens and responsive to requests in a timely manner. External agencies and other universities will be looking to Maynooth to see if the introduction of the Structured Doctoral Programmes at NUI Maynooth results in better completion rates for graduate students and degrees with added value.

### ***XI. Quality Improvement Plan***

The SWOT analysis presented in the Quality Improvement Plan is a useful and important summation of the information presented in the rest of the self-assessment report. The recommendations following the SWOT were considered when making the recommendations presented below.

#### **Summary**

The transformation of the Graduate Studies Office in the three years since it has been a separate office is extraordinary. Throughout the restructuring of Graduate Studies at NUI Maynooth, this office has been the major service provider for an increasing number of graduate students and of new programmes and policies to help the Graduate School establish a national and international reputation for excellence in graduate education and research. On the whole, the Graduate Studies Office has provided outstanding service and support to the newly established Graduate School. Some areas in need of development or improvement have been identified. The recommendations are made to further the services and support provided by the Graduate Studies Office to Graduate Studies at NUI Maynooth.

#### **Recommendations**

1. Increase the staff in the Graduate Studies Office by one to fully support and service the present and increasing activities of the office. Since the roles and responsibilities of the Graduate School Office have been increasing and those of the individual staff members continue to evolve, it would not be prudent to recommend the expertise and duties of the new staff member here. The Dean of the Graduate School should determine the needed expertise and responsibilities for the best functioning of the Graduate Studies Office as it is evolving with input from the rest of the Graduate Studies Office staff. Once this person is in place the workloads and responsibilities of the staff members should be balanced and reflect the needs of the Graduate Studies Office and the expertise of the staff.



2. Create a much needed common-space for graduate students for professional development and social activities. Many students do have a dedicated space—an “association room” that may include study facilities. But where they exist they are within the departments/disciplines, and thus do not meet the urgent need for intellectual and social mixing across disciplines.
3. In administrative offices that serve and support graduate students designate one person responsible for working with the Dean of the Graduate School and a member of staff in the Graduate Studies Office to ensure that quality service and support for Graduate Studies is a high priority throughout the University.
4. Information management within the Graduate Studies Office should be further developed. Even with additional development within the Graduate Studies Office the level of expertise needed to ensure professional survey design, record keeping, data recovery and analysis, sound predictive information for strategic planning and to support essential activities for the Graduate School will require resources and expertise beyond those of the Graduate Studies Office. The Computer Center and Institutional Research appear to be ideal resources for several of these services.
5. To meet the increasing need for recruiting and marketing, additional members of academic staff be trained in and involved in recruiting. More University resources including incentives for staff engaged in these activities should be directed to Graduate School Recruiting and Marketing.
6. Develop a web portal facility for graduate students.
7. Transfer the responsibility of handing the IRCSET and related fees and expenses from the Graduate Studies Office where there is no expertise in these areas to Finance or other unit with the expertise required.
8. As planned the Graduate School Dean should continue conversation with the Departments and Institutes that have had delays in fully adopting the new policies of the Structured Doctoral Programmes and the Ph.D. Research Student Supervisory Policy to address the issues associated with these delays and how best to resolve them. As ways are found to overcome delays, the Graduate Studies Office should direct energy and expertise to these departments to implement the policies.
9. Address the remaining problems with PAC.
10. The Graduate Studies Office has initiated an important and timely comprehensive review of the success of current programmes. Procedures should be established to have early notification of the Graduate Studies Office by Departments and Institutes as they develop new programmes so that the Graduate Studies Office can help with market research before programme development is complete and to anticipate any additional resources needed to support new programmes. Equally

important procedures should be put in place to discontinue unsuccessful programmes.

11. Considering the importance and the increase in the number of part time students and students in Taught Programmes, the Graduate Studies Office should consider designing and administrating surveys specifically for these student populations. Results of these surveys will determine the level of satisfaction these students have with the service and support they receive and will enable the Graduate Studies Office to better address problems that are uncovered and to support those activities that are successful.
12. Use the move of the Graduate Studies Office as an opportunity to make the service and support provided by the Office better known with the graduate students and university wide.

### **The Review Process**

The peer reviewers were provided with an extensive Self-Assessment Report before the campus visit on November 25 and 26, 2010. We were also given a copy of *Graduate Studies at NUI Maynooth: Strategies and Policies*, and viewed additional information on the Graduate School and other University websites.

Dr. Richard Watson, Director of Quality, Quality Promotions Office, welcomed us to campus and discussed the Quality Review Process. This review benefited greatly from his extensive knowledge of the working of NUI Maynooth and of the national agencies responsible for Quality Education and his generous sharing of this information. Dr. Watson's hospitality and support during the campus visit are gratefully acknowledged. Sincere thanks are given to Ms. Marguerite Lohan for excellent preparation for the visit and the constant kind attention to detail during the campus visit.

During the campus visit meetings took place with several individuals and groups of people. These included meetings with President Tom Collins, several other members of the higher administration, meetings with Faculty Deans, Heads of Academic Departments and Directors of Research Institutes, the Staff of the Graduate Studies Office and the Dean of the Graduate School, representatives from many offices with services that support graduate studies and with graduate students. There were also useful phone conversations with the Irish Universities quality Board and Higher Education Authority. Without exception, everyone was welcoming, took the review process seriously and exhibited a positive attitude and pride in NUI Maynooth.

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**Professor Susan G. Ernst**  
**External Reviewer**

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**Professor Peter Denman**  
**Internal Reviewer**