



NUI MAYNOOTH

Ollscoil na h-Éireann Má Nuad

Quality Review of the Department of History

March 2010

Peer Review Report

Peer Review Group:

External Reviewers:

**Professor Marianne Elliott,
University of Liverpool;
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Internal Reviewers:

**Professor Margaret Kelleher,
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Librarian, NUIM.**

NUI Maynooth: External Reviewers' Report
Quality Review carried out 1-3 March 2010

1. Background. In preparation for our review, we received the Department of History's excellent Self Assessment Report, together with a full list of appendices. We visited the Department between 1 and 3 March 2010, and had an opportunity to speak with a wide variety of staff, student and other 'stakeholders' within the institution – and to weigh the arguments of the Report against an array of oral testimony. We were able to discuss the operation of the Department with individual academics, area groupings (such as the modern European historians), all levels of undergraduate and postgraduate, as well as administrators, librarians and staff from Adult Education. We believe that this intensive set of discussions, allied with the commendably clear and weighty self-assessment materials, has provided us with a very full sense of the operation of the Department.

However, we also sensed, both from the documentation as well as our conversations, that the retirement in January 2010 of the long-standing Professor of Modern History and Head of Department, Vincent Comerford, has brought the Department to a cross-roads: we sensed, too, that this, together with the wider challenges facing the university sector in Ireland and beyond, has stimulated a degree of apprehension and uncertainty about the future. We believe that, as peer reviewers, we can help to clarify some of the issues and possibilities facing the Department.

2 The Self-Assessment Report. We thought that this was an impressive and honestly reflective document - and our comments below follow its structure, while being informed not only by the Report, but also by its supporting appendices and our on-site meetings.

2.1. Introduction. We noted the commendable desire of the Department to align its future strategic plans with those of the university (pp.7, 48-50). While we are keenly aware that the difficult financial contexts make long-term planning difficult, we noted that there was no clear expression of the future academic evolution and growth of the Department. For example, does the Department wish to retain its pre-eminence in Irish history? If so, how does it wish to replace departing colleagues? If not, where does it wish to invest and grow? Are there clearly defined new areas of teaching and research where the Department sees itself as investing? We recognise that the review has taken place during an interim period in terms of overall leadership but note the absence of a clear consensus about the future academic shape and coverage of the Department.

The location of the Department in Rhetoric House is one of its great strengths, and understandably inspires considerable affection among its members. However, these historic premises evidently come at a cost. Lack of space appears particularly acute for post-graduates, post-doctoral fellows and the many part-time tutors: There is evidently little space to accommodate (for example) informal feedback sessions for students or indeed for social interaction. There are plans to remedy this by locating some postgraduates in the new Humanities and Social Sciences building (An Foras Feasa facilities), though as this is on the north campus, it will still involve a certain disjunction with the core department. Currently many students have almost all their teaching on the north campus and there would be much to be said for acquiring even some shared space there for administrative and academic staff.

2.2 Undergraduate Teaching. As noted above the range and quality of delivery is very high, given the very large numbers of students that History accommodates, when compared with other departments. In the discussions we held during our three day visit, students were generally complimentary about the commitment of staff, the quality of feedback, the tutorial system, and the approachability of Office staff.

On the debit side, there was some evidence to suggest that the First Year arrangements are not working as effectively as might be desired. In our discussion with First Year representatives there was broad agreement that the 'Practising History' course was undemanding, and while the sample of students whom we interviewed was necessarily

small, their views do appear to be confirmed by the survey evidence in Appendix 4 (where there has clearly been a substantial drop in student approval for First Year in History between 2001 and 2009). There was also some evidence from both tutors and students to suggest a mismatch of lectures and tutorials during First Year (when the tutorial schedule addressed topics not yet discussed by the lecturer). Students were, however, positive about the tutorial regime, and compared the arrangements in History favourably with other popular First Year subjects where there was reportedly no tutorial system.

There was a clear sense of the core modules in Years 2 and 3 'straining at the seams', given the very large numbers. However, we consider the range and interest of the 'electives' offered to be impressive, particularly given the relatively small numbers of academic staff in the Department. On balance, we felt that the mixture of core and elective modules in the honours programme worked coherently and well. It is true that the bias of the degree programme is overwhelmingly in favour of Irish, British and continental European history; but there is some evidence to suggest that the Department is seeking to extend this range. It is also clear that a small Department cannot achieve (or be expected to achieve) the chronological, geographical or thematic breadth that bigger enterprises can deliver.

We noted the very heavy reliance of the Department and of its tutorial system on part-time tutors. The many part-time tutors bring some advantages - enabling the Department to sustain its very wide range of activities, maintain research leave schemes and to deliver high-quality research outputs which match the best internationally. The tutors receive a lot of support from academic and administrative staff and they recognise the helpfulness of a policy which keeps them in some form of academic employment while they pursue research and more permanent posts. The downsides are, however, the extra administrative burden on the Office in overseeing numerous pay-sheets, the broad range of teaching commitments (tutors ranging sometimes far beyond their specialities), the absence of facilities to allow them to meet with each other or to give student feedback.

2.3 Evaluation. The range of student evaluation sought by the Department is a further impressive element of its ongoing internal assessment policies. We were very favourably

impressed by the evidence provided in the Self Assessment Report of course evaluation and other assessment forms, as well as by the detailed evidence of returns.

2.4 Outreach. We were also impressed by the range, quality and commitment of the department to Outreach programmes and Maynooth clearly dominates the market for popular interest in Local History. History teaching at the ten-year old Kilkenny campus has clearly been a great success: Indeed, the record of administrative staff there and within the main department in dealing with part-time students received high praise. Each of us has long been impressed by the research students produced by the Local History programmes, and by the Maynooth Studies in Local History publications series. These students also represent important income streams. But we were aware of some emerging problems: the credit crunch has caused a downturn in numbers at Kilkenny, and the rights or interests of part-time students may not always be as carefully addressed as those studying full-time.

2.5. Assessment. The range of assessments across First, Second and Third Arts seems to strike a reasonable balance between formal examination components, and tutorial assignments. In making this judgement, we are taking into account the evidence of favourable feedback supplied by external examiners, as well as the large numbers of students and constricted resources with which the Department deals. We noted during our conversations with academic staff that several colleagues found the current marking rules restrictive (one colleague was particularly concerned by the unavailability of '62') and would like a return to usage of all marks.

3.1. Postgraduate Programmes. The Department's wide range of taught postgraduate (MA and Diploma) programmes is well-managed and successful. The plans to develop new MA programmes seem to be creative, well-considered and an effective means of engaging staff research interests. They are also in line with international thinking about the balance between research and undergraduate degrees in research-intensive universities. However, they do absorb a lot of staff time and (as noted above) might only

be fully sustainable if the level of incentivisation is restored to its original level of 30 per cent of fee income.

The MLitt/PhD programmes appear broadly well-managed, and in our discussion with postgraduate representatives there was very positive feedback about the commitment of supervisors and the practice of the research seminar. We found it difficult to assess completion rates, which of course are an abiding preoccupation across the sector. The average of 13 major thesis completions a year is understandably deemed ‘satisfactory’ (p.29), but the figure requires further interrogation and contextualisation: Some concern was expressed during our meeting with the postgraduates about relatively high drop-out rates, and this appears to be complemented by some of the figures in Appendix II. However, it is impossible for us to judge on the available evidence whether this potentially important observation has merit, and (if so) how it might be addressed.

We also noted concerns about the lack of postgraduate social or desk space at present, although the latter may be addressed in part by the PRTL14 funded new facilities and the new Library building. Both postgraduates and postdoctoral fellows argued that the availability, even of small amounts, and on a competitive basis, of travel funds would have a disproportionately beneficial impact upon their communities; and we, too, consider that this would be a wise departmental investment. If the Department wishes to develop a postgraduate community with other than Irish interests such a fund would appear to be indispensable.

We understand that the Department is considering a move towards the joint supervision of research students. We commend this, on the grounds that joint supervision provides students with access to a greater array of scholarly talent. It can also provide an effective form of ‘on the job’ training for early career academic staff who may be inexperienced supervisors.

The Department has also moved towards the provision of generic skills in line with what is happening elsewhere in the sector; but (as we have also found in our own institutions) generic modules are not always appropriate and are sometimes resented by those students who are ‘conscripted’ to them. For example, the generic skills/tools for the MLitt -

required of all research students - were not deemed appropriate for those specialising in areas other than Irish and/or medieval history.

The Department contains at present a very large Irish History community, which has won international acclaim. However, this can leave the small numbers of staff and postgraduate researchers working in other fields somewhat isolated. Care too will be needed to ensure that there are sufficient Library resources to sustain such areas (see below). The Department is aware of these issues, as well as the potential danger of exclusion by the predominantly Irish focus of *An Foras Feasa* (p. 35).

It would be unreasonable to conclude this section, however, on anything other than a positive note. Since the inception of NUI Maynooth, and before, the Department has nurtured an impressively large community of young researchers, and has punched above its weight in terms of the IRCHSS postgraduate and postdoctoral competitions. One especially impressive testimony to the success of the Department's postgraduate activity is to be found in Appendix XI.

3.2. Staff Research. We commend the research leave arrangements, and the evidence of successful competitive grant application. We are strongly of the opinion that, particularly on the basis of the evidence laid out in Appendix X, the Department has an excellent research profile.

4. Services, Structure and Wider Contexts. Under this heading it might be helpful (inter alia) to review the concerns and feedback articulated by different types of teacher within the Department.

4.1. Departmental Structures and Governance. We note with approval that contract lecturers are invited to attend departmental meetings. We consider, however, that more attention might be paid to the needs of (in particular) the three contract lecturers, and (perhaps) the array of occasional lecturers, given their relative importance to the Department: One issue which might be considered, certainly for the contract lecturers, is

a system of ‘mentoring’ – linking the contract lecturer to a well-established colleague, who might provide professional and research guidance.

We note the frank discussion (p.33) of the ‘new level of dependence on the expertise of the departmental staff’. We note, too, (p.34) ‘the possibility of a more general review of the role of departmental members in respect of administration’.

4.2 The Department is strongly to be commended for the range of initiatives which it has sponsored linking its researchers to a variety of state and other outside bodies.

Particularly noteworthy in this respect are the initiatives of the Centre for the Study of Historic Irish Houses and Estates (Dr Terence Dooley(in connection with the Office of Public Works, and the Centre for Military History and Strategic Studies (Dr Ian Speller), in connection with the Defence Forces.

4.3. The Library. We acknowledge the good fortune of the Department in having close access to the Russell Library, a special collection of world-class standing. An inspection of the open shelves of the University Library suggested that it was an excellent resource for Irish history. We note, too, that there are immediate plans to expand the facilities offered by the Library. On the debit side, we encountered some evidence that the Library’s holding in areas other than Irish history could be wanting; and we accept that, given the Department’s ambitions to build strength in areas beyond Ireland, and given the large numbers of undergraduates, problems of access and provision may already be well-established.

4.4 International Links. We consider that, given the research strengths of the Department, and its array of other assets, the Department could further develop its international linkages. Mention is made in the Self Assessment Report (pp.20, 40) of the link with SUNY Brockport; but we believe that the Department could well have pursued other opportunities (in terms of recruitment to taught Masters’ programmes and visiting undergraduate studentships) beyond this.

4.5 Communication. Particular attention might be paid to ensuring that all types of temporary lecturing staff are kept informed of major departmental issues.

5. Recommendations. May we now draw these comments together into several main recommendations?

5.1. Professor Comerford occupied a very significant space not only in the Department, but also in Maynooth and Irish university life more widely. While we do not consider that it will be likely to find a replacement who will have the same special standing, attract the same level of respect, and generate the same level of consensus as Professor Comerford, we do believe that the senior chair has an important unifying and leadership function within the Department. We therefore consider that the university management should make the replacement of Professor Comerford a matter of the utmost priority. In order to underpin departmental unity and morale, we believe that any chair should be defined in an inclusive manner – that is to say, in a manner which will attract a wide range of applications across a broad section of the discipline - and appointed after an open competition.

5.2. Much of the administration of the Department has been conducted by Professor Comerford in association with Ms Ann Donoghue and Ms Catherine Heslin. This arrangement has produced excellent results for the Department, but at the cost (we believe) of unrealistically large burdens on these three colleagues. The Department of History is a large and complex administrative entity, which services a very large student community, and unites a very diverse community of scholars, grouped into several research centres. We believe that the smooth and successful operation of the Department has become too dependent upon the unreasonably great sacrifices of this small group of colleagues. We note that it is one of the goals of the Department ‘to share the burdens of administration equitably among the academic staff’ (p.6).

We believe that any replacement for Professor Comerford could not be expected to inherit such burdensome administrative responsibilities. We believe, therefore, that now is the appropriate moment to inaugurate a review of administration with a view to ensuring the continuing smooth governance of the Department. In particular, we consider that the current grouping of functions within the Headship should be separated out, and

that responsibility for key areas of departmental life – postgraduate recruitment and teaching, undergraduate affairs, research, internationalisation, for example – should be delegated to senior, perhaps professorial, colleagues.

It is clear that any temporary absence of either of the two key administrative support staff named above has created problems in the administration of the Department: it is also clear, therefore, that the permanent departure of either or both of these colleagues would have a potentially devastating impact upon the Department. We believe that any review of the administrative structures of the Department should consider expanding the resources allocated here.

5.3. The large number of undergraduates (which has doubled since 1990) is currently only sustainable through the use of postgraduate or postdoctoral tutors. We consider the tutorial regime in the Department to be a significant pedagogic asset, and we noted that, in our conversations, a range of undergraduates commented very favourably on their tutorial experiences.

However, the tutorial support budget is dependent upon centralised incentive payments, which arise from the Masters' programmes. We understand that these payments have been reduced from 30 per cent to 22 per cent of fee income in the course of this academic year (2009/10); and we are clear that this claw-back represents in effect a serious disincentive. Tutorial budgets and imaginative and successful new MA programmes are simultaneously placed under threat. We consider this to be deeply regrettable.

5.4. NUI Maynooth has (despite its small size) one of the most successful concentrations of Irish historians on the island. While we wish to distinguish this issue from the challenges created by Professor Comerford's departure, we note that his retirement, added to the impending retirement of Professor Colm Lennon and further retirements within the coming years, means that the Department's high standing in this area is under threat. The issue of replacing the senior chair, the Professorship of Modern History, is distinct, and requires a very broad trawl to identify a scholar with significant leadership qualities; but we believe that Vincent Comerford's departure also, separately, underlines

the particular challenge facing the now diminishing community of Irish historians at Maynooth.

The Department states as one of its goals that it seeks to be ‘a centre for postgraduate research and study on Irish history of all periods’: it also states that it wishes ‘to achieve an average output of ten to twelve PhDs annually’. Given the heavily Irish interests of the postgraduate community, it seems to us that these core goals are unattainable without urgent attention being paid to the diminution of the Irish history community through successive retirements.

5.5. The reputation of History at NUI Maynooth is strong, and we came with high expectations. On the whole, we have not been disappointed. After three days of review, we have concluded that the Department sustains an impressive range of activities and outputs, judged whether in terms of research, teaching, outreach or public benefit.

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