



NUI MAYNOOTH
Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

DEPARTMENT OF MODERN HISTORY

QUALITY REVIEW 2002

PEER REVIEW REPORT 2002

Quality Review 2002

Modern History

1 Introductory Remarks

The External Reviewers for the Department of Modern History at NUI Maynooth found their visit a richly rewarding and satisfactory experience. The advance documentation provided by the Department was exemplary in its thoroughness, clarity and professional presentation. Copious documentation, relating to all aspects of the work of the Department, was meticulously arranged and conveniently available throughout the External Reviewers' visit. The complete documentation conveyed an impression – confirmed during the visit – of a productive Department, well-organized, efficient, admirably cohesive and highly-motivated, with an excellent executive/ administrative support office. While many of the factors responsible for this satisfactory position will be noted in the body of this Report, it should be stated at the outset that the efficiency and healthy *esprit de corps* of the Department owes much to the firm but sensitive and supportive leadership provided by the Professor of Modern History and Head of Department.

The arrangements for the conduct of the visit were entirely satisfactory and were handled with efficiency and good humour by Saranne Magennis and the Quality Promotion Office. The various phases of the visit – discussions with individual staff and with groups of students, visits to key facilities – were scheduled (and adjusted) sensibly and with a view to making best use of the time available. A short break in the schedule of meetings on Day 2 would have been welcomed by the Externs, though the number of staff and the time required for a satisfactory conversation with each of the informants probably dictated the tight schedule.

A number of key assumptions inform the general thrust of the Review and of this Report. In the context of the overall strategic vision of the university, it was clearly established in the meetings between the External Reviewers and the senior officers of the university who comprised the Review Group - the President and the Dean of Arts/Humanities - that the university is firmly committed to achieving a quality performance by the most exacting international standards in all areas of its activities. Following a decade of robust expansion in numbers of students and staff and in resources, the short to medium term outlook for NUIM suggests a more competitive environment for securing both state and non-state funding for key university requirements. At the same time, a declining national cohort of school-leavers will lead to increased competition for students between universities, although this may be offset by a greater inflow of mature students in response to state and university commitments to lifelong learning.

These developments are already under way, with implications for all aspects of how the university pursues its mission in teaching and research. NUIM already has a high proportion of mature students in its undergraduate cohort, and it is envisaged that there will be an increase in the relative number of postgraduates. Specifically within the Arts Faculty, a number of new academic developments are anticipated (e.g. Applied Social Studies). However the critical point is that following the strong growth of the 1990s, NUIM considers it sensible for academic departments to plan in the short to medium term on the assumption that net extra resources in staffing are likely to be scarce. Innovation and creativity will be largely (though not entirely) generated from the current base of staffing.

The expansion of the 1990s has fundamentally changed the Department of Modern History and shaped the challenges and opportunities which it now faces. The Department's profile both within Ireland and externally has risen sharply and it is widely perceived as an energetic centre for historical scholarship and teaching. The published research of staff has attracted international commendation from professional historians. Postgraduate work has been noteworthy, especially the MA in Local History and the number and quality of M.Litt. and Ph.D. theses. An enviable number of highly qualified post-doctoral fellows have been attracted to the Department. The Department has also made a significant contribution to the university's outreach programmes and its academic service to the wider public. Overall, the Department of Modern History is a significant asset of NUIM which deserves the fullest support to allow it to build on this positive foundation.

It is equally clear, however, that the Department has come to a crossroads. The documentation provided for this Review demonstrated a strong awareness of this and testified to the intense self-assessment that has been taking place. The draft outline of a departmental strategic plan (presented to the External Reviewers during the visit) identifies many of the key questions and choices that the External Reviewers see as needing to be addressed. In particular, the appointment of staff in areas of non-Irish as well as Irish history raises the issue of the overall balance between different fields and periods of historical scholarship and the relationship between them. Additionally, while course development and adaptation have been ongoing, the External Reviewers agree that a more fundamental review of the undergraduate curriculum (content, teaching formats and modes of assessment) is desirable. The broader context referred to above of increased competition for a more varied student cohort poses the question of how the Department might best position itself in relation to the teaching of history in Irish universities as a whole. These issues and others require strategic choices on the basis of clear priorities and a thorough assessment of the academic cost-benefit of the different options identified.

These general introductory remarks form the context for this Report, which follows the headings set out in the format recommended by the Quality Promotion Office.

2 Response to the Self-Assessment Document

2.1 Introduction to the Department

The current size of the Department of Modern History at NUIM (founded in 1953) reflects a period of strong growth, in student and staff numbers, during the 1990s. The Department has twelve and a half academic posts and one and a half executive assistant posts. The recruitment for academic posts during the past decade has expanded the expertise of the Department beyond its traditional strength in Irish history, so that it now employs specialists in American, French, German, Portuguese and Spanish history, as well as in early and medieval Ireland and local and women's history. The Department also has the services of part-time and occasional lecturers and tutors and, more recently, of post-doctoral fellows. This staff complement provides forty one-semester modules per annum on the day-time undergraduate programme, teaches postgraduate courses, supervises research dissertations, contributes to the modular BA in Local and Community Studies in two locations and provides outreach courses for the NUI Certificate in Local History in different venues.

Statistics contained in the Department's self-assessment Report indicate that there were over 750 students in the Department in 2001-02, of whom 650 are day-time undergraduates. This figure represents a drop from the record figure of 925 in 1996/97. While no firm assumptions have been made regarding future numbers, it is not anticipated that there will be any immediate fall in undergraduate numbers. Nonetheless, competition for undergraduates is likely to intensify in the medium-term future. In the year 2001-02 there were some 80 postgraduates in the Department, divided between taught programmes and major research degrees, with 32 students registered for the Ph.D. It is hoped that these numbers will increase. The strong commitment of the Department to research (and the proof of its competitive strength) is demonstrated by the fact that under the new research funding schemes of the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences, twelve doctoral scholarships, six post-doctoral fellowships and two research fellowships for academic staff have been awarded to scholars in Modern History at NUIM. In terms of inter-institutional comparisons, this represents an outstanding performance.

The declared purpose and general goals of the Department are consistent with the best international thinking on academic history. In defining aims specific to Modern History at NUIM, and identifying current issues and future strategic directions for the Department, a number of key issues emerge. The Department's strong growth in the 1990s has raised its national and international profile, increased its capacity to offer a broader menu of courses and to extend its graduate and research horizons, and made creative and innovative academic developments possible both within the Department and in cooperation with others. Rapid growth has also changed the balance of specialist interests and expertise. These changes have implications for all aspects of the Department's work. The Department has responded flexibly and sensibly to growth but the self-assessment review and the draft outline strategic plan demonstrate that it accepts

the need for a more fundamental reappraisal of its operations and future direction, especially in the following areas.

Improving both completion rates and the percentage of 'good honours' among the graduating class is a key goal. Achieving it will depend on many factors, some amenable to Departmental action, others requiring more complex intervention at university level, and still others dependent on wider social and economic circumstances. Among the key steps identified by the Department are an improved staff-student ratio, more small-group teaching, close monitoring of student performance, and course reform, especially in the First Year. This area is examined below under **Undergraduate course issues**.

The introduction of a single honours degree in Modern History for a small cohort of students, for which the Department makes a good case, is seen as an important development in its own right and one that might help improve the performance of the graduating class. This issue is also dealt with under **Undergraduate course issues**.

The provision of suitable teaching space (halls and classrooms) lies outside the Department's control and is a matter for the university administration. It requires urgent attention, however, not only in the light of current needs but also because changes in the syllabus and teaching format for undergraduates of the kind being debated by the Department cannot occur without it. This question is addressed below under **Undergraduate course issues**.

Expansion of the postgraduate programme has been one of the Department's striking successes, most notably with the highly-regarded MA in Local History and a significant number of M.Litt. and Ph.D. theses produced in various fields of history. The Department is debating how best to direct its efforts between the competing claims of taught and research degrees of various kinds. This issue, along with the fostering of a dynamic postgraduate research culture, is addressed below in the section on **Research and Postgraduate Programmes**.

The research output of Department staff in recent years has been impressive and current research plans are ambitious yet realistic. They depend on the maintenance of sabbatical leave as currently practised by the Department, an issue also considered below in the sections on **Research and Postgraduate Programmes** and on **Staff Development**.

In view of its record in teaching and research, the Department has legitimate ambitions for further staff expansion. Such a development will be determined by university procedures for general resource allocation. But in making a case to the university, the Department would no doubt wish to reflect on the choice between entering a new field of history and strengthening an existing one. This issue is taken up below in the section on **Research and Postgraduate Programme**.

2.2 *Undergraduate course issues*

As outlined above, changes during the past decade dictated the need for a thorough review of the structure and content of the undergraduate History programme. This was undertaken by the Department's self-assessment for the Review and by the outline summary of a departmental strategic plan to 2005. During their visit the External Reviewers had the opportunity to gain further elaboration by staff of their views on key issues addressed in these documents. The observations and recommendations in this section take account of the clarification achieved in discussions with staff and students.

History is studied through a two subject degree programme. In the first year, it is taken as one of three subjects in a common Arts entry programme, and comprises two core courses in each semester. Two of these are on subjects likely to be familiar to students from secondary school, and two are designed to introduce students to unfamiliar subjects. In the second and third years, students take History in conjunction with another subject. Each semester, they take two core courses and one special topic, the latter being chosen from a rich variety of courses reflecting the research interests of staff and of some specialists invited from outside. Core courses in the first year are mainly in modern (19th and 20th century) history. In the second year they are on medieval and early modern history, and in the third year are on early modern history plus one course on Europe and the colonial world in the 19th-20th centuries and one on 'The idea of history'. Both core and option courses display a good balance between Irish, British, European, and American history.

Core courses are taught through large lecture classes, with a fortnightly tutorial in groups of ten to twelve which supports the students in their reading and provides a framework in which they write their assignments. Special topics are taught through mixed lecture and seminar format in groups of up to 25 or 30 in the more popular options.

The Department shares the university's concern about relatively high non-completion rates and the relatively small number graduating with high honors grades (ranging in Modern History from 11% to 18% between 1998 and 2001). The Department has also identified a 'significant minority' of undergraduates who do not share the eager and committed attitude to study of the majority of their fellows.

There is nothing to indicate that the level of qualification of entrants to the Arts programme at NUIM will change in the short to medium term future, so that it must be assumed that the educational background of students will remain roughly what it is, though with a possible increase in the already commendably high proportion of mature students. At 1:27, the staff-student ratio is above the average for universities in the Republic of Ireland, though below that in a number of departments at NUIM. An overall increase in the resources for small group teaching is therefore justified but cannot be relied upon. The External Examiners in Modern History are clear that assessment and final degree classification are rigorous and appropriate, in conformity with the best international standards. The Department is thus realistic in taking these considerations into account when addressing the above-mentioned concerns. The logic and general

direction of the changes proposed by the Department seem sensible and well considered. The External Reviewers would simply like to suggest that the following observations should be given consideration.

2.2.1. Underlying assumptions

Firstly, it is assumed that a full scheme of modularization and semesterization will be operating within the Faculty of Arts within the next few years. Secondly, an early solution is needed for the acute problem of a shortage of suitable teaching space – notably small to medium-size class-rooms, appropriately equipped for tutorials, seminars and small-group teaching. On the evidence available to the External Reviewers, shortage of such space acts as a major impediment to the introduction of desirable curricular reform in Modern History. Increasing the number of optional special courses (which may require scheduling more than one course in the same time-slot) and increasing the amount of small-group teaching, both desirable developments, cannot be undertaken without additional teaching rooms being available. It is hoped that the proposed Hume Building will make a significant contribution towards solving this problem. In any case, the university will need to consider, in strategic terms, the implications for space allocation of curriculum reform proposals aimed at increasing the choice of course options for students and enhancing their learning experience through increased use of small-group teaching.

2.2.2 Core courses and special topics

Core courses taught largely in the form of broad chronological surveys of national and international history provide breadth of knowledge and the ability to think synthetically on large issues. As such they have a valuable place in the programme. Special topics allow students to follow their own interests and introduce them to more intense historiographical reading and study of primary sources. The Department might wish to consider re-weighting the second and third year programmes towards special topics. If it does so, it will need to decide if complete survey ‘coverage’ of Irish history should be maintained or selective ‘survey’ coverage provided of a variety of fields.

2.2.3. Small-group teaching

Small group teaching is perhaps the single most important means of engaging students’ interest and improving their performance. Tutorials of 10-12 students, crucial in the delivery of core survey courses, take place once a fortnight and thus on average four times per course. Special topic classes typically have 25 to 30 students, which is too large for intensive small-group work. One means of ameliorating this situation without an overall change in the staff:student ratio is by reducing the number of courses required from three to two in each semester of the second and third years, and redeploying the staff time so freed into smaller classes.

2.2.4. Twentieth century history

The fact that NUIM does not have a Department of Politics will inevitably result in students with a particular interest in contemporary politics and society looking to Modern History to provide courses in twentieth century or contemporary history. At the moment, the Department is able to avail of teaching from post-doctoral or contract staff to broaden the range of course offerings in twentieth century history (including twentieth century Ireland) beyond what could reasonably be provided by the full-time staff with expertise in this period. In planning for future staff recruitment the Department may wish to consider strengthening twentieth century history, where student demand will remain strong, and turning it into a pole of research and teaching strength. The appointment of a specialist in contemporary Irish political history would underpin the strength of Irish history in the Department and create exciting possibilities for collaboration with existing staff whose expertise lies in the history of European integration and the contemporary history of the Iberian Peninsula.

2.2.5. Assessment

The incorporation of tutorial essay marks into course assessment, as recommended in the Departmental plan, will enhance the relevance of the tutorial programme by rewarding students for work done.

2.2.6. First year programme

The recently re-vamped First Year Tutorial programme - which is well-ordered in terms of stated objectives and tasks to be completed - seems, on the early evidence, to be working well and ought to be continued. In any revision of the content of the First Year course serious consideration should be given to the inclusion of a form of 'induction course' into the nature of historical enquiry and the practice of history. This should be skills-oriented and rooted in a historical problem or period (as distinct from a 'what is history' course of the kind appropriately offered at present in third year). This form of 'induction course' would take into account the varied backgrounds and perceived needs of the first year student intake at NUIM (see **Introductory Remarks**).

2.2.7 B.A. (International) and modern languages with history

The Department is clearly committed to promoting the BA (International) among its students as an attractive option whereby students spend a third year on a SOCRATES or other exchange programme at a foreign university before completing their fourth year at NUIM. However, the small number of students combining Modern History with a modern language in their degree is a cause for concern. Careful monitoring of student subject-choice from First Arts, and an active encouragement of the combination of History and a modern language, may lead to some improvement in this situation. But it may be that a Faculty-led initiative is needed, including formal consideration by a working-party or by a special committee, in order to establish how language competence in a modern language can be improved for a larger cohort of graduates in Modern History

at NUIM. There are large issues here relating to the academic role of modern languages in the university that go beyond the remit of this Review. (See also below under **Research and postgraduate programme**).

2.2.8 *Single honours degree in Modern History*

The Department has made a good case for the introduction of a single honours degree in History. It would be available to a small cohort of students and would not privilege this group in comparison with the large majority of students continuing to take History as part of a two subject BA. It would not by itself resolve the overall problem of degree grades addressed above. But there is almost certainly the potential demand for such a degree, and a stream of dedicated history students might have a leavening effect on the commitment of two subject students and underpin recruitment to the postgraduate programme. Single honours students would require a carefully constructed curriculum, including some form of minor dissertation or extended piece of work. The question as to whether selection for Single honours History might best take place at (CAO) entry or at the end of the foundation year First Arts, or through a combination of both, needs further consideration, at Departmental level in the first instance. But in terms of staff size and quality and the range of expertise available, the Departmental is well capable of offering a single honours History degree.

2.2.9 *Other course issues*

Some other course issues merit comment. The Department's strong concentration of expertise in Irish History will naturally, and properly, be reflected in the Department's course offerings. However, the increase in specialist courses in non-Irish history offers the possibility of jointly-taught thematic courses combining Irish and non-Irish history, which might prove stimulating for staff and beneficial for students. Likewise, in the interests of achieving broader synergies on a cross or inter-disciplinary basis, the Department might wish to consider devising, and recognizing for credit purposes in History, certain modules which might be taught in common with colleagues from other departments.

The Department of Modern History makes a significant contribution (average four modules per semester and one intensive summer module) to the B.A. part-time degree in Local and Community Studies. The general structure of the programme and History's contribution to it are generally considered satisfactory, and there is a high opinion of the motivation and calibre of the students. The Department's contribution to this programme relies heavily on occasional and contract staff.

2.3. *Communication*

All the evidence points to an excellent system of communications within the Department (staff and students) and between the Department and the wider public. Notices and communications on the notice-boards of the Department and on the doors of individual staff testified to good practice in this area. Departmental handbooks (for staff, for

undergraduates and for graduates) were comprehensive and clear. The documentation on all aspects of the Department's business (e.g. course materials, student assessment samples, extern examiners reports, medical certificates) was available and obviously maintained in admirably good order. This extends to the Department's website, which is a model of its kind.

More importantly, perhaps, the meetings with undergraduate and graduate students confirmed this favorable opinion of the Department's communications system. Instructions for written assignments, reliability of declared office-hours, deadlines and clearance procedures for course work and written assignments : in these and in all other aspects of the Department's dealings with students, there was a unanimous verdict among the students that the Department was efficient and consistent in its communications. As one undergraduate put it (speaking of deadlines and examination requirements) : 'with History, you always know where you stand'. The Departmental meetings are held regularly and seem to work well, as does the Staff-Student liaison committee.

It is acknowledged by the Departmental staff that continued attention is required in ensuring good communications between individual lecturers, the relevant year co-ordinator and the tutors engaged in different courses. It is recommended that this requirement be kept under constant review and , if necessary, that group meetings be held on a regular basis between tutors, year co-ordinator and lecturers, in order to ensure the greatest possible cohesion between the different elements in the teaching of each course.

So far as communication between the Department and the university offices is concerned, there may be room for improvement in respect of the processing by the International Office of documentation (notably examination results) for Visiting Students (ECTS for the most part) who have returned to their home country following a period of study at NUIM.

2.4 Support services

Key academic support services to be addressed in this section are the Departmental offices and facilities in Rhetoric House, the Library, and the Computer Services available to the Department of Modern History.

2.4.1 Departmental facilities

As far as its own administration is concerned, the Department is extremely well-served by Ann O'Donoghue and Catherine Heslin. However, the volume and complexity of the administrative needs of the Department – with a significant postgraduate and outreach commitment as well as its large undergraduate student body – would justify two full-time administrative support staff.

The staff offices in the Department of Modern History are well-equipped, and the facilities in the staff meeting rooms (with filing for Departmental documentation and excellent photo-copying equipment and coffee facilities) are very good. The archaeology

'laboratory', with a valuable collection of books as well as archaeological material, is obviously a most valuable facility, well-organized by Mr. Bradley. The provision of the postgraduate computer suite has been achieved at the cost of a sizeable seminar room, the lack of which is particularly regretted by postgraduates as well as by staff.

The success of the Department in attracting post-doctoral fellows, and the prospect of a continuing flow of post-doctoral and other visiting fellows, has created difficulties in providing office space within the Department. To date, these difficulties have been dealt with through the use of offices of staff on sabbatical combined with the conversion of a room into an open office facility with a number of desks. Obviously, there is a limit to what the finite space available to the Department, however ingeniously-used, can accommodate. As further space becomes available in Rhetoric Hall a further allocation of space to the Department would enable it to provide a seminar room and some flexibility in meeting the needs of visiting and post-doctoral fellows in the Department.

2.4.2 Library

It was the universal view of all informants that the Library holdings for undergraduate teaching purposes in Modern History are not adequate. There are historical deficits which impinge on all courses, but which are acutely felt in the new specialist areas of European and American history which have become part of the course offerings in recent years. Students expressed frustration at the difficulty (if not the impossibility) of being able to locate and borrow books recommended for their main core courses (either because there were too few copies of a recommended text or because there was no copy at all in the Library's holdings). These difficulties and frustrations were especially acute with regard to non-Irish history courses. The general feeling of undergraduates was that, apart altogether from deficiencies in Library holdings, the John Paul 11 Library was simply not big enough any longer to cater satisfactorily as a working Library for the current undergraduate population at NUIM.

Graduate students in taught postgraduate programmes also registered concern at the deficiencies in holdings. But the current emphasis on course work in Irish history at this level means that the specialist holdings and facilities of the Russell Library are available to those whose research interests coincide with the particular holdings of this specialist Library.

Postgraduate students engaged in research for major dissertations - M.Litt. and Ph.D.- are reconciled to working in archives and specialist Libraries with holdings of primary or highly specialist reference and secondary source material. Both research students and post-doctoral fellows see the need for continuing, close co-operation and reciprocal rights between NUIM and the major Dublin university and other research Libraries. This seems sensible (in respect of research postgraduates and their needs) and ought to be pursued on an ongoing basis by NUIM.

So far as the other Library deficits, already noted, are concerned, clearly the actual size of the Library and its holdings are matters which will need significant extra resources to put

right. However, some interim steps could be taken to improve the situation in Modern History. A special fund might be established from which historic deficits could be made good, on a phased basis. Again, the university might adopt the practice, common in many universities, of providing a newly-appointed staff member with a new area of expertise (and, presumably, new specialist courses to offer) with a special 'introductory' Library grant in order to acquire basic Library material in the new area, with retrospective effect for recent such appointments.

It needs to be emphasized that these criticisms of the shortcomings in the Library were not directed in any way towards the Library staff, whose helpful attitude was generally praised by most of the informants.

2.4.3 Computing facilities

Many students appear to have difficulty in gaining access to network computing facilities at the various sites on campus. This difficulty, predictably, is most severely felt at times when deadlines for completing assignments are approaching. The Department of Modern History, as is increasingly the norm in all universities, requires all written material for assessment to be presented in type-written form and according to standard rules of presentation. No doubt this pressure can only be relieved ultimately by the expansion and tight management of computing facilities across the campus. But in the interest of an improved service, there is merit in the suggestion that the Computer Services Center should consider assigning a dedicated member of staff to deal with the specific needs of users from the Arts and Social Sciences departments.

One Modern History facility which many history departments in other Irish universities would envy, is its excellent postgraduate computing suite. The postgraduates appreciate their good fortune in having such a facility and also in having Departmental staff members who are willing to give instruction on its best use. It was an enlightened decision by the university and the Department to invest in such a facility. Confining it to postgraduates is sensible, but it is recommended that this include students registered for the Higher Diploma in Irish History.

2.5. Research and Postgraduate programmes

2.5.1. Postgraduate programmes

The Department in recent years has offered a number of taught postgraduate programmes: Higher Diploma in Irish History, MA (full-time, with minor dissertation), MA in Local History (part-time with minor dissertation). From 1997 to 2000 the Department offered an MA in European Union Studies in conjunction with the Departments of Economics, Geography and Applied Social Studies. A taught MA programme in European History has been approved by the university but has not been offered to date, while there is also provision, which has not been needed to date, for the award of a Higher Diploma in Local History to students of the MA in Local History who

have satisfactorily completed every requirement of this course with the exception of completing the minor dissertation.

The rationale, course requirements, admission and assessment procedures for each of these courses is set out clearly and satisfactorily in its self-assessment document by the Department. Moreover, the Departmental Postgraduate Handbook is excellent and informative. The figures for postgraduate FTEs in Modern History declined during the past four years, mostly in the MA programme. The Department has therefore reflected on the costs and benefits of such courses, which require heavy investment of staff resources. Such appraisal is healthy, particularly in the light of proposed changes elsewhere which will inevitably have implications for staff-time.

A number of aspects of the taught postgraduate programmes of the Department merit particular attention. Firstly, the MA in Local History must be judged to be a major success, in terms both of the quality of the academic work accomplished and of the broader service to Irish society. The content is well-considered (and includes, in common with the MA in Modern History, competence in computer applications and other relevant skills). The minor dissertations produced by students in the MA in Local History have generated an admirable series of short books – **Maynooth Studies in Local History** - which has firmly established Maynooth as a centre of excellence in the study of local history and of local studies in general.

Secondly, in the light of the number of Departmental staff with expertise in areas other than Irish history, it is probably sensible to assume that, in the short term, the most effective contribution by such staff may well be to taught interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary MA programmes, such as an MA in European Studies or in Medieval Studies. Such programmes require tight organization and coordination. A course board, under Faculty auspices, may facilitate planning, monitoring and course development. But it is likely that, even with the best possible synergies and pooling of expertise, dedicated administrative support and some additional teaching resources will be required to sustain a viable and competitive taught interdisciplinary postgraduate programme of this kind.

Two related issues, upon which there will be further comment under **Research** (below), are that of a virtual common set of courses, or core curriculum, for all postgraduates in their first year, and that of language competence for postgraduate research students. A virtually common First Year postgraduate curriculum (mainly skills-oriented, as is the case with the current course menu for the MA and the First Year M.Litt. at NUIM), would make provision for an exit point (following assessment) at the end of one year by candidates for the MA in Modern History (f/t); an exit after two years for candidates for the M.Litt.; and for the Ph.D. a major dissertation to be completed normally not less than nine terms after the commencement of the candidate's registration as a postgraduate student. Some flexibility in the determination of modules to be taken in the common First Year would facilitate incorporating appropriate language training (in modern continental European languages, Irish and Latin) for candidates intending to pursue research in areas where such language competence would be essential or desirable.

The advantages of a common First Year postgraduate course lie in optimum use of staff time and also in the creation of a stronger sense of a 'postgraduate school' in History with a primary focus on research. The precise requirements for the full-time MA in Modern History might be reviewed in the light of such an integrated postgraduate programme.

2.5.2. Research

There is a strong research ethos in the Department of Modern History at NUIM. This is recognized widely among professional historians and scholars in Ireland and internationally. It is reflected in the record of scholarly publications of staff and in their presence as invited participants in international colloquia and research projects, in the healthy number of research students registered for research degrees, in the recent growth in the number of post-doctoral fellows attached to the Department, and also in the various series of specialist research publications emanating from the Department. During the past five years thirty students have completed degrees by major thesis (18 Masters and 12 Ph.Ds), in research areas which include all periods of Irish history, and certain areas of British, American and continental European history. Thirty two students are currently registered for the Ph.D. in History at NUIM. In the recently inaugurated state-funded schemes for research in the Humanities and Social Sciences, students and members of the Department have achieved impressive recognition in the awards of the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS), securing twelve doctoral scholarships, six post-doctoral fellowships and (among academic staff) two research fellowships. Additionally, in the NUIM project which secured funding (€4m) under the PRTLII programme - i.e the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA) - the Department of Modern History is a strong participant, with representation at Board and operational level.

Research students engaged in major dissertations have various needs. External sources of financial support have recently improved, under IRCHSS and PRTLII, and there are also support funds available (on a limited and competitive basis) within the university itself. Supervision of dissertations is crucial. The procedures (set out clearly in Departmental Handbooks) and guidelines adopted by the Department in this area are sensible and realistic. The evidence suggests a high level of student satisfaction with supervision of theses. The feedback to students on drafts of their written work needs to be kept under review, particularly in the light of the Department's declared goal of increasing the number of research students. The requirement that each research student complete an annual *pro forma* research report (on which the supervisor comments) contributes positively to quality assurance.

The research tutorials and the research seminar (at which attendance is obligatory) have well-defined objectives. The more 'workshop' nature of the tutorial may lead to its being slightly undervalued by students : it may require a sharper articulation of its purpose and the regular review of its operation to create a more uniformly positive attitude. The research seminar is an appropriate forum for introducing guest scholars and it might

usefully serve from time to time as a forum for presentations of research findings or work in progress by Departmental staff. While the research students consulted during the visit held a positive attitude towards the ‘bonding’ function of the research seminar, and were appreciative of the advantages of the Department’s postgraduate computer suite, the creation of a healthy *esprit de corps* among the research cohort in Modern History would be greatly assisted by the provision of a dedicated postgraduate common room and perhaps by the addition of a modest social dimension to the meetings of the research seminar (coffee or refreshments afterwards).

The Library needs of postgraduate research students generally involve the use of various archives and libraries for primary and specialist secondary material. Research students may compensate for the deficits of the Library at NUIM in respect of specialist secondary and reference material through the use of inter-library loans or through reciprocal rights operating between research libraries within the Dublin area. On the other hand, the particular strengths of the holdings of the Russell Library ought to support research in specific areas: for example, with appropriate language competence, research students at NUIM should be capable of generating important research and publications from the Salamanca Papers.

In the context of the variety in background and circumstance of research postgraduates in History, it is clearly the ambition of the Department to increase the size of the full-time, campus-based cohort of research students at NUIM. This is a sound ambition. However, there will continue to be research students in History, at NUIM as at other Irish universities, who are working on major dissertations on a part-time basis and who frequently reside at some distance from the campus. Such students are frequently devoted to historical research but unable, for personal reasons, to become full-time students. The university should seek to support such students in their research. One practical step which could be taken would be to establish a separate (and favourable) fee structure for part-time research students engaged on major dissertations and registered for higher degrees at NUIM.

The presence of post-doctoral fellows in the Department since 1999 – under NUI and Government of Ireland support schemes – has been of significant benefit to the research ethos and commitment of Modern History at NUIM. The post-doctoral fellows, as the Department acknowledges, ‘enhance the research profile of the Department by bringing conferences to Maynooth in their areas of specialization,... by attending and enlivening research seminars’; they have contributed to enhancing Library stocks by identifying gaps in the holdings in their specialist areas, and in the teaching which they are permitted to undertake, they have enriched the course offerings of the Department. From the perspective of the fellows themselves, it was clear from conversations with them during the visit that they find the Department of Modern History a hospitable and supportive environment for research, congenial and challenging. The experience to date supports the conclusion reached in the self-assessment document: “In a very positive sense, the institution of post-doctoral fellowships is a bridge between the world of postgraduate research and that of academic teaching and administration”.

All members of the Department are active researchers and are fully committed to the university's stated intention of encouraging quality research and publications. Their research publications' record during the past five years is impressive. Crucial to this achievement is the scheme of research leave which operates within the department. Ideally, the University, in pursuit of its general goals in research, would be well served by a general sabbatical leave scheme which did not involve a beneficiary incurring financial loss. It is acknowledged that in devising any such general scheme the university must take account of a range of factors, including the variation in size and staff numbers in different Departments. But the Board commends the current practice in History – to which all members of the Department have agreed and which, for that particular Department, operates in such a way as to ensure academic returns in research and publications. The university is to be commended for its travel fund which allows individual staff members to draw on funds for research and conference trips.

The degree to which the Library at NUIM meets – or can reasonably be expected to meet – the research needs of staff very much depends on the interests of individual staff. Within the overall budgetary constraints, efforts have been made to acquire research material – in micro-form or in print – to support research interests, and the Russell Library, as already stated, has important specialist collections. However, particularly in specialist areas only recently introduced at NUIM, staff will have to travel to specialist archives and other research libraries abroad in order to undertake their research.

The publication series of the Department – the Maynooth monograph series and the Maynooth Studies in Local History – are highly regarded by professionals in the field and add distinction to the Department's reputation for serious research.

The Department is considering establishing staff research seminars, to run in parallel with the postgraduate research seminars and including research papers by visitors as well as by NUIM staff. Certainly, the Department has the critical mass of active research scholars to sustain such a series. On the other hand, the advantages and convenience of one single research seminar (involving postgraduate researchers, staff and visitors) may be worth further consideration. In any case, the need for a dedicated seminar room for this increasingly active research programme is now pressing, while the growing and complex demands of the postgraduate section of the Department are such as to constitute a good case for the provision of extra administrative/executive assistance to the Department. Sustaining a quality performance in research and teaching requires appropriate academic and administrative supports.

2.6 *Staff development*

As indicated above, the environment in the Modern History Department is strongly supportive of staff development. Leadership is firm, sensitive and supportive and there is a strong sense of collective pride in striving for excellence in academic performance. Even staff on temporary contract appointments testified to the supportive environment, while post-doctoral fellows were unanimous in praising the supportive atmosphere of the Department (one post-doctoral fellow with previous experience of academic institutions

on both sides of the Atlantic spoke of the Department's encouragement of new approaches and 'cutting edge' research in History). The Departmental ethos and policy is fully supportive of the research ambitions and plans of individual staff members. The most notable practical expression of this is the Departmental scheme of sabbatical leave described above, whose maintenance and financial underwriting is of the first importance.

2.7 *External relationships*

It is clear that the Department of Modern History is actively involved in a rich matrix of external relationships, moving from relationships with other structures within NUIM to those arising from a broad spectrum of international links. Members of the Department have been, and continue to be, actively involved at different levels of the universities administrative and policy-centred structures, through membership of the formal committee structures (e.g . at Faculty) and also through participation in the increasing number of advisory and support structures being established throughout the university (e.g. access, induction and related services).

Members of the Department have acted as Extern Examiners - at primary degree level and for research dissertations – at numerous universities and other third level institutions (through the NCEA) within Ireland and in Britain. Likewise, the Department has been represented on national boards with a role in curriculum and assessment involving History, as with the History course team of the National Distance Education Centre. Under the PRTLTI, the Department is actively involved (at Board and operational level) in NIRSA.

The high standing of the Department within the scholarly community is reflected in the membership by staff of national academic and scholarly bodies (e.g. RIA, Irish Historical Society, RHS, Society of Antiquaries, Royal Association for Medicine in Ireland). Moreover, individual members of the Department are prominent in many major scholarly projects of national and international significance (New History of Ireland, Irish Dictionary of National Biography, History of the Irish Book project). Members of the Department have over a number of years acted as editor of the journal *Archivium Hibernicum*.

In meeting the wider needs of Irish society, at national, regional and local level, the Department has an impressive record. Apart from the involvement of individual members of the Department in national and local societies concerned with history, archaeology, the environment and other areas where the expertise of professional historians contributes to the enrichment of a civic culture and a responsible democracy, the Department's contribution to the outreach programmes of NUIM is significant. It offers the NUI Certificate in Local History at various centres, participates in the modular BA in Local and Community Studies in Kilkenny and on the Maynooth campus, and its MA in Local History draws candidates from many parts of the country and has made an enormous contribution to the 'professionalization' of local history throughout Ireland in recent years. It is appropriate to point out that, because of their content, these

outreach programmes make particular demands on certain staff with an expertise in Irish history, especially in the case of the NUI Certificate in Local History. These particular demands need to be kept under review in the on-going Departmental consideration of priorities and academic cost-benefit.

In terms of international student exchanges the Department has been one of the original participants in the ECTS (credit-transfer scheme) for more than a decade, in co-operation with a group of distinguished European universities. There are a number of issues and difficulties in this area which need to be addressed at a Faculty and University level as well as at Departmental level. The flow of students under the ECTS scheme has been rather unbalanced: during the past three years the Department has hosted an average of twelve ECTS students a year, while it has only been able to send out an average of two, though these were postgraduate students. Inflexibility in course structure and financial constraints have been identified as inhibiting NUIM students' participation, though it would be sensible to look also at improved language competence in any strategy aimed at improving the situation. The full introduction of semesterization and modularization and of the BA International ought to improve the prospects for a stronger outflow of exchange students from NUIM under the ECTS scheme, though it would be sensible to retain the option of some postgraduates being permitted to benefit from the scheme.

Under current Departmental regulations, only incoming students of the ECTS scheme have access to the full range of courses on offer. Other visiting students - Socrates or others (there were over fifty such students taking Modern History modules at NUIM in 2001-2002) - are allowed access to core modules only. This must cause difficulty and disappointment for those visiting students (other than the ECTS group) who come to Ireland with the intention of taking a concentration of courses in Irish history and civilization. The proposed revamping of the curriculum and course structure (and the shift to more small-group teaching) should provide an opportunity for reviewing the course offerings available to the general body of visiting students.

Two other aspects of the external relationships of the Department merit comment, both raising issues for consideration at a university and Faculty level. First, in the light of certain difficulties experienced by the Department and by some overseas students in the administration of their year in NUIM (referred to above), the relevant arrangements ought to be reviewed as a matter of urgency and in consultation with the key academic departments hosting such visiting students.

Secondly, while the Department maintains some valuable links with universities in North America (extending occasionally, in the case of the Catholic University of America, to exchanges of staff as well as postgraduates), the wider issue of visiting American students - as JYA or semester abroad visitors - has been raised by the Department. Specifically, NUIM may need to decide whether it wishes to attract visiting students on a systematic basis from North America, and, if so, what the resource implications might be - for the university and for the main departments involved. The re-consideration of the issues if a Summer School in Irish Studies might best be in the context of an examination

of this broader issues of overseas – in particular, American – students being attracted to NUIM.

2.8 *Other factors*

In the interests of achieving the best academic return on staff effort, especially but not exclusively in teaching, there is a case for reviewing the full range of opportunities for cooperation between Departments at NUIM, and indeed , where appropriate, between Departments within NUIM and scholars in other institutions. Specifically, there may be possibilities for formal cooperation between the Modern History at NUIM and the Ecclesiastical History Department of St.Patrick's College, Maynooth. Again, the development of a taught interdisciplinary Masters in the general area of European Studies, or an interdisciplinary programme in Medieval Studies are areas in which the Department would have a definite interest. But it would be unreasonable to expect the Department to be the 'lead' Department - as initiator or coordinator - in each and every area in which it may have an interest and to which it may be able to contribute. The model of the modular part-time BA in Local and Community Studies, the response to which seems generally positive, may be useful for further course development of an interdisciplinary kind, and involving Modern History, within NUIM.

3. Conclusion and Recommendations

3.1. *Conclusion*

The Department of Modern History at NUIM is a well-run, cohesive, harmonious and productive Department, with a strong ethos of quality in its teaching and its research performance. It has grown, in staff numbers, range of expertise and confidence, during the past decade. Its profile and reputation have also grown and it is highly regarded nationally and internationally for its professional approach to its teaching and for the scholarly output of its staff.

The Department faces important strategic choices and decisions, a function of its growth and expansion and of changes in the external environment (including the profile of its student population). These strategic choices, which relate to curriculum and course development , to postgraduate offerings and to outreach teaching, will involve prioritization, adaptation and innovation. The Department has already demonstrated, in its rigorous and thorough self-assessment, that it has the vision and the will to respond to the challenge of change. It is a Department which is well-focused and determined to ask the right questions and to find the best answers. The recommendations which follow are based on this very positive assessment of a fine Department : they are, therefore, more developmental and indicative than prescriptive.

3.2. Recommendations

3.2.1 Undergraduate course issues.

- The university should address the inadequacy of teaching space, which currently limits curricular reform and small group teaching.
- The Department might consider re-balancing the course load in favour of special topics.
- The Department might consider reducing the number of courses taught in second and third years and redistributing the staff resources released by this in more small-group teaching.
- If a new appointment becomes available, the Department might consider making it in twentieth century Irish history in order to reinforce both contemporary history and possible collaborative teaching of twentieth century Irish and non- Irish history.
- The Department should consolidate the incorporation of tutorial essay marks into course assessment.
- The Department, Faculty of Arts, and the university should seek ways to promote the study of modern languages with history.
- The Department should explore the introduction of a Single honours degree in History as a realistic option, giving special attention to the appropriate point at which entry to the programme should occur.

3.2.2 Communication

- Examination results should be communicated to Visiting Students as soon as possible after the completion of their year of study at NUIM.

3.2.3 Support services

- As further space becomes available in Rhetoric House, consideration should be given to providing a postgraduate seminar room and additional office space for post-doctoral fellows.
- The university should, as a matter of urgency, address the inadequacies of Library holdings for undergraduates, especially in the new specialist areas of European and American history where the deficiencies are most glaring.

- New staff appointments, especially in areas of new expertise, should be provided with an ‘introductory’ Library grant, and recent such appointments should be accorded this facility retrospectively.
- The university should consider ways of improving computing facilities for undergraduates.
- The Computer Centre should consider assigning a member of staff to liaise with the needs of the Arts and Social Sciences departments.
- Use of the Departmental postgraduate computing suite should be extended to students registered for the Higher Diploma in Irish History.

3.2.4 Postgraduate programmes

- The MA in Local History should continue to be developed as a major strength of the Department.
- The Department might consider a common first-year postgraduate course leading to an MA in Modern History (year one), the M.Litt. (year two), or the Ph.D. (year three).
- The possibility might be explored of Modern History staff contributing to inter-departmental MA programmes in European Studies and Medieval Studies.

3.2.5 Research

- The university should consider introducing a part-time fee for research students who in reality pursue their studies on a part-time basis.
- The current practice of research leave operated by the Department is vital to the staff’s strong output of research and publications and the Department’s high academic standing. Any overall review of general conditions of sabbatical leave should seek to ensure that this high research productivity and academic standing of the Department of History is maintained and further supported.
- Consideration should be given to integrating the proposed staff research seminar with the existing postgraduate research seminars.

3.2.6 External relationships

- The burden on the Department of its staff’s participation in the valuable outreach programmes run by the university (Local History, Local and Community Studies) should be kept under review.

- The university should promote the BA (International) both for its own academic value and as a means of addressing the imbalance of student numbers in the Department of Modern History resulting from SOCRATES exchanges.
- The university and the Faculty of Arts might wish to consider, in close consultation with the core departments, whether NUIM wishes to attract visiting students on a systematic basis from North America, and if so what might be the practical academic options and mechanisms best calculated to serve such a strategic aim.

3.2.7. *Other factors*

- The full range of opportunities for collaboration with departments in NUIM and with other institutions should be reviewed. Particular consideration might be given to collaboration with the Ecclesiastical History Department of St. Patrick's College, Maynooth.

3.3 *Methodology*

The methodology employed by the Department in completing the self-assessment exercise was characteristically professional, logical, thorough and well-executed. The time-frame adopted for the completion of the task was sensible and the allocation of responsibility and collation of the material provide clear evidence of the cohesion and cooperative spirit which is a feature of the way the Department functions. Moreover, where it was considered appropriate, the assistance of professionals was sought – for example, a professional survey researcher was engaged by the Department in the drawing up of the five questionnaires through which data were collected for the self-assessment

3.4 *Supplementary Material*

As indicated earlier in this Report, a wide range of documentary material, covering all aspects of the conduct of the business of the Department, was systematically arranged in box-files and made available to the External Reviewers during the visit. This enabled the Reviewers to locate and consider any aspect of the Department's administrative business. Indeed, it is difficult to see how the presentation of supplementary material (in content and order) could have been improved upon, and the Quality Promotions Office might well consider taking the Department as an exemplar in advising other departments on how to prepare for a Quality Review.

JH
GÓT

23 April 2002

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