

Quality Implementation Plan for the Department of History

This plan was approved following meetings of the President with the Head of Department in February and March 2011

A. Formal recommendations arising from the Peer Review Report

1. *Recommendations that the department can implement unaided*

5.2 Excessive administrative burden on Head of Department

Response of department: Steps are being taken to devolve some of the administrative burdens that have fallen on the Head of Department. This has involved the establishment of some sub-committees and the creation of some new administrative responsibilities that are being taken on by departmental colleagues, including:

- Postgraduate Coordinator
- Coordinator for international funding opportunities (and the creation of a European/international funding sub-committee)
- Coordinator for research seminar.
- Sub-committee for curricular reform
- Sub-committee for liaison with secondary schools

Other such possibilities for reducing the burden will be kept under review.

Action: The response of the department was approved.

2. *Recommendations requiring additional resources from the University*

5.1 Replacement of Professor Comerford by filling the post of Professor and Head of History Department

Response of department: This has already taken place. The post was open to historians of all specialisms (as recommended in the Peer Review Report), and there was a strong field of applicants. The new head (Professor Marian Lyons) took up the post on 1 October 2010.

Action: The response of the University was approved.

5.2 Excessive administrative burden on the two key administrative support staff

Response of department: Ultimately, additional funding is required from the University to facilitate additional administrative support for what is one of the largest departments in the University, with a staff-student ratio (2009-10) of 41.72, according to p.9 of the Dean's Annual Business Report, Faculty of Arts, Celtic Studies & Philosophy, tabled 4 October 2010. The extremely strong postgraduate sector in the department (currently 141 students registered), combined with an undergraduate cohort in excess of 800, places particularly heavy demands on administrative as well as teaching colleagues. The proposed support would take the form of at least one half-time executive assistant post. One internal change that has already been implemented arises from recognition of the need for the two administrative support staff to have discrete work areas in which they can discuss business in a professional manner: the two colleagues in question now have separate offices. As noted in the Peer Review Report, they are already extremely efficient and effective in what they do. Consultations have begun to identify ways in which some internal devolving of responsibilities could help towards reducing this excessive administrative burden.

Action: It was pointed out that the existing occasional staff fund available to the department does not cover the full cost of employing occasional staff. The department requested that senior management consider funding one half-time executive assistant post from central university funds, and the President is to refer this matter to the appropriate committee.

5.3 Reduction in centralised incentivisation payments for taught Masters' programmes

Response of department: The Report noted that the reduction from an agreed 30 per cent of fee income for the taught Masters' programmes is having a serious effect on the department's ability to meet tutorial budgets. However, two entirely new taught Masters' programmes (M.A. in European History, M.A. in Historic Houses) have been introduced from September 2010, alongside existing programmes (M.A. in Local History, M.A. in Military and Strategic History, and M.A. in Historical Archives). The matter will be kept under review, since the department's ability to continue to offer all its M.A. programmes depends on the University restoring an agreed and adequate level of incentivisation.

Action: It was noted that a 30% incentivisation payment for taught Masters programmes had been agreed, and the Head of Department is to seek adherence to this agreement from the Bursar.

5.4 Future reputation of the department and its ability to maintain high levels of quality research postgraduates

Response of department: The Report notes that the department's traditional strengths in Irish history may be compromised by recent and impending retirements, and suggests that urgent attention be given to this matter. As things have turned out, we have had an additional 3-year contract post in Irish history (from September 2010), helping to secure our position in that field. We also have the good fortune to welcome an incoming Head of Department who specialises not only in early modern Ireland, but early modern France as well. Therefore, the diversification continues in a healthy fashion, in line with international trends. In the current economic crisis, the department recognises that diversity is our strength, in terms of both subject focus and gender balance, and offers a fine example to our postgraduates. However, future recruitment of research postgraduates needs to be re-evaluated from the perspective of quality supervision, funding opportunities and the job market. Outside pressures, both from government and the university, to increase postgraduate numbers will not necessarily lead to a parallel increase in staff to supervise them. Additionally, national sources of postgraduate funding are now seriously under threat and the internal job market suffers from oversupply. A majority of postgraduates at the MA level follow topics in military history. Many research postgraduates continue to choose Irish topics. The resultant pressures on supervision in certain areas leads us to seek curriculum reform through the aforementioned sub-committee, in order to find more effective ways to encourage students to take up alternative paths, with the knock on effects of opening them up to international sources of funding (e.g. DAAD, Fulbright, Wellcome Trust, etc.), not to mention making more effective use of our departmental human resources. Further, we recognize the need to take a more proactive role in directing the future placement of our PhDs into a (short-term diminishing) job market. With the help of curriculum reforms, a new workload model can be introduced to limit the number of supervisions that any single colleague should undertake for quality purposes and the greater benefit of our postgraduates; the number of supervisions of minor theses for taught Masters' degrees will also be taken into account when assessing appropriate workloads. It is accepted that this may mean some reduction in the number of research postgraduates who are currently admitted. For Irish history, all avenues, including An Foras Feasa and NIRSA, will be explored. One advantage of the new M.A. in European History is that it is expected to encourage undergraduates to contemplate going on to a research degree in European history from the very onset of their MA/MLitt.

Action: These proposals were approved.

B Additional recommendations made in the body of the Report

1. Recommendations that the department can implement unaided

2.2 Need for I Year curriculum reform

Response of department: A departmental sub-committee has been established to consider this matter in the context of possible wider curriculum reform.

Action: A new programme has been devised for introduction in the academic year 2100-12.

3.1 Provision of generic (recte 'subject-specific') modules: suitability for postgraduate students not studying modern Irish history

Response of department: This matter is currently under review.

Action: The department offers two modules (HY611 and HY612) which are subject-specific but neither one of these relates specifically to Ireland. Rather, they deal with methods and sources in general. The department is exploring possible avenues for tailoring the modules to the needs of students working in fields other than Irish history by broadening the range of staff involved in delivering the modules in question and/or by adapting the assessment instruments to make the modules more relevant to the learning requirements of these students. This issue has been the subject of ongoing discussion between those members of staff involved in the delivery of graduate programmes within the department.

4.1, 4.5 Need for improved communications with contract/temporary staff

Response of department: This matter is under review.

Action: The department has taken several steps to improve communications with contract/temporary staff. A large office in Rhetoric House has been made available for the exclusive use of the department's occasional/temporary staff. The department's board room has also been made available to these members of staff to facilitate individual consultations with students and meetings with other members of staff. Contract/temporary staff have also been included in social events organised by the department.

4.4 Need for stronger international links

Response of department: The matter is under review.

Action: The Head of Department has held discussions with a leading Irish-based member of the Clio history network about negotiating re-entry and steps to achieve this objective are currently in train.

The department is endeavouring to strengthen international links through increased student and staff mobility via the ERASMUS programme and recruitment to its taught MA in History programmes. Staff are also engaged in

identifying research clusters within the department with a view to developing further international research collaborations.

2. Recommendations requiring assistance from other college bodies

2.2, 2.5 Excessive numbers taking History in NUIM

Response of department: The Report used the expression ‘straining at the seams’ in respect of undergraduate numbers in particular, especially in view of the constricted resources available to the department. The Head of Department is in discussion with other heads to explore aspects and implications of a possible cap on numbers. Any such recommendation would also require the involvement of the University (and doubtless of all the Irish Universities).

Action: This problem of excessive numbers in several departments is under active consideration by various bodies within the University, including the Teaching and Learning Committee and the Academic Council.

2.4 Outreach: needs of part-time students

Response of department: The Head of Department is in discussion with the department’s Postgraduate Coordinator and with the Department of Adult Education on this matter.

Action: The Department of Adult Education is leading discussions with the Bursar on this matter.

3.1 Lack of space for History postgraduates

Response of department: The department is happy to note that some alleviation of this problem has come about following completion of the Iontas building. Since completion (September 2010), An Foras Feasa has been able to make available research space in the AFF postgraduate laboratory for a number of postgraduates in the Faculty of Arts, Celtic Studies, and Philosophy. (It can also be reported that during the summer three additional History postgraduates were successful in obtaining scholarships from the IRCHSS, as well as three new IRCHSS post-doctoral fellows.)

Action: The AFF facility can provide space for about 80 postgraduates, and the Department of History welcomes the positive response from AFF. The department is to consult the Graduate Feedback Council in order to ascertain the views of postgraduates on the suitability of existing space and the provision of additional space.

3. Recommendations requiring additional resources from the University

2.1 Pressures on space in Rhetoric House

Response of department: The department fully endorses the Report's recognition of the requirement for further resources in the form of space, particularly for occasional staff, part-time tutors, and other temporary/part-time staff. In particular, confirmation of the University's agreement to the department's use of space (recently vacated by An Foras Feasa) in the Junior Infirmary is of vital importance. In this respect, mention can be made of the Report's welcome (4.2) for the department's initiative in sponsoring links with a variety of state and other outside bodies, including the Office of Public Works (Centre for the Study for Historic Irish Houses and Estates), and the Defence Forces (Centre for Military History and Strategic Studies). These initiatives place additional demands on already overstretched academic and administrative staff.

Action: Some provision has been made for occasional staff in Rhetoric House, but there is an ongoing shortage of space for tutors.

3.1 Desirability of travel grants for postgraduate research visits to distant or overseas libraries or archives

Response of department: The department has from time to time made token payments to postgraduate students who incurred travel costs in the course of delivering conference papers, but there is a need for the University to provide more systematic resources to allow postgraduates to be reimbursed for travel to carry out (necessary) research.

Action: The President will invite the Dean of Graduate Studies to call a meeting of Heads of Departments and representatives of the Graduate Feedback Council.

Professor Tom Collins
President

Professor Marian Lyons
Head of Department