



NUI MAYNOOTH

Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

LANGUAGE CENTRE

QUALITY REVIEW 2000

PEER REVIEW REPORT 2000

Language Centre, NUIM: Quality assessment

Developmental aspects

Perceived strengths

It is clear to the outside reviewers that the Language Centre enjoys the highest level of commitment from all the staff of the Centre. The overall direction of the Centre reflects an energetic, imaginative and progressive approach to all aspects of the work of the Centre covering course design and delivery, provision of human and material resources as well as the welfare of students and staff of the Centre.

The concerns of the Tutors reflect their commitment to providing the best possible service to students of the University, coming as they do from a range of courses, disciplines and Faculties within the University. The Tutors are highly appreciative of the level of support and professional expertise provided by the Director, the Principal Technician and the Executive Assistant who are seen to deliver an optimum quality service to the teaching staff and students of the Centre. The quality of the English spoken by some of the Foreign Language Tutors reveals a remarkably high standard of near-native fluency, a factor which both reflects and adds to the perception of competence available within the Centre.

A particularly positive aspect of the work of the Centre is the SALL (Self-Access Language Learning) facility. The room, including the resources and services that are made available there, is a well-equipped, high-value facility that enables students to interface with their several languages in a variety of manners. The ease of utilisation of the TV reception facility, covering live transmissions in Nua-Ghaeilge, French, German and Spanish, is impressive not least because of the student-friendly manner in which it is arranged. The perceived willingness with which additional language and cultural materials are made available, and regularly added to on request from students and teaching staff, is particularly impressive. Dictionaries, videos current news publications are readily available and obviously utilised. Students are especially appreciative of the part-time presence of a language advisory person at this venue.

The pedagogical preparation, by the staff of the Language Centre, of the *Vifax* service in Nua-Ghaeilge, and its dissemination to a wide number of schools indicates the level of

initiative, professional competence and foresight which typifies the ethos of the Centre. In addition, the availability of the *Vifax* service for the other languages, received from Bordeaux (France), is a valuable Self-Access language learning resource.

In addition to providing professional support for the teaching and other staff, it is clear that the Director of the Centre is seen to provide moral support for the interests and concerns of the Tutors and to represent them effectively vis-à-vis the wider academic community. The technical support provided by the Principal Technician is of the highest standard and the general availability of such support a major asset to the Tutors.

Diversification & New Initiatives

There is a clearly perceived concern to develop new initiatives in the Centre. The Director's course on *Language Awareness* is one such example which drew considerable appreciation for students; similarly the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) course and the English Writing Skills course provided to Physics students are good examples of how the Centre is responding to the language needs of the academic community; likewise the foreign language courses provided to students of History, European Studies and Cultural Tourism are highly valuable initiatives which are not necessarily available on every campus in the country.

The Centre has a respectable record for publications and the delivery of external lectures and conference papers, thus confirming the enhancement of its academic status and activity. The publication of *Living Language. Aspects of Linguistic Contact and Identity* (Ed. A. Gallagher). The delivery of external and intra-muros lecturing by the Director and the Principal Technician further enhance this fundamental aspect of the brief of the Centre.

Conclusion

Points previously made indicate that, among the various aspects of the work of the Centre, it would appear desirable and feasible for the Language Centre to pursue a route consistent with the academic development of its brief and actual expertise.

Liaison

From listening to students and Tutors of the Centre it appears that the level of liaison between the Language Centre Tutors and the language Departments from which the students come is in need of attention. In general it appears that the valuable work of the Centre (as

witnessed by the students' desire for more language tuition to take place there) enjoys less than a satisfactory relationship with some of the originating departments. Courses designed and delivered by the Centre do not necessarily benefit from a satisfactory level of recognition on the part of all the departments concerned. This impinges directly on the students and their learning experience because of the apparent lack of coordination and supervision in the implementation of the syllabus. While the design of the courses and their delivery are satisfactory, and direction is provided by the Director of the Language Centre, there is none the less an apparent lack of pedagogical/academic supervision in some cases which can lead to some Tutors working in isolated teaching conditions which are not conducive to a secure learning environment for students.

Conclusion

The points made previously, and expressed unanimously elsewhere by the Tutors, point to the need for serious consideration to be given to the academic and pedagogical structures available to the Language Centre. Because of their conditions of employment, a considerable number of obviously qualified, experienced and dedicated teaching staff do not at present have the possibility of supplying to the Centre all the pedagogical and supervisory functions required. Although they are at present paid by the hour it is worthy noting that changing labour legislation and the example of new language teaching grades recently created in other universities in the Republic provide a context in which the academic resourcing of the Centre can be placed. In the context of existing courses and in the light of possible future developments in the area of Applied Languages and EFL at NUI, Maynooth, it is recommended therefore that Full-time positions be created in each of the five areas. Given present student numbers and the strength of the areas this might best be done by hiring initially one person to cover Nua-Ghaeilge and/or French, followed by Spanish/German/EFL. However the matter is addressed, it is apparent to the external reviewers that additional academic resources should be created in the Language Centre in order to permit it to realise its brief and fulfil its remit. The provision of new academic-related resources on a permanent basis would enhance the Language Centre's work, create the necessary link with the academic department (on a shared or seconded basis if appropriate) and provide a secure, progressive environment for the language student.

Language teaching does not come cheaply. The micro-teaching nature of the

discipline, the need to work in small groups (approx 15 max) and the requirement of a minimum number of weekly class-contact hours all contribute to a person-intensive activity. Quality investment in leads to the production of quality.

The recommendation for new academic-related posts in the languages taught at the Language Centre must be considered in the wider context of the service provision undertaken by the Centre at present and in the future. The Centre has shown that the ability to innovate already exists and the time is opportune for consideration to be given to the development of the service role of the Centre with regard to designing, supplying and delivering appropriate quality language courses across the University. The present somewhat ambiguous situation, which pertains to the funding of many of the self-financing courses, proves that this need already exists while further indicating that attention needs to be paid to the design of some courses with regard for example to the relatively modest number of hours tuition currently provided on some courses.

Perceived weaknesses

It should be noted that, as suggested elsewhere, the appointment of academic coordinators would, over time, remedy much of what follows:

*There is a perceived lack of liaison between the work of the Language Centre and the language departments.

*The degree of recognition and supervision of Language Centre courses by language departments differs markedly from one language to another. There appears to be little rationale for this difference, much of which appears to be the product of chance. Students, who were articulate in voicing a number of specific instances where this could be detected, particularly remarked upon the lack of coordination between Language Centre courses and the language departments.

*While course design is clearly going in a positive direction students desire more possibilities to, as one person expressed it, “practice the language”. Notwithstanding their evident and unanimous appreciation of the Tutors’ work and that of the Language Centre staff they want more opportunities to speak the language rather than write about their experience of the language.

*A discrepancy exists between the design elements of several of the self-financing courses with regard to the number of hours of weekly tuition provided (ranging from 2 to 5 and soon to 10 hours per week in one instance). There is a need for the establishment of a standard policy in this regard in order to allow courses correspond to recognised procedures.