



NUI MAYNOOTH
Ollscoil na hÉireann Mhá Nuad

**Quality Review of the
Centre for Media Studies
25 – 27 October 2006**

Peer Review Report

**Peer Review Group:
External Reviewers:**

**Professor Anahid Kassabian,
University of Liverpool, UK;
Mr Brian Trench,
Dublin City University, Ireland.**

Internal Reviewers:

**Dr Peter Denman, Dean of Faculty of Arts,
Celtic Studies & Philosophy, NUIM;
Dr David Redmond,
Registrar, NUIM.**

Introduction

This report represents the peer review of the Centre for Media Studies, NUI Maynooth, and specifically the peer review visit to the Centre and to the University undertaken on 25-27 October 2006.

The peer review group comprised: internal members Dr Peter Denman, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, and Dr David Redmond, NUI Maynooth Registrar, and external assessors Professor Anahid Kassabian, Institute of Popular Music, University of Liverpool, and Brian Trench, School of Communications, Dublin City University. The report was drafted by the external assessors, reviewed by the other group members and checked for factual accuracy by Dr Chris Morash, director of the Centre for Media Studies.

The full group met on the evening of 25 October and again 24 hours later. In the interim, the external assessors met staff and students associated with the Centre for Media Studies, visited the facilities of Kairos Communications, which is contracted to provide practical training to students of the Centre, and met the university president, Professor John Hughes and other senior personnel. Throughout, the review group had the active support of the university's Quality Promotion Office.

The reviewers wish to record their satisfaction with the responses received to all queries from academic and administrative staff of the Centre, from full-time and part-time staff of Kairos Communications and from students of the Centre's BA and MA programmes. They are, further, pleased to have had the opportunity to meet the university's president and vice-president in order to have a higher-level view of the achievements and prospects of the Centre.

The reviewers are satisfied that they received all relevant information to allow them form a comprehensive view of the Centre. However, the quality review process was interrupted – it was originally scheduled for the academic year, 2005/2006 – and this affected the consistency of information supplied, notably details of course content in the Centre's Quality Assurance Self-Assessment Report, tellingly dated February 2006 / September 2006.

Department under review

The Centre for Media Studies was established in 2002, following a proposal by the university's Admissions Office and President's Office that drew attention to the strong demand and relatively (to Britain) short supply in Ireland for media studies programmes at university level.

NUI Maynooth considered it had a unique opportunity to run such a programme, in that it had a media training and production company, Kairos Communications Ltd, located beside the university campus. Kairos Communications has broadcast-standard equipment and facilities, including a television studio, radio studio, and editing suites. The participation of Kairos Communications in the programmes of the Centre for Media Studies has meant that students of those programmes have been working with industry-standard equipment, which is regularly upgraded, and with industry professionals.

Another factor supporting the establishment of the Centre and its programmes was the university's intention to introduce a modular teaching structure, permitting interdisciplinary study. Modules on offer in several departments were identified as potential elements of a Media Studies programme.

For these several reasons, the BA (Media Studies) could be introduced quite quickly, offering media studies in the context of an arts programme, and enrolling the first students in 2003/2004. The Centre for Media Studies operated for its first two years with only one full-time faculty member (Director of Media Studies), seconded from the Department of English from autumn 2002 for five years. A second academic staff member joined the Centre at the start of the 2005/2006 academic year. This unusually modest staffing was viable

only because half of the teaching for the programme was contracted to Kairos Communications.

The present quality review took place at a time of flux for the Centre. The benefits of being young and small have been seen in its dynamism and innovation. Many of its decisions and initiatives appear to have been made on pragmatic grounds, and with short lead times, and have been effective in delivering on the aims. But the addition of a Masters programme (MA Television and Radio Production), the recruitment of a third academic staff member, which is proceeding at the time of writing, and the proposed start in 2007 of a new undergraduate programme (BA/BSc in Multimedia) place demands on the Centre that require greater stability and clarity in its status and in its reporting lines. The review group believes the Centre should be redefined as a department of the university, and that the position of Director of Centre / Head of Department should be made permanent.

Such a move would also help achieve the clearer articulation of relations with other departments, including and specifically with departments contributing to the optional course content of the BA (Media Studies), e.g. English, Sociology, and Anthropology. (We comment later in this report on the integration into the media studies programmes of course content delivered by others.)

We learned at the start of the peer review visit that senior university personnel would welcome advice on the best way to manage the relationship with Kairos Communications, which is unusual in a university context. The delivery of such a large part of course content through an external agency is very unusual in a university context. We were reassured, on the whole, that the relationship is appropriate and valuable, giving the university and its students access to professional experience and technical infrastructure that is unusual and would be prohibitively expensive to provide through more usual channels.

However, there are issues to be addressed of consistency in teaching style and student assessment, as between the elements delivered by academic staff of the Centre and the media professionals engaged, mainly part-time, to provide practical instruction through Kairos Communications. We heard that there was frequent contact between Centre for Media Studies staff and Kairos Communications, but we recommend that formal board meetings of all lecturers contributing to the BA and MA media programmes, including those employed through Kairos, take place at least twice per annum.

On the subject of the Centre's staffing, we quickly formed the view that the grade of the lecturer in the Centre needed to be improved, and we heard during the visit that this was due to happen. We recommend further that the administrative position in the Centre

(currently filled through a job share) should be upgraded; the range of duties performed, including maintenance of a DVD library, management of equipment loans, keeping of student attendance records, go beyond those of conventional departmental administration. We were very impressed with the quality and enthusiasm of the course administration.

As noted, the recruitment of a third academic to the Centre, focused on the BA in Multimedia, is proceeding at the time of writing. There are plans for the recruitment of a second lecturer focused on Multimedia. We recommend that further recruitment to the Centre be timetabled, with careful consideration of the areas of expertise to be covered. In view of the strong emphasis of the Centre's media studies on broadcast media, we recommend that the next appointment be made in the area of broadcasting.

As further steps to stabilising the Centre, we recommend the formation of an advisory board drawn from the several disciplinary areas associated with media studies, and including external examiner/s, and industry representatives.

BA (Media Studies)

This course has very quickly established itself in a competitive field and attracts students achieving high academic standards at school, who continue to perform at above-average levels at the university.

The BA (Media Studies) aims to produce graduates with the expected range of capacities and skills associated with an honours Arts degree, to produce graduates suitable for higher-level production training, and to produce graduates capable of working in the media industries. The diverse destinations of the first cohort of graduates (35 graduates in 2006) confirm that this triple aim is being broadly achieved.

We did not find a clear articulation of the philosophy of the BA programme beyond the above statement of intended outcomes. The range of 'media' is not explicitly defined, although, in practice, it is very largely contained within current affairs and documentary broadcasting. Nor is 'studies' defined, although the programme is proposed as one with a significant production component. In fact, this accounts for less than one quarter of total credits across the three years. It is not immediately obvious why some courses are included, though this may be a factor of the inconsistency of course outlines between various sources (reflecting recent revisions) and the imprecise naming of some courses more than a reflection of the course content. However, it was, and to some extent remains, unclear where matters

such as media policy, media ethics and other professional issues and various methods of analysis of media content and media organisations, are addressed in the programme.

We note some recent improvements in this regard but we recommend that the programme content be consolidated around clearly articulated objectives and syllabi, and, in particular, that the integration of Centre for Media Studies and Kairos Communications elements be developed further, with a consistent format for the statement of course objectives and intended learning outcomes.

We recommend that the mainly notional offering of a wide range of options in several other disciplines be replaced with a more modest offering of actually available options such as Media and Society, Contemporary Irish Writing, Literary and Cultural Theory, Popular Culture, and one or two others. Including such options might mean that Cinema History and Theory moves from core to optional. In terms of the overall balance of the programme, we would consider this appropriate.

We recommend that careful thought be given in any further, incremental revisions of the BA (Media Studies) to how it will link with the proposed BA / BSc Multimedia. (We comment further on this new programme later.)

We were impressed with the quality of the course delivery in-class (as far as we could judge) and via the classroom software, Moodle, though we note the absence of Moodle materials for the production modules as a weakness. We commend the Centre and Kairos Communications for developing a valuable template for the assessment of production assignments, an exercise that is recognised widely in media studies circles as especially difficult. We recommend that all production modules should have explicit outlines of syllabus, recommended readings, and expected outcomes and we advise Kairos Communications to consider implementing Moodle for the courses it delivers.

We recommend that the Centre facilitate occasional screenings of television documentaries and current affairs programmes, as selected by Kairos staff, for viewing and listening assignments and critical review in Kairos-delivered modules.

We consider the library holdings in relevant journals, books to support practice and theory teaching, and audio-visual stock for critical analysis, to be inadequate for the Centre's teaching in its present form, much less in expanded forms. We recommend a major, significant outlay to purchase books and audio-visual materials when departmental status is conferred, and we believe the annual allocation thereafter should be increased substantially to reflect the unusual cost of audio-visual materials.

We recommend that the Media in the Community and Dissertation components in 3rd year be integrated into one core module, and that its credit weighting be at least doubled, to reflect the independent learning effort by students, and to underpin this module's status as a capstone component of the degree.

We were surprised to learn that the participation of the Department of Sociology is so marginal in this degree programme, particularly in view of its historical relations with the proposal for media studies, and its known media sociology expertise. We recommend that this expertise be integrated formally into the BA (Media Studies) programme and into the associated Masters programme (see next section).

MA (Television and Radio Production)

This programme represents one progression route for graduates of the BA (Media Studies), as evidenced by the number (5) of that first cohort of graduates who have entered the MA. But it recruits the majority of its students from other sources, and needs to be reviewed in its own right, and not merely as an add-on to the BA.

We recommend that the academic content of the programme be strengthened, to reflect its Masters (as distinct from Graduate

Diploma) status. Such content could be addressed in modules on, for example, communication and cultural theories, methods of media analysis, political economy of broadcasting, some elements of which might be delivered by, or jointly with, the Department of Sociology. While students coming from the BA (Media Studies) may have had some exposure to this kind of theoretical content, the same cannot be assumed of other entrants.

This programme relies to an even greater extent on contributions from Kairos Communications than does the BA, so the observations above about measures to ensure consistency of teaching approaches between the Centre and Kairos Communications apply here with even more force.

We consider that more strategic thought needs to be given to any further developments at Masters level. (We comment later on the need for a strategic plan.)

BA / BSc Multimedia

We learned during the review visit that the Centre's participation in this new programme has arisen at least in part from the need of another department to boost student intake. We understand the pragmatic considerations involved, but we believe that this new programme might not necessarily have been the most advisable next departure in undergraduate teaching, as the Centre's direct participation represents a minority of the programme as proposed.

We learned that recruitment to the Centre of one lecturer in multimedia is formally committed, and the recruitment of a second is proposed. We note the specification that professional experience is "highly desirable" for these positions; this is a minimum requirement in our view as we see dangers of theory/practice and content/technology splits if applications-based instruction is taught in one department, media practice is taught through an external agency and only theory were to be taught in the Centre. The supervision of final-year BA Multimedia projects rests properly in the Centre, and only lecturers with good knowledge (and preferably direct experience) of creative practices and production constraints can provide such supervision.

We were concerned at the apparent lack of instruction in video and audio production and editing in the degree programme outline - all the

more surprising given the strong presence of such subjects in the BA (Media Studies). But we were assured that this was being addressed in the further refinement of the programme, and specifically in negotiations between the Centre and Kairos Communications.

We recommend that the new media expertise available in the Department of Sociology be integrated into this programme, perhaps through the creation of a shared lectureship. We would consider it a missed opportunity were the programme to proceed without a formal tie-in of that distinctive strength of the Department of Sociology.

Student experience

We were impressed with the quality, confidence and enthusiasm of the students we met and with the results of the student evaluation conducted as part of the self-assessment exercise; these also provide valuable pointers for the Centre's further development.

The performance of students on the BA (Media Studies), as reflected in the information provided on grades achieved in each of the student cohorts, reflects very well on the teaching and learning that the Centre facilitates. We questioned the very high concentration (to near-totality) of 2.1 and 1st class grades but were reassured by the evidence from the Media Studies students' performance in their combined subjects

that these grades reflected the university's assessment of their ability overall.

The Media Studies students are already participating at high levels in broader university activities, as is customary for media and communications students elsewhere; in this way, as in the participation of the programme's students in other academic areas, the establishment of media programmes in the university will be seen as a significant boon to the life of the university as a whole.

The students remarked on some of the difficulties in negotiating the relationship between the Centre and Kairos, and the courses offered by each; they appear to have overcome any of the significant difficulties. However, the tight schedules to which they work sometimes mean they arrive late at modules on the main campus or at Kairos. We recommend that the timetabling of Kairos-based modules be modified, if possible, to reduce these pressures.

Future plans for the Centre

A small, dynamic centre with one programme is growing towards a department with two programmes, a shared programme and other activities in mind. In this context, more formal operational structures will be needed, such as twice-annual (at least) meetings of lecturers on the Centre's programmes, as mentioned earlier. We were surprised to note that the external examiner had not attended an examination board; we consider this to be essential for external examination, more especially in relation to new degree programmes. We understand that practices in relation to external examination differ between universities, but we recommend that the external examiner should have a formal engagement with all lecturing staff on the Centre's programmes at least once annually.

We recommend that the Centre develop a strategic plan for five years, in anticipation of its passing to Department status. This plan should address the scope of 'media' in which the Department is interested, now and in the longer term. Thus, are news journalism, entertainment media, print media, film studies, and popular culture studies to be considered as areas of development? Conscious and explicit choices need to be made. The plan should also set out targets, inter alia, for programme development, staff recruitment, research activities, and strategic alliances, over the coming five years.

We are concerned that the proposed collaboration with a Chinese university comes very early in the life of the Centre, and that it could represent a serious distraction of effort. The Strategic Plan should situate this initiative clearly in the Centre's priorities and timetable.

We recommend that the areas be defined in which research students are sought. Some distinctive possibilities among the strengths of current Maynooth staff are media history, broadcasting, and media literacy. We recommend that specific and attainable targets be set for growth in the numbers of research students over a five-year timeframe.

We recommend that priority be given in a five-year timeframe to broadening and strengthening the permanent academic staff.

We recommend that no addition of programmes be planned within a three-year timeframe, but that, beyond that timeframe, a single-honours BA in Media / New Media and/or a Masters in Media with a strong theoretical orientation, from which research students might emerge, be considered for introduction.

Methodology of the review process

We had high levels of co-operation and commitment to the present quality review from the staff of the Centre, from Kairos Communications (although they are not formally bound to the process), from senior university personnel, and from the Quality Promotion Office. In preparation for our visit, we would have found the following helpful:

- access to Moodle to review module materials;
- external examiners' reports since the last review;
- statistics on student grades;
- an electronic template of the final review report;
- an electronic copy of the internal report.

We received these materials while we were on site, or immediately afterwards, but receiving them earlier would have been helpful. In fact, the delivery of all materials could have been more timely.

We note that major programme changes had been decided, and others considered, before the present review process began, or was completed. We recommend that future major changes be scheduled for consideration and implementation in line with future quality assurance reviews.

We are happy to restate that the Centre for Media Studies and its staff co-operated comprehensively and effectively in this review, and that they showed a high level of awareness of their challenges and opportunities. We anticipate that, with careful planning and adequate resourcing, the Centre will grow and develop to become a significant presence in media studies.

In view of our observations and recommendations on the priorities for academic recruitment, on the need for closer ties with the Department of Sociology, on the risks attached to the two-department approach to multimedia studies, and on the alignment of quality review and course development, the external reviewers are concerned that recruitment and course development initiatives undertaken since the peer review visit, though they indicate a welcome commitment to expansion of the Centre's resources, do not reflect these recommendations. One of the two new lecturer posts is located in an area of expertise – new media cultures, and society and technology - already existing within the Department of Sociology, and the other is in media theory and policy rather than, as suggested, in broadcasting. This further highlights the importance of completing processes like this one before undertaking major programmatic changes or developments.

Recommendations

In summary, the peer review group recommends

1. that the Centre be redefined as a department of the university
2. that the position of Director of Centre / Head of Department be made permanent at the earliest opportunity
3. that the administrative position in the Centre be upgraded in recognition of the wide range and intensity of the responsibilities
4. that plans for further recruitment of academic staff to the Centre be carefully considered as to the areas of expertise to be covered
5. that the next lecturer appointment to the Centre be made in broadcasting
6. that an advisory board be formed, drawn from the several disciplinary areas associated with media studies, and including external examiner/s, and industry representatives
7. that board meetings of all lecturers contributing to the BA and MA media programmes, including those employed through Kairos, take place at least twice per annum

8. that the programme content of the BA (Media Studies) be consolidated around clearly articulated and consistently formulated objectives
9. that the apparently wide range of options for students on the BA (Media Studies) from other departments – not all of which are available – be reduced to an offering of real options
10. that any further revisions of the BA (Media Studies) be undertaken in such a way to increase links and synergies with the new BA / BSc Multimedia
11. that all production modules delivered through Kairos Communications should have explicit outlines of syllabus, recommended readings, and expected outcomes
12. that the Centre facilitate screenings of television documentaries and current affairs programmes for viewing and listening assignments and critical review
13. that a major, significant outlay is made to purchase books and audio-visual materials relevant to the Centre's programmes and that the annual allocation for such ongoing purchases be increased substantially
14. that the Media in the Community and Dissertation components in year 3 of the BA (Media Studies) be integrated into one mandatory core module with at least doubled credit weighting

15. that the academic content of the MA (Television and Radio Production) be strengthened, to reflect its Masters status
16. that the media sociology expertise available in the Department of Sociology be integrated formally into the BA (Media Studies) and MA (Television and Radio Production)
17. that the new media expertise available in the Department of Sociology be integrated formally into the BA/BSc Multimedia, possibly through a shared lectureship
18. that the timetabling of modules delivered by Kairos Communications be changed, in order to reduce the difficulties for students of getting to and from lectures on the university campus on time
19. that the Centre develop a strategic plan for five years to address the scope of media in which it is interested, now and in the future, and to set out targets for programme development, staff recruitment, research activities, strategic alliances and other aspects of its growth as a prospective department of the university
20. that the areas be defined in which research students are sought, such as media history, broadcasting, and media literacy, and the numbers to be recruited
21. that priority be given in a five-year timeframe to broadening and strengthening the permanent academic staff of the Centre / Department

22. that no addition of programmes be planned within a three-year timeframe, but that a single-honours BA in Media / New Media and/or a Masters in Media be considered for introduction beyond that timeframe
23. that future major changes be considered and implemented in line with the next cycle of quality assurance review