Quality Review of the Department of Music

February 2010

Peer Review Report

Peer Review Group:

External Reviewers: **Professor Peter Manning,**
University of Durham, UK;
Professor Susan Rankin,
University of Cambridge, UK.

Internal Reviewers: **Professor Rowena Pecchenino,**
Dean of Faculty of Social Sciences &
Head of Economics, Finance &
Accounting, NUIM;
Professor Jim Walsh,
Deputy President & Vice-President for
Innovation, NUIM.

Department of Music, NUI Maynooth
External Review, February 2010

Introduction

The NUI Maynooth Music Department is one of eighteen providers on the island of Ireland offering music curricula to third-and fourth-level students. It is the largest music department of its kind in Ireland, and in terms of catchment area, size, and the range and scope of academic provision it has no direct comparators.

At the undergraduate level it offers three programmes, BA, BMus and BA Music Technology. In the case of the BA, music is studied as an arts subject in combination with two other subjects in the first year, and one other subject in years two and three. In the case of the BMus, music is studied as a major subject in the first year with one other arts subject taken as a minor subject, with both years two and three being devoted exclusively to music. The BA Music Technology programme involves the study of music technology with two other subjects in the first year and one other subject in years two and three. Music may also be taken as a subject within the BATh degree of the Pontifical University of Maynooth.

Modules for the BMus and BA embrace technical and applied studies of music of various styles and periods complemented by detailed analytical studies. Students with approved prerequisite attainment pursue first-study performance to an advanced level, and all BMus and BA students participate in one of the Department's approved ensembles. Final year students have the opportunity of option for one of three specialist strands: Composition, Musicology, and Performance. BA students have the additional opportunities of a 'Taught' strand. BA Music Technology students study general elements of music as well as composition and aspects of popular music. In the context of informatics, students study computer programming and signal processing, with additional specialised modules in sound engineering and computer music.

At postgraduate level taught full- and part-time MA degrees are offered in four areas: Composition, Computer Music (Music Technology), Musicology, and Performance & Musicology. A postgraduate Diploma in Music Technology is also offered. The research degrees of MLitt and PhD are also offered, and the Department will offer structured PhD programmes from 2010-11 onwards as part of a university-wide initiative.

The Music Department is currently the third largest in the Faculty of Arts, Celtic Studies and Philosophy and enjoys a unique function in the University through its concert-giving activities, enriching the cultural life of the institution and the local community. There are eleven full-time members of academic staff and three support staff consisting of a departmental administrator, a part-time executive assistant and a technician. In addition the Director of Choral Groups, who is also employed by St Patrick's College Maynooth provides part-time lecturing and directing expertise.

The full-time Academic Staff profile consists of two professors (one serving as Head of Department) one senior lecturer, seven lecturers and an assistant lecturer, providing leading expertise in musicology, performance, composition (acoustic and

electroacoustic) and music technology. Research interests embrace music from the 16th to the 20th centuries, the history of music in Ireland, music analysis and performance-related research, music technology, and both acoustic and electroacoustic composition.

In terms of strategic direction, a significant watershed in the Department's development occurred with the retirement of Professor Gerald Gillen as Head of Department in September 2007. The re-configuration of the role of Head of Department to align with the new framework introduced by the University in 2006 and the appointment of Professor Fiona M. Palmer as the new HoD created an opportunity for the Department to review and develop its ongoing strategy. The current Quality Review is thus especially timely in terms of providing an interim progress report on progress in this context.

A   Teaching, Learning and Assessment

1) Curriculum design and delivery

It was evident to the reviewers that much has already been achieved in the context of the review of teaching and learning which has been underway since September 2007, with many of the key objectives already agreed and implemented. The management of change places additional demands on all staff, and their willingness to participate in the associated processes of decision-making and governance has underpinned and usefully informed the emerging strategy.

These enhancements have enriched the student experience in terms of the quality and standards of learning, teaching and assessment provided at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, moving beyond the basic requirements of quality assurance in pursuit of an agenda which is enhancement-led. The students clearly value both the academic and pastoral support they receive both from academic and administrative staff and there is a strong sense of loyalty and commitment which bodes well for the future.

The revision and updating of the music curriculum is taking place at a time when all university providers face significant challenges, the situation for those in Ireland being very similar to those in the UK. A primary cause for concern is the growing divide between the requirements of the school leaving certificate and the knowledge and skills necessary to study for a degree in music, and the consequential need to rectify these deficiencies post-admission places additional demands on staff.

While recognising the evident commitment of all those involved to meet these challenges there would appear to be little or no spare capacity to take on further students, especially at undergraduate level, without a commensurate increase in teaching support. Whereas the Department does have direct control over student numbers and the associated admission processes for both the BMus and the BA Music Technology, the level of uncertainty which exists over the numbers who study for the BA creates additional challenges in this context, and the impact of teaching loads on the capacity of staff to undertake research is addressed elsewhere in the report.

The discussions with staff highlighted the importance of taking into account not only teaching hours but also the time required to mark work, and the reviewers came to the view that the volume of work set for assessment might usefully be revisited. While fully recognising that some areas of the curriculum are necessarily intensive in this regard there may be opportunities in others for reducing marking loads.

Given the size of the postgraduate community it may also be the case that there are further opportunities for involving research students in a supporting role. Whereas it is clearly important that such activities do not take up a disproportionate amount of their study time, the experience thus gained will benefit the employment prospects for those students subsequently seeking employment in higher education.

The recent redesign of the undergraduate curricula has reaped a number of key benefits: Firstly, the core areas of techniques, musicology, composition and performance have an assured coherence which extends both to the opportunities for developing intra-disciplinary links in an effective and suitably cognate manner and also securing appropriate progression year by year. Secondly the specialist areas of study which are available in the third year are now clearly informed by the research interests of staff, which in turn usefully prepares the ground for those who elect to continue their studies at a postgraduate level. Thirdly, the overall coherence of the programmes emphasises both the distinctiveness of what is on offer and also its relevance.

There are particular challenges in maintaining the delivery of areas of study which rely on the continuing availability of high quality teaching skills which are now becoming the exception rather than the rule, notably those required for harmony and counterpoint. Many UK universities have greatly reduced or indeed largely abandoned the teaching of such areas, much to the detriment of the students concerned, and the retention of such studies at Maynooth adds a distinctive and valuable perspective to the overall profile. It is hoped that these features can be suitably sustained.

The proposals outlined in the Self Assessment Report for possible future revisions to the curricula merit some further comment. The study of medieval music is increasingly under threat as the number of universities prepared to teach it, certainly in the UK, steadily diminishes. Given the strong tradition of liturgical music at Maynooth the Department would thus be exceptionally well placed to develop this area of study.

In the context of jazz and popular music, the broadening of the performance modules to include these areas and more generally a broader engagement with popular music would provide a complementary expansion of provision in areas which create significant opportunities for useful synergies with other teaching and research areas, from the art and practice of music technology to music aesthetics and allied interests in philosophy.

Whereas the connectivity between the BA and BMus is assured by the significant number of features in common as regards the curricula for these programmes, their relationship to the BA Music Technology merits further scrutiny. Whereas elements of music technology, most notably the composition of electroacoustic music, often

feature as part of conventional BA and BMus programmes, freestanding degrees in music technology are often located in computer science departments, one of the most notable examples in Ireland being the BSc in Music, Media and Performance Technology at Limerick.

What is especially distinctive about the Maynooth degree is its location within the Music department, thus creating optimal conditions for synergies between student composers and performers and those who elect to study in significant breadth and depth the creative use of the underlying technology. At the same time the study of the technology itself is strongly underpinned by the practical benefits of the partnership which has been forged with the Department of Computer Science. The very real benefits of this structure were evident from the meetings with students at both undergraduate and postgraduate level and also staff from both departments who highlighted their joint research interests and associated collaboration.

The curriculum for the BA Music Technology degree, as in the case of the other music degrees is well structured, coherent, and very much fit for purpose. There are particular challenges to be faced in this interdisciplinary context not least in terms of the range and diversity of music and technical skills that necessarily have to be acquired. It is the rule rather than the exception that students applying for such programmes have less well-developed music skills than those applying for a more traditional music degree, and it is very much an advantage that at Maynooth both types of degree are taught side by side.

At the taught postgraduate level the pathways available at the Masters level reflect the research interests and expertise of the staff, the core subject areas in turn building upon the curricula of the undergraduate degrees. The opportunities to study these areas at a more advanced level encourage students to continue at Maynooth, in turn preparing the ground for further progression to a research degree.

The structure of the MA degrees is assured and appropriate, providing a clearly articulated focus on the major component of study. Training in research methods is necessarily an integral component of these degrees, and it is important to recognise that beyond a common core of skills the requirements differ at least to some degree according to the area of study. The meeting with taught postgraduate students suggests that whereas the needs of those studying musicology are suitably addressed there are some concerns in the context of those studying performance, composition and computer music.

The challenges to be met here are by no means unique to Maynooth. For example it is not always evident to composers and performers why musicological research methods are relevant to their specific areas of study, and acceptance of their value can be usefully enhanced if the topics covered are extended to embrace skills more directly associated with their particular specialisms. The current approach clearly recognises these differences but there is scope further to develop these more subject-specific components.

2) Resources

The reviewers noted the recent improvements in the context of library provision, practice facilities and music technology, and both the students and the staff confirmed the significant benefits which have collectively resulted from these investments.

Library resources are a particular challenge given escalating costs and the Department recognises the need to prioritise acquisitions, concentrating in the first instance on the core requirements to support learning and teaching. The student representatives expressed the view that there is still some way to go before the repertory of text-based materials including scores, CDs, and on-line electronic resources, come fully into balance with their expectations. The reviewers' visit to the library confirmed that there were gaps in these areas which could usefully benefit from further investment, but overall the resources available were adequate for the delivery of the taught programmes.

Recent investment in the practice facilities have led to significant improvements in the quality of provision in terms of the number of rooms now available for individual study, and also the availability of pianos. The soundproofing of rooms is also a key consideration and recent investments in this context have reaped important dividends in this regard.

The resources provided for the undergraduate and postgraduate taught degrees in Music Technology are suitably comprehensive and up-to-date, and the students speak very positively in this context. Technology, however, continues to develop at a brisk and potentially expensive pace, and the University needs to ensure that there is a cost-efficient but appropriately resourced strategy in place for upgrading these facilities on a regular basis.

Whereas the provision of resources for taught undergraduate and postgraduate degrees is thus essentially secure the reviewers do have some concerns in the context of both library resources and study space for postgraduate research students, and these are returned to in Section B of this report.

A final consideration in this context is the continuing provision of technical and administrative support. The current contract for the departmental technician is fixed term, and therefore consideration will soon need to be given to the arrangements to put in place after the end of the contract. It became evident during the review that the technician's responsibilities extend beyond those exclusively associated with Music Technology to embrace key areas of IT support for all students and staff, and the loss of this post would have serious implications for the Department.

Similarly the Departmental office provides crucial underpinning to the student learning experience, and there are similar concerns over what will happen when the temporary administrative appointment comes to an end. The case for continuing both posts is very strong, and is further reinforced in the next section.

[During the preparation of this report, it emerged that the matters regarding staffing mentioned in the preceding two paragraphs are being addressed, as indicated in the section "Conclusions and Recommendations".]

B   Research and Scholarship

Research is an important and developing element in the departmental profile: the department seeks to increase its intake of and provision for postgraduates, and, at the same time, to encourage and support research activity undertaken by members of staff. At both levels this strategy faces severe challenges. It is the hope of the external reviewers that the University will recognise in this aspect of departmental activities an orientation of effort which needs and deserves strong support, in order to ensure the good health of the department, in its national and international context in years to come.

The teaching of taught Master's students has been considered in section A of this report: this section will deal only with research activities.

1) Directions: PhD students

The 'development and enhancement of postgraduate research' belongs among the strategic goals of the University. Since nine years ago the Music Department has increased the number of its PhD students, from 2 then to 22 currently, with six completions along the way; this trend looks set to continue. The Department is also participating in the setting up of structured PhD programmes, and several of its PhD students have already had the chance to take modules in generic skills.

The reaction to such courses was on the whole extremely positive, and the PRG encourages the Department's support for such work. Current students pointed out– and thus showed their strong awareness of–the advantages of mixing with students based in other departments, and of testing their own requirements, questions and experiences against that of others.

The extent to which students felt they had strong contact with and access to their research supervisors was very impressive. It is not easy to win such positive reactions from students, especially at the postgraduate level, and the Department should be warmly congratulated for this 100% positive report–which will surely contribute to departmental reputation and attraction for new applicants.

It is also clear that the current student cohort has a good sense of community, and feels departmental support in this; arrangements for students to make formal presentations of their work, encouragement to publish, and to participate in international conferences, are matters raised by students met by the reviewers–and, in most cases, seen by the students as a normal part of their activities. It is not clear that all PhD students felt equally encouraged to look further, and to find ways of articulating their research ambitions.

All students should be made strongly aware of the need to look outwards, beyond their own research work, whether it is at the level of collective exchange or in the individual meetings between students and their research supervisors (or at both levels). The Department's strategy in developing links to other institutions and

external bodies might also seek to incorporate students, and to involve them as far as possible in its encounters with research activities and researchers based elsewhere.

Given the relative closeness of the institutions, and the relatively small numbers involved it might also make sense for the trio of TCD, UCD and Maynooth to interact in fostering a research culture–for example by sharing opportunities to present ongoing research projects in a student-dominated group, to consider synergies between their individual research strengths, and to collaborate in invitations to visiting speakers.

The imminent loss of a senior member of staff who currently oversees and coordinates postgraduate research work is a matter which demands immediate consideration by the University. This is much more than a matter of getting in someone who has the hours available to do some administration: it concerns the appointment of a staff member who has her/himself had significant experience in a research world, and exposure to its possibilities and challenges– who can therefore both advise and act as a model for young researchers. [While compiling this report, the reviewers were informed that this matter is being addressed in the context of a University-wide review of staffing.]

2) Resources: PhD students

The need for a space for postgraduate students to see as their own–for quiet work on their own and for interaction with each other–has been mentioned elsewhere in this report. It is an urgent need, if this aspect of departmental activity is to continue to flourish.

The other urgent need is for serious consideration of library holdings. The Department may seek to develop specific areas: it certainly cannot be expected to enlarge in every direction. Nevertheless, the students need to learn about a big world of scholarship beyond themselves, and to understand how to access it, whether in hard copy (books, CDs, DVDs) or electronically.

Difficulties about electronic access were raised with the reviewers; these ranged from software problems (which could surely be easily solved) to the provision of links to the hugely changing number of books and journals available on the web. The last set of library issues has to do with access to other libraries in the Dublin area.

On the whole the PhD students had a sound sense of how to get into other libraries (although the undergraduate and master's students were hazy about this); but it is worth reminding those responsible for the induction of research students of the fundamental significance of helping them to learn how to find what they need, and insisting that there will usually be far more that they need to read / study then they at first realise. There might be consideration given to provision of some introductory sessions about this.

The quality of the technical resources available for the taught degrees in Music Technology ensures a secure and suitably supported working environment for research students working in this area, and here the links to the Department of Computer Science are especially beneficial. Such students, however, will have special

requirements from time to time when they engage with potentially ground-breaking research, and their needs need to be kept carefully under review.

3) Directions and Resources: Staff

The external reviewers met separately with every member of staff, and with many of the support staff. In these interviews the question of research activities was addressed seriously by all. Most members of staff are actively involved in research, whether that consists in the writing of scholarly papers, the exploration of new digital techniques, the composition of music, or the study of performance.

The enthusiasm of the individual members of staff for the activity of research was palpable: in some cases it was evident that their commitment to research is fundamental to their self-respect as members of an academic community. This enthusiasm and commitment is a precious resource for the wider university community, and the reviewers hope that the university will urgently find ways to foster green shoots.

As things stand the situation of staff research in this department appears somewhat precarious: in the case of some staff members, that research which is undertaken is squashed into corners of an extremely busy professional existence, and may not flourish without being given more space.

In this respect the balance between teaching, research and administrative activities deserves urgent consideration. Teaching and research need not be mutually exclusive: a strong research culture can inform and inspire teaching. The amount of teaching undertaken in this department, fueled by a very large undergraduate and masters intake of students, is absorbing so much of the individual and collective energy of the departmental staff, that it is really important to bring the two together, and to work out ways of sharing resources (in terms of time and energy). It is therefore worth exploring whether it is possible to focus more courses into specialist areas–which can easily and quickly be provided with general context.

On the side of administration, it is imperative that the University assure the continuation of the current support staff structure and the case being put forward here is essentially the same as that already put forward in the context of learning and teaching: without the staff working in the departmental office (one of whom is on a temporary contract) and the technical assistant (again on a short term contract), what is currently being achieved in terms of research is severely threatened–and this at both senior and junior levels of the department, each of which has its own significance in the research culture. [As indicated above, the reviewers were informed before completion of the report that this matter is being addressed.]

The most serious current difficulty facing research is one which lies beyond the control of the department–this is the university's policy regarding sabbatical leave. If research is to be encouraged, there need to be significant opportunities for individuals to set aside teaching and administration and to focus on major projects.

As things stand, it appears to be difficult to disassociate sabbatical requirements and financial issues. Above all, those members of staff who are in the first ten years of their professional life (which describes a fairly large proportion of the Music Department) will find the requirement to surrender 35% of their salary very difficult to meet. It is to the most junior members of the department that the most help needs to be offered in this respect: it is in this early part of their careers that they need to develop horizons, ideas, contacts–so that the sense of what it means to belong to the research community is part of their own scholarly personality, and not something they try to add on at a later stage.

The Department has since 2007 set up a research committee, with the business of overseeing general research work, including links to other institutions and conference plans. This is an important forum for the encouragement of individual as well as departmental research activity. The number of links for collaborative research looks very healthy indeed.

We hope that the role of this committee can continue to be strengthened, always towards ideas and planning, encouragement of individual initiatives, sharing of knowledge about grant applications, and networking possibilities. In addition, we think it worth exploring possibilities for digital research, not only in the domain of Music Technology, but especially on the humanities side, since there are many new and interesting avenues opening up. It is not necessary to imagine digital humanities as demanding different research interests and methodologies, but as a way of enhancing traditional interests and approaches.

In the short term the Research Committee might consider exploring the possibilities of exchange with other European Universities–of both staff (short visits) and research students (up to a semester). The EU provides financial support, and such exchanges can be enormously interesting for the individuals involved; they may also develop into strong links. The initiative for exchange–which departments would make sense as opposite numbers, and be of interest for staff and students alike–will need to come from the staff in the first place.

In conclusion, the current strength of research in this department, and promise for the future is a strength 'in hiding': it is extremely vulnerable, since, as a mostly individual activity, research is what gets put off. To become stronger, and to flourish at all levels, it desperately needs strong support from the wider university, as well as encouragement for the Department to rethink the balance of time and energy dedicated to its various activities.

C   Service to Academic and other Communities: Internal and External

Members of staff are engaged in a wide range of administrative tasks beyond the Department itself. It is inevitable that the directions in which different members of staff look and extend their work will be quite diverse. The richness of experience and contact which these links bring into the department is extremely important, while giving it a strong profile, both within the university and beyond the university. We hope that staff members will continue these healthy levels of involvement; those staff members not currently much involved in university administration might be

encouraged to see it as a way of developing the place of the Music Department in the wider institution.

D   Additional Key Activity

The Music Department has a particularly important and significant role to stimulate and contribute to activities which directly benefit the University as a whole and also the wider community. This is discharged in a number of ways, notably via its ensemble activities which provide a productive blend of regular music-making and concert giving.

Six ensembles are professionally directed by the Department, each providing distinctive contributions to these outreach activities; the Choral Society, the Chamber Orchestra, the Ladies' Choir, the Chamber Choir, the Guitar Ensemble, and the Irish Traditional Group. In addition a new link with Camerata Ireland has resulted in a series of high-profile master classes at Castletown House, and a growing relationship with Castletown House and also the Office of Public Works.

These activities are clearly valued by the University and the wider community, and their continuing development is warmly to be encouraged. There are, however, some resource implications here, notably in terms of administrative support, and these will need to be appropriately maintained. A further consideration which is a constraint both in an outreach context and also the student experience is the current lack of a large performance space within the University. Whilst recognising that circumstances are unlikely to change in the immediate future it is hoped that this deficiency will be borne in mind should an opportunity arise for capital investment in this particular context.

E   Management and Leadership

The Department has gone through a period of very fast change in direction and in style of management and leadership. Within the challenge of a changed and continually changing culture beyond the department (above all, in terms of student needs and expectations but also for support and management of staff), the appointment of a new Head of Department has offered a chance for the Music Department community to rethink how it is run, day by day, and level (of activity) by level.

As a result it has been attempted to develop a stronger team mentality, to encourage staff to share and to focus. Key elements in this strategy have included more delegation of responsibilities, encouragement of responsiveness to student demands and expectations, and to university policies, and movement towards joining up parts of the curriculum.

Student response to these initiatives is very positive: they do appreciate being involved in discussions of the way forward. Most staff response is also positive–and

the greater opportunities for engagement in the running of the department are appreciated by individual staff members. In the area of admissions, at undergraduate and postgraduate level, there have been marked changes, leading to greater control.

It is now much more clear to potential entrants what they might expect to get in a musical education at Maynooth, as it is clear to the staff what quality of performance, practical and intellectual, they might expect from entrance candidates. This is moving standards up, without sacrificing the size of the pool of entrants. (This admissions work is only maintainable with support staff, in addition to academic staff.)

There are two areas of potential concern, both of which deserve consideration by the University authorities beyond the Department. It is important to offer guidance to members of staff, especially those at the early career stage; they may have questions about any and all aspects of academic life. There is already much mentoring going on. But it is formally unorganised and mainly left to the HoD. Were there to be a more formal central University scheme, then individual members of staff could see the activity of discussing their situation, with its problems and chances, as a normal rather than an abnormal activity. In addition, were a scheme to offer the possibility of mentoring through senior staff based in other departments, individuals could explore other avenues for thinking about their own position, and also learn from experience and good practice developed elsewhere.

The second area of concern is that of the continuation of the programme of management and leadership beyond the tenure of the present HoD. In order to ensure the embedding of current very positive initiatives, it is important that the next HoD be highly active and focussed on the Department (rather than a personal career).

In addition, the administrative structure of the department, which is as essential to the efficient running of activities which focus outwards (the concert programme) as it is to efficient handling of student needs (handing in of assignments, availability of staff to help with student enquiries, and so on) is a fundamental element in this new team approach to how the department functions. This administrative structure will need ongoing financial resources, since it is currently dependent on temporary staff.

F   Training and Development

All members of staff, both administrative and academic, have undertaken training–of a large variety of types. Views about the quality of the training offered were variable (which comes as no surprise–this is a repeated experience in all institutions). In this sense, the reviewers support the statement made in the self-assessment document that 'the benefits of training and development courses could be more regularly evaluated': if it is possible to offer a forum for exchanging such information (on Moodle?) this could be useful to individuals exploring different possibilities. And the further suggestion that a 'quid pro quo' scheme be operated among staff members 'enabling release from lectures to attend training courses' is evidently sensible. It is often the case that staff are unaware how useful training courses (good ones!) can be--anything which helps them to find out that courses are worth doing should be encouraged.

G   Implementation of University Policies & Processes

The self-assessment document highlights the following key policies as subject to particular scrutiny in the recent past: Data Protection Policy and Freedom of Information Act, Policy for Protection of Staff against Workplace Bullying, Harassment and Sexual Harassment, Policy on Equality, and University Safety Policy, and it notes that staff are aware of these policies and generally agree. It is noted, however, that the approach tends to be reactive rather than proactive and steps are being taken to rectify this shortcoming, particularly in the context of health and safety.

One further area identified by the reviewers concerns the mentoring support provided for younger members of staff, both in terms of teaching and also research. It would be mutually advantageous to revisit the current arrangements to see if the current level of support can be usefully enhanced.

H   Integrating Support Services

Whereas the Department generally enjoys very good support from institution-wide services with regular communication through the usual channels, and clearly-defined roles have been allocated to staff members in the Department, it is recognised that there is room for some improvement, for example in terms of providing clear and easily-accessible documentation in all areas and more specifically improving the levels of support in those areas of IT which are provided by central services.

Music has a number of requirements in this context, for example the need for support that embraces both Mac and PC computing platforms. The role of the Department technician in terms of providing in-house support is especially critical in these circumstances, and such difficulties provide further support to the case that is advanced for continuing this post on a non-fixed term basis.

Quality Improvement Plan and Department Strategy Proposals

The SWOT analysis which has been used as the basis of the Quality Improvement Plan is comprehensive and suitably embracing in terms of reviewing progress to date in implementing the strategic plan. There is a close correlation between this internally prepared analysis and the findings of the reviewers. Similarly the Department Strategy Proposals are similarly well focused and comprehensive, providing a useful context for the recommendations that form the final part of this report.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Department of Music provides a high quality learning and teaching environment for students at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, leading to awards which appropriately reflect the levels of attainment in terms of academic standards. The review has identified a number of distinctive features which contribute to this assured profile. These include:

- Dedicated teaching and administrative staff who have reacted very positively to the challenges of curriculum review and development
- A distinctive portfolio of degree programmes which combine a thorough grounding in relevant key skills with research-led teaching
- Coherent pathways within the curriculum embracing musicology, composition, performance, and music technology
- A clear sense of progression year by year, allowing students to develop their interests within a framework which productively balances the need for overall coherence with opportunities for choice
- The commitment to providing comprehensive and effective student support in terms of advice and feedback on assessed work
- The investment in resources both in terms of practice facilities and also specialist IT to service the requirements of Music Technology learning and teaching
- A very positive attitude to research, both as a training activity, at postgraduate level, and as a professional activity on the part of staff
- Good interaction between staff and students in research work
- The gradual development of structures to support research, including a research committee, commitment to participation in international conferences, strong encouragement to publish, and the provision of opportunities for the sharing of results within the department.

This review coincides with the mid-point of the music strategy introduced in 2007 and thus has the status of an interim report on the implementation of this five year plan. As noted in the previous section the updated proposals clearly articulate the key challenges still to be met if the aims and objectives of this strategy are to be fully met, and the reviewers endorse the desired outcomes as timely and appropriate.

The recommendations that follow summarise the key points that emerged from the review and fall into two main categories:

(a) initiatives that can be undertaken by the department itself.
- As a matter of priority, review the balance between teaching, research and administrative activities
- Review the scope and nature of formative assessments, especially in the case of modules of a more technical nature
- Consider the possibilities of coordination of some research activities with other institutions based in the Dublin area
- Continue to review and develop structured PhD programmes
- Explore the setting up of a more formal mentoring scheme, including the allowance that senior members of staff may approach members of other departments for 'appraisal interviews'

(b) recommendations that require a greater commitment of resources by the University

- Upgrade the quality of the facilities provided for postgraduate research students, notably the space provided for individual study

- Urgently consider the basis of the provision of sabbatical leave, especially for early career staff
- Review the provision of library resources, paying particular attention to the needs of postgraduate research students
- Ensure that the quality of the IT resources is maintained, and where possible further enhanced
- Secure the ongoing provision of technical and administrative support, where possible on a non-fixed term basis
- As a matter of priority, consider the replacement of the retiring member of staff who currently holds responsibility for leading and overseeing the department's research activities, both at student and at staff levels.

[It was evident to the External Peer Reviewers from the Internal Self Assessment Report and from discussions during the visit that the Department has some critical staffing issues that need to be addressed urgently by the University. These include the replacement of a retiring senior academic with another senior academic post, and making arrangements to safeguard the posts of technician and the half time executive assistant. During the course of the Peer Review visit the Internal Reviewers indicated that these issues were being considered in the context of an overall review of staffing levels throughout the University. It appears that each of the staffing issues has now (April 2010) been addressed in a manner that is satisfactory for the department. Further, sabbatical policy is also being reassessed to ensure that researchers are given adequate opportunity and support to actively pursue their research careers via, among other things, making sabbatical funding more generous.]

Methodology of the Review

The review was carried out by Professor Susan Rankin (University of Cambridge) and Professor Peter Manning (University of Durham) in February 2010. For this purpose the Music Department prepared a Self Assessment Report which formed the basis of the review and also the format and content of this report.

The review visit took place between February 23rd and February 25th and involved meetings with senior officers of the University including the President, all members of academic and administrative staff consulted individually, and students. In the latter case meetings were held with representatives in three contexts; i) undergraduate students, ii) taught postgraduate students, and iii) postgraduate research students. The review also included site visits to key locations including the library, the practice suite, and the music technology facilities.

_____　　　　　　　_____
Professor Peter Manning　　　　　　　　　　**Professor Susan Rankin**
External Reviewer　　　　　　　　　　　　　　**External Reviewer**

_____　　　　　　　_____
Professor Rowena Pecchenino　　　　　　　　**Professor Jim Walsh**
Internal Reviewer　　　　　　　　　　　　　　**Internal Reviewer**