



**NUI MAYNOOTH**

*Glacóil na hÉireann Mhó Nuad*

**Quality Review of the  
National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis  
(NIRSA)**

**November 2009**

**Peer Review Report**

**Peer Review Group:**

**External Reviewer:** Professor Andrew Gillespie,  
University of Newcastle, UK.

**Internal Reviewer:** Professor Ray O'Neill,  
Vice President for Research, NUIM.

# Peer Review Report on the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA)

## **1. Introduction**

NIRSA was established as a University Institute at NUI Maynooth in 2001. Its remit is to:

1. undertake fundamental, applied and comparative research on spatial processes and their effects on social and economic development in Ireland;
2. provide high quality graduate education to the next generation of Irish social scientists.

It was initially established through a combination of PRTL I Cycle 2 funding and from funding by a private donor. Following its initial funding, between 2005 and 2007 it ran as a self-sustaining unit underwritten by a joint NIRSA-National Centre for Geocomputation (NCG) University business plan, and from October 2007 it secured funding through PRTL I Cycle 4 for establishing the Irish Social Sciences Platform (ISSP), for which NIRSA is the lead administrative partner. Most of its PRTL I4 funding finishes in September 2010.

NIRSA is a multi-disciplinary and multi-institutional partnership, and in its current configuration consists of four partner institutions, NUI Maynooth; Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick; Institute of Technology, Sligo; and Queen's University Belfast. Within NUI Maynooth the core departments are currently Sociology and Geography, although members are drawn from a number of departments, including (notably and closely related) Anthropology.

NIRSA has been reviewed four times previously – a private donor review, 2 HEA reviews (mid-term and as part of an institutional review, including in 2003 by the present external reviewer), and as part of the NUIM European Universities Association review. These previous reviews were all highly positive. The current review consequently followed the 'light touch' Complementary Quality Review procedure, based on a Self-Assessment Report, a peer review by two reviewers, one external and one internal (Prof Andrew Gillespie of Newcastle University, UK was the external, Prof Ray O'Neill the internal). The peer review visit took place over two days, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> November 2009.

The peer review report firstly reviews the contribution of NIRSA to meeting the Institutions goals, under the three main headings used in the self-assessment report; teaching and learning; research and scholarship; and service to academic and other communities; it then reviews the management and resourcing of NIRSA, before proposing further quality improvements.

## **2. Contribution to Teaching and Learning**

NIRSA has played a significant role in graduate education, establishing a PhD training programme soon after its inception. Initiatives it initially developed included an all-island postgraduate training weekend for first year research students in Geography and allied disciplines, which is now in its tenth year; a programme of career skills seminars; a masterclass seminar series; and ad hoc methodology workshops. Since 2001 it has run a summer student intern programme, for UG and Master's students, employing in total 66 interns to date, a number of whom have gone on to become PhD students.

From 2007, NIRSA has been the lead administrative partner in the PRTL14 funded Irish Social Sciences Platform (ISSP), a graduate education programme involving academics and students from 19 academic disciplines in 9 institutions across the island. ISSP has to date funded 54 PhD students and 16 postdocs, integrated into a common research and graduate programme centred on the knowledge society, sustaining communities and balanced development. The programme makes available postgraduate level modules to all social science PhD students in the participating institutions, and is delivering a full 60 credit Graduate Education Programme (GREP) over three years. We note that this level of taught credits requires a significant extra effort from both students and staff. The effectiveness of this should be carefully monitored. NIRSA also participates in the structured graduate education programme of the Dublin Regional Higher Education Alliance.

NIRSA has contributed positively to both the scale and quality of graduate education in Ireland, and has been cited by the Irish Universities Association as an example of excellence in postgraduate training in Ireland. It has substantially increased the number of social science postgraduate students enrolled in several partner institutions. There can be little doubt that NIRSA has acted as a catalyst for the improvement and enhancement of graduate research training in the social sciences in Ireland. On the basis of interviews during the review it is clear that the institute is very highly regarded by the PhD students, both from Sociology and Geography that participate in its programmes, and is recognised by them as providing a highly supportive environment for undertaking postgraduate research.

In September 2009, NIRSA launched an ambitious new MA programme in Society and Space, delivered in conjunction with the Departments of Geography and Sociology. We note that the first cohort of 15 students are all NUIM graduates, and suggest that there is scope for greater recruitment beyond NUIM.

Future developments proposed include an ISSP Smart Society/Smart Economy PTRL15 bid, and an Erasmus Mundus international GREP proposal with three other European universities.

### **3. Research and Scholarship**

NIRSA has been immensely successful in leveraging its initial €2.7m PRTLTI core funding, having directly and indirectly generated €19.7m in research income, from 186 projects (not including NCG monies). Of great significance, the National Centre for Geocomputation (NCG) was established as the result of a successful NIRSA application to the Science Foundation Ireland. An issue to be resolved is that it is not always the case that members' grants are credited to or administered through NIRSA. Clarity is required on this topic and unambiguous rules as to the attribution of awards (and their associated overheads) would be useful.

NIRSA's academic outputs are also impressive, with NIRSA members having published 47 books, 183 refereed journal articles, 185 book chapters and 346 other publications. Of the journal articles, there is a good spread across both Irish and international journals. 686 papers have been presented by NIRSA members at international conferences, and 395 at national conferences. NIRSA has been proactive in organising workshops and conferences (some 55 to date), and its seminar series has attracted 100 external speakers, including a significant number of leading names from European and North American geography and sociology. NIRSA has also hosted 27 Visiting Fellows, with a number of them commending the vibrancy of NIRSA's intellectual environment.

NIRSA has established two significant national research resources, the All-Island Research Observatory (AIRO) and the Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA). The former provides all-Ireland spatial data sets and analysis tools for the first time, through an online interface, while the latter archives social science data in media other than machine-readable datasets.

The focus of research through the three inter-related clusters of (i) Building knowledge Economies, (ii) Sustaining Communities and (iii) Planning Environments is viewed as appropriate for the interdisciplinary nature of the institute.

### **4. Service to Academic and Other Communities**

Involvement in the NIRSA partnership has been of demonstrable benefit to the partner institutions beyond NUIM – ie Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Institute of Technology, Sligo, and Queen's University Belfast. In the cases of MIC Limerick and IT Sligo, involvement has helped to strengthen their social science research culture, while QUB have benefitted in particular in the planning area, with NIRSA having facilitated their involvement in cross-border research.

In the leading role it has taken in the ISSP, NIRSA has made a significant contribution to social science research and graduate training in Ireland. And both AIRO and IQDA are national research resources available to the Irish academic community.

Beyond the academy, the applied research on spatial planning and community development that NIRSA has prosecuted has enabled it to develop fruitful links with the public and third sectors in Ireland and Northern Ireland, and it has been able to contribute to policy initiatives at scales from the local (particularly within Greater Dublin), to the national and inter-jurisdictional. Significant inputs to policy in a range of areas have been among NIRSA's most important research outputs. Its contribution is highly valued by user organisations, for example with respect to its applied research on balanced spatial development and on small area statistics. In addition to organising workshops and conferences targeted at practitioner audiences, NIRSA also prosecutes knowledge transfer through the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD), in which it is the core partner, which undertakes cross-border spatial planning research and provides advanced training to the public and private sectors.

## ***5. Overall Assessment of NIRSA's performance***

Overall, NIRSA has performed excellently, and it is making a significant contribution to all three of the University's strategic goals, of student learning, of knowledge creation and dissemination, and of contributing to social, political and economic development. As a research centre on regional and spatial analysis, it has an extremely strong brand and national reputation, both within academic and policy/practitioner circles; it is demonstrably Ireland's premier research centre within its field. Further, NIRSA has acted as a catalyst for up-grading the quality of graduate education in the social sciences in Ireland, through its lead role in the ISSP.

It is more difficult to gauge NIRSA's international reputation, though its involvement in the European spatial planning network, ESPON, the quality of the visiting fellows and seminar presenters that it has been able to attract, and its published outputs in international journals all suggest that it is attaining international recognition, an impressive achievement for a research centre established only ten years ago.

## ***6. Issues of governance and resourcing***

NIRSA's establishment and subsequent expansions have been underpinned by successive rounds of PRTLTI funding. Valuable as such funding has been, it creates issues of uncertainty and the risk of contraction when particular cycles of funding come to an end. Putting NIRSA on a more stable institutional footing, not just as a short-term response to the current funding gap but as a longer-term recognition of the need to provide some mainstream, core-funding from the University, should be a priority for NUIM. We recommend that the best approach would be for NIRSA to retain its existing organisational status, but with some realistic level of core funding to underpin its research activities (i.e. 'option 2' in the possible scenarios outlined in the Self-Assessment Report), in the form of the Director's post, an admin support post, and perhaps two additional academic posts which would be research-focussed.

Given that NIRSA operates as a shared Institute between Geography and Sociology, having one of the additional posts in each of the two Departments would make sense, with them acting effectively as Deputy Directors of NIRSA, and acting as the bridge between NIRSA and the two Departments. These additional posts would need to be sufficiently senior to take part of the burden of generating research income for NIRSA from the shoulders of the current Director. If the rationale for these two additional posts were agreed, it would make sense for one of them (the post in Geography) to have a spatial planning focus, given the gap left by the retirement of Brendan Bartley, with the other post (in Sociology) designed to strengthen the linkage to and involvement of Sociology in NIRSA.

For those activities of NIRSA that have clear benefits to Irish social sciences, notably the ISSP and infrastructure resources such as the AIRO and IQDA, there is clearly a need to re-establish longer-term external funding once the current cycle of funding ends. NUIM core funding should be directed at NIRSA's core activities, as a research centre and centre of high quality graduate education in the spatial analysis/planning field.

## ***7. Future developmental opportunities***

There are grounds for believing that NIRSA could in future further leverage its growing international reputation, for example through increased involvement in EU Framework Research programmes and in international recruitment to its graduate education programmes, at both MA and PhD levels. As part of an internationalisation strategy, there would be scope for exploring the possibility of establishing one or more strategic partnerships, at a global level (e.g. UK-Europe/North America/Asia), encompassing both research collaboration and graduate education, such as joint MA programmes.

One issue concerning future development options is how far to retain NIRSA's existing substantive regional/spatial focus, with its three clusters of research on building knowledge economies, planning environments and sustaining communities, versus the possibility of evolving into a more broadly-based 'social science research institute'. The success of NIRSA's leading role in establishing the ISSP would give credibility to the latter option, however, there would be a risk of losing focus and momentum if NIRSA became too broad and attempted to take on too wide a remit. We recommend that NIRSA should retain a strong focus on its core specialisation in regional/spatial analysis and planning, but that there would nonetheless be scope for taking on additional themes, with climate change and the policy responses and adaptation to it being one obvious possibility that would fit well with its existing substantive remit. We note that if NIRSA were to move towards a more broadly-based social science institute, the existing acronym could easily be recycled, with a title such as the National Institute for Research in Social Analysis! This would keep the established brand but be somewhat more inclusive.

In summary, NIRSA has had considerable success to date in its first decade, and has established a very strong national reputation and a growing international reputation. With the appropriate institutional support, NIRSA could in the coming decade contribute significantly to the achievement of NUIM's strategic goals with respect to the provision of taught postgraduate programmes (SG2), the provision of graduate education programmes of international standing (SG3), and the development of research programmes and knowledge transfer initiatives in targeted areas that enable NUIM to become a national leader, and an international centre of excellence (SG4). The strategic benefits to the university of ensuring the sustainability of this institute are clear, and those benefits should not be lost, even in the current economic circumstances. NIRSA is already the established national leader in its field, and has the clear potential to become an international centre of excellence that can further enhance the reputation of NUI Maynooth.

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**Professor Andrew Gillespie**  
**External Reviewer**

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**Professor Ray O'Neill**  
**Internal Reviewer**