



**Maynooth  
University**  
National University  
of Ireland Maynooth

**Ollscoil Mhá Nuad**

**Maynooth University**

## **QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND ASSURANCE**

### **PEER REVIEW GROUP REPORT**

#### ***DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY***

**ACADEMIC YEAR 2017/18**

June 2018

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## 1. Introduction

This Peer Review Group (PRG) report is provided for the Department of Geography at Maynooth University. The PRG members were supplied with copies of the internal self-assessment report (SAR) in both hard copy and digital form prior to on-site panel meetings and a tour of facilities during 25-26 April 2018.

Meetings were held with the Head of Department, senior management of the University, academic and research staff (including postdoctoral researchers and contract staff), administrative, technical, and support staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students, and selected institutional stakeholders. External stakeholders involved in research collaborations were consulted via telephone. A tour was also taken of some office, teaching and research spaces managed by the Department (see Appendix 1 for details).

## 2. Peer Review Group Members

Name	Affiliation	Role
<b>Prof. Jo Sharp</b>	University of Glasgow	External Reviewer
<b>Prof. Rob Wilby</b>	Loughborough University	External Reviewer
<b>Prof. Kevin Kavanagh</b>	Maynooth Univeristy	Internal Reviewer
<b>Dr. Kylie Jarrett</b>	Maynooth University	Internal Reviewer

## 3. Timetable of the site visit

The timetable provided for a Departmental site visit of 30 minutes which was inadequate for viewing all offices and laboratories of a Department that is based on two separate sites within the University.

Some aspects of the timetable could have been more helpful to the PRG. Most significantly, given the importance of relations with Research Institutes at Maynooth, it would have been greatly appreciated if representatives of the Department's research institutes (CHG, NCG, ICARUS) had been available for discussions during this visit. Conversely, meetings with colleagues from Departments/Offices outside of Geography was of limited use as sufficient context was provided in the SAR. Consultations with some external stakeholders was also of limited use to the committee, as it was unclear what role they were to play in the review and the PRG was not provided with sufficient information to guide the discussion. We suggest that future reviews provide more time for the PRG to engage with Departmental staff and students, with the opportunity to call for additional, contextual material if necessary.

## **4. Peer Review Methodology**

### **4.1 Site Visit**

A diverse range of stakeholders were involved but there was no representation from NCG or NIRSA staff in key discussions that related to the research institutes. We would have welcomed more time with undergraduate and research committees rather than the range of external stakeholders and other University Departments/Offices.

It would have been valuable to see the principles of the new Strategic Plan in order to inform our assessment.

The support arrangements for the visit and staff support were very good.

### **4.2 Preparation of the Peer Review Group Report**

A draft report was produced collaboratively by the PRG during the site visit and further edited in the following weeks before this final version was submitted.

## **5. Overall Assessment**

### **5.1 Summary Assessment of the Department**

The Geography Department at MU is a healthy Department with excellent recruitment at undergraduate level, proven ability to achieve good learning outcomes, and an excellent research record both in terms of publications and research funding. Most impressive is the strong upward trajectory of research outputs and funding, achieved despite a very demanding teaching programme. Feedback from undergraduate and postgraduate students was extremely positive and, in particular, complimented the Department on the proactive approach to student care. The Department has a well-established international reputation for its work in a variety of areas, good success in attracting research funding, and is the premier Geography Department in Ireland. The Department should be commended for this remarkable performance in the context of an uncertain and challenging economic environment.

The Department has the opportunity to build on these achievements by providing a broader range of learning opportunities for undergraduate and postgraduate students. This could be achieved by further developing engagement with the Science Faculty, particularly the Biology Department, as well as by deepening the integration between physical and human geography. The apparent inadequacy of many teaching, office and research spaces, as well as poorly integrated IT systems, presents significant obstacles to the day-to-day delivery of research and teaching, as well as to the strategic development of multi-disciplinary research agendas within Geography and beyond.

The PGR suggests that the Department reflect on the balance between research output and research quality to develop a research strategy that highlights intellectual contribution in addition to research metrics.

## 5.2 Self-Assessment Report

The Self-Assessment Report was extremely thorough. The document clearly evidences a Department achieving excellent student outcomes and supports, as well as a rich, engaged research and teaching culture. However, while the report offered valuable reflection on the previous years, it was difficult to get a sense of the future strategy for the Department, particularly in relation to research, and how this was informed by the insights from the review.

The lack of integration of the IT systems hinders the generation of basic metrics to use as a comparator (both within the institution and with equivalent institutions). Often, statistics were presented in isolation which made review, particularly by External members of the panel, very difficult, and created unnecessary work for Department administrators. There are also likely impacts on the institutional quality reporting (and will present challenges for Athena Swan data collection and comparison). Access to more accurate, timely and comparative metrics, would also help to better benchmark progress and to identify emergent challenges for teaching and research delivery.

## 6. Findings of the Peer Review Group: Commendations and Recommendations

### 6.1 Overview

Research output has increased and diversified amongst the staff of the Department since the last report but citation counts have not grown at the same rate.

There is a pro-active approach to large-group teaching and use of digital learning technologies by certain members of the Department but this could be developed further (see recommendations).

Students report a significant degree of satisfaction with the programmes offered by the Department at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Assessment and the variety of modules are diverse and appropriate. Policies relating to timeliness of feedback and provision of lecture information through the VLE and using lecture capture systems could be developed. These would help to ensure consistency across the Department and to support students with specific learning needs, in particular those facing challenges that affect their attendance.

The adequacy of facilities and resourcing require urgent attention. The physical and technical infrastructure of the campus, in particular IT systems, are impacting significantly on the everyday running of the Department by introducing redundant work, limited transparency, or even the possibility of data errors.

The benefits of co-locating ICARUS with the rest of the Department (to improve cohesion and collaboration) and of providing improved laboratory facilities for physical geography were also apparent. The challenges of managing a Department split across the campus became apparent on the campus tour. Concerns about the impact of a teaching Department distributed across campus, in particular, were voiced by all members of the Department. Postgraduate and postdoctoral researchers also raised concerns about impacts on their cohesion as a cohort and as members of the Department.

Significant issues were identified in relation to physical access to the Department and some learning environments for students with mobility issues. The inability of students with limited mobility to access Departmental offices on the second floor of Rhetoric House was a serious cause of concern to the PRG and should be remedied immediately.

## 6.2 Commendations

Geography at MU is internationally recognised for the quality of research, both in human and physical geography. The recent improvements in metrics across the board are outstanding. It is clear that the Department is highly regarded across the institution and was described by one senior member of the University as “the jewel in the crown”.

At the same time, the Department should be commended for the creation of a rich, student-centred environment. In the face of large class sizes, staff have sought to innovate. Students across all levels unanimously expressed their appreciation for the support given in all circumstances by academic and non-academic staff. One told us “we could not get more support than we do” whilst another said “it is a very lovely Department to be part of”.

The panel were very impressed by the expanded role Department administrators had initiated with regard to student care. This is in addition to their management duties and clear desire for ongoing development of these roles. These staff members clearly play a critical role in linking students with the Department. Development of this pool of expertise should be enabled and utilised more effectively in highlighting the Department and in its outreach activities.

Students are engaged in a range of voluntary activities on campus and are described as “good citizens”.

The degree of public engagement in research, teaching and including voluntary work through the Green Campus initiative by both staff and students, is noteworthy and brings value. Stakeholders commended the Department for the policy relevance and commitment of Departmental research.

## 6.3 Recommendations for Improvement

The tables below categorise recommendations as either Institutional/strategic (indicated by I) or Departmental (indicated by D), in line with the guidance accompanying this template.

## Institutional (I) and Departmental (D) Strategic Recommendations

Number	Recommendation	Additional PRG Comments
<b>S.1</b>	<b>Sustainability</b>	
S.1.1	Develop a 5 year research strategy that emphasises key areas of strengths and ways to support emerging potential, including a hiring strategy and long-term plan for investment in capacity building. (D and, in response, I)	To achieve sustainability, and to support intellectual leadership in disciplinary agendas, it may be necessary to prioritise quality over quantity. The MU VPR informed the PGR that from 2018 he will require research plans from each Department, which the panel was assured will inform future hiring.
S.1.2	Instigate professional development and review processes to enable work planning and prioritisation for all staff in the Department and Institution. (D and I)	This is related to sustainability as a supportive, developmental and collegial process rather than one focused on performance monitoring.
S.1.3	Plan a Department away day to define transparent workload model principles to reflect teaching, research, enterprise and impact, mentoring, doctoral supervision and administrative roles. (D)	To sustain transparency and collegiality as well as to identify areas for rationalization in teaching and research delivery.
<b>S.2</b>	<b>Access</b>	

S.2.1	<p>Establish a lecture capture system (video and/or audio) to enable remote access (space/time). (D)</p> <p>Explore possibility of part-time provision of undergraduate degree programmes. (I)</p>	<p>Recognising that a significant number of students are missing substantial parts of certain modules (due to diverse student backgrounds, financial constraints and issues of space on campus amongst other reasons) suggestions are being made to mitigate against poor student performance in some modules that show high failure rates.</p>
S.2.2	<p>Expand learning and study spaces for undergraduates and postgraduates on campus. (I)</p>	<p>Undergraduate representatives expressed frustration about the lack of available learning and study spaces. This is clearly impeding their engagement with the Department and the University, and thus likely impacting their performance.</p>
S.2.3	<p>Address urgently the lack of access to the Department offices in Rhetoric House and some learning spaces for people with mobility issues. (I)</p>	<p>In addition to breaching equality policies, the fact that such students are unable to access the key pastoral role played by Department administrators doubly discriminates against them, and is a matter of considerable concern.</p>
S.2.4	<p>Provide lecture content on Moodle in advance of the timetabled class. (D)</p>	<p>It is usual good pedagogical practice to have these resources available at least 24 hours in advance of the class.</p>
S.3	<p><b>Curriculum reform</b></p>	
S.3.1	<p>Rationalise UG and PG module provision to free up time for research and public engagement activities. (D)</p>	<p>Suggestions from the panel include:</p> <p>Considering team teaching to provide greater resilience and flexibility for buyouts;</p>



		<p>Greater sharing of modules across postgraduate programmes;</p> <p>Standardise student work required across modules of the same credit weighting;</p> <p>Establishing minimum student numbers for module viability.</p>
<b>S.3.2</b>	Establish BSc pathway. (D and I)	Developing links with the Faculty of Science will support the quality of students with science skills in the Geography undergraduate programme with the potential to feed into the physical Geography postgraduate programmes. Links with the Biology Department should be developed as a matter of urgency.
<b>S.3.3</b>	Rebrand the MA in Human Geography. (D)	To emphasise the unique offering of this Masters provision the panel suggests something like MA in Geography, Social Justice and Public Engagement.
<b>S.3.4</b>	Formalise existing teaching and learning arrangements such as policies relating to dates of assessment, timeliness and quality of feedback. (D)	Although there are good practices in the Department, this is inconsistent.
<b>S.3.5</b>	Embed career development in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. (D and I)	Undergraduate students had little knowledge of career pathways or how to build a portfolio of skills for their future employment.
<b>S.3.6</b>	Expand practical and research skills training in undergraduate and postgraduate modules. (D)	Examples that students raised include SPSS, NVivo, field instrumentation, R programming. Establishing a permanent weather station on campus would be a significant training, outreach and research resource.

<b>S.4</b>	<b>Enabling environment</b>	
<b>S.4.1</b>	Upgrade all University IT systems (research, teaching, examination, timetable, student information, finance and welfare) such that they are fit for purpose. (I)	The present systems are a source of inefficiencies, duplication of effort and potential for introduction of errors due to mutual incompatibilities. Moreover, at present it would appear that the institution is unable to efficiently generate standard reporting metrics and comparators.
<b>S.4.2</b>	Devolve budgets and staffing powers to HoD to improve flexibility in personnel management in respect to research buyouts. (I)	The present system would appear to dis-incentivise research grant submission.
<b>S.4.3</b>	Co-locate the Department in a building that provides sufficient and appropriate space for teaching and research activities. (I)	The location of Departmental offices on two separate sites is a major impediment to developing cohesion, particularly between physical and human geography, and reduces the efficiency of teaching and research programmes.
<b>S.4.4</b>	Invest in further administrative support in the Department. (I)	This will free up research time for academic staff by transferring activities such as marketing, media, timetabling, etc. to dedicated / appropriately skilled administrative personnel. This could also apply to student recruitment and outreach activities.
<b>S.4.5</b>	The University needs more effectively to highlight to prospective undergraduate students the excellent teaching and research programmes of the Department. (I)	The benefits of taking Geography at undergraduate level are not apparent from the content of the University website. A greater effort in publicising the achievements of the Department is essential for attracting highly motivated students.

## APPENDIX 1: GEOGRAPHY DEPARTMENT: PEER REVIEW GROUP SITE VISIT TIMETABLE

Tuesday , 24 <sup>th</sup> April, 2018		
Time	Description	Venue
19:00	Convening of the Peer Review Group.  Briefing by: Professor Aidan Mulkeen, Vice President Academic and Registrar PRG agrees a Chair, and discuss the visit. Identification of any aspects requiring clarification or additional information.  Dinner for members of the Peer Review Group & University Executive Members	Booked Carton House     Aidan Mulkeen Mark Maguire Kevin Kavanagh Kylie Jarrett Joanne Sharp
Wednesday, 25 <sup>th</sup> April, 2018		
Time	Description	Venue
8:30- 9:00	Convening of Peer Review Group	Council Room
9:00 -9:45	Professor Gerry Kearns, Head of Department	Council Room
9:45 -10:30	Group meeting with all Department staff (Head of Department recused)	Council Room
10:30 -11:00	Tour of facilities of Department, escorted by Dr Ronan Foley	Department Facilities
11:00 -11:30	Refreshments	Council Room
11:30-12:00	<b>Staff Group 1/Postgrad Committee</b> Dr Rowan Fealy Dr Ronan Foley Dr Conor Murphy Professor Karen Till	Council Room
12:00-12:30	<b>Staff Group 2/Admin &amp; Technical Staff</b> Mr Michael Bolger Ms Neasa Hogan Ms Una Holton Ms Jennifer Lloyd-Hughes Ms Corrine Voces	Council Room

External Reviewers: Professor Rob Wilby, Loughborough University, Professor Joanne Sharp, Glasgow University  
 Internal Reviewers: Professor Kevin Kavanagh, Biology Department, Dr Kylie Jarrett, Media Studies Department

12:30-1:00	<b>Staff Group 3/Postdoc &amp; Contract Staff</b> Dr John Coll Dr Lidia Manzo Mr Michael Murphy Dr Simon Noone Ms Karen O'Regan Dr David Smyth	
13.00 -14:00	Working Lunch	Reserve Pugin Hall
14:00 -14:30	<b>Meet with Students:</b> Undergraduate Students/10	Council Room
14.30.-15.00	Postgraduate Students/7	
15.00-15.30	PhD/6	
15.30-16.00	Ms Niamh Lynch, Director of Student Services	Council Room
16.00-16:15	Break	Council Room
16.15-16.30	<b>External Stakeholder/Phone call</b> Mr Xavier Monteys, Senior Geologist, Geological Society of Ireland, Research Collaborator	
16.30-17.00	Dr Joe Larragy, Applied Social Studies	Council Room
17.00.-17.30	Ms Lisa O'Regan, eLearning Development Officer, Teaching & Learning	Council Room
18.00	PRG meeting – identification of any areas for clarification and finalisation of tasks for following day	Council Room
19.00	PRG private working dinner	<b>Booked Carton House</b>

External Reviewers: Professor Rob Wilby, Loughborough University, Professor Joanne Sharp, Glasgow University  
Internal Reviewers: Professor Kevin Kavanagh, Biology Department, Dr Kylie Jarrett, Media Studies Department

**Thursday, 26<sup>th</sup> April, 2018**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Venue</b>
8:30-9:00	Convening of Peer Review Group	Council Room
9:00-9:30	Dr Mark Maguire, Dean Faculty of Social Sciences	Council Room
9.30-10.00	<b>Staff Group 4/Undergrad Committee</b> Dr Ro Charlton Dr Alistair Fraser Dr Paul Gibson Dr Martina Roche Dr Helen Shaw Professor Jan Rigby Dr Chris Van Egeraat	Council Room
10.00-10.30	<b>Staff Group 5/Athena Swan Group</b> Professor Kath Browne Dr Ronan Foley Professor Gerry Kearns Ms Claire McGing Dr Martina Roche Ms Aoife Sheridan	
10.30-11.00	<b>Staff Group 6/Research Committee</b> Professor Kath Browne Professor Mary Gilmartin Dr Gerard McCarthy	
11.00-11.30	Break	Council Room
11.30-12.00	Professor Ray O'Neill, Vice President for Research	Council Room
12.00-12.15	<b>External Stakeholders/Phone call</b> Mr Cian O'Brien, Artistic Director Project Arts Centre, Art and Geography Projects	Council Room
12.15-12.30	Dr David Meredith, Senior Researcher Teagasc, Research Partner	

External Reviewers: Professor Rob Wilby, Loughborough University, Professor Joanne Sharp, Glasgow University  
Internal Reviewers: Professor Kevin Kavanagh, Biology Department, Dr Kylie Jarrett, Media Studies Department

12.30-13.00	Professor Sharon Todd, Head of Department Education	Council Room
13:00-14:00	Working Lunch	Pugin Hall
14:00-16:30	Preparation of Exit Presentation	Council Room
16:30-17:00	Exit presentation to all departmental staff, made by the Chair of the PRG, summarising the principal commendations and recommendations of the Peer Review Group	Council Room
17:00	Refreshments and Exit of the PRG	Council Room

External Reviewers: Professor Rob Wilby, Loughborough University, Professor Joanne Sharp, Glasgow University  
Internal Reviewers: Professor Kevin Kavanagh, Biology Department, Dr Kylie Jarrett, Media Studies Department