



**Maynooth
University**
National University
of Ireland Maynooth

Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

Maynooth University

QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND ASSURANCE

PEER REVIEW GROUP REPORT

SOCIOLOGY

ACADEMIC YEAR 2016/17

Date 26 April 2017

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1. Introduction

The review included reading a comprehensive Departmental Self-Assessment Report with Appendices, a document outlining the University's overall Quality Assurance strategy and a Site Visit. The latter involved meeting a representative selection of undergraduate and postgraduate students, the vast majority of academic staff both individually and in a group context, administrative staff and relevant members of University Management. We were able to inspect Departmental facilities and draw on the knowledge of the Head of Department as required. In terms of its provenance, the Department of Sociology has strong claims to be the oldest in Ireland, and to be currently the leading Department of Sociology on the island of Ireland. It also offers Politics to a minority of its students and is about to make a significant contribution to a new Criminology Degree led by the Department of Law. It is central to the Faculty of Social Science and has historically generated a number of cognate departments in the Faculty; Applied Social Studies, Adult and Community Education and Anthropology. The review took place between 28th and 30th March 2017.

Peer Review Group Members

Name	Affiliation	Role
Prof Liam O'Dowd	Queen's University Belfast	External Reviewer (Chair)
Prof Steve Garner	Birmingham City University	External Reviewer
Dr Deirdre Desmond	Maynooth University	Internal Reviewer
Dr Catherine Hurley	Maynooth University	Internal Reviewer

2. Timetable of the site visit

The timetable for the site visit is included as Appendix A. The timetable provided adequate time to meet staff, students, administrators and management and allowed us to visit departmental facilities.

3. Peer Review Methodology

4.1 Site Visit

The site visit was very satisfactory. We were furnished in advance with a highly accessible and well-structured 'Self Assessment Review', which outlined clearly the activities and record of the department since 2008. A successful Departmental 'Away Day' in January 2017 provided the basis for the review. During our visit, we made a small number of requests for

additional documentation, and these were met promptly and very efficiently, as was our request for a meeting with Human Resources. We were able to speak to the great majority of academic staff both individually and in a group format. We also met key members of University management, the Director of MUSSI, and a good spread of undergraduate and postgraduate students in sociology and politics at different stages in their academic course.

We had discussions with a number of recent PhD graduates now serving as adjunct lecturers, and with the two Departmental administrators. We were also able to speak by phone with a number of external stakeholders nominated by the department. We were given a detailed tour of the Departmental Building. At the outset of the visit, the Head of Department provided a very useful orientation to the Department and was continuously available for consultation. Finally, we received regular briefings from the Director of Strategy and Quality throughout our visit.

4.1.1 Preparation of the Peer Review Group Report

The PRG panel was chaired by Professor Liam O'Dowd who played a key role in co-ordinating the panel's findings. There was clear consensus amongst the panel on the key issues identified by the review.

4. Overall Assessment

4.1 Summary Assessment of the Department

The department is an impressive, efficiently-run unit. It is teaching-intensive with a high staff-student ratio, and very large numbers of students in sociology. It has a highly impressive research culture which marks it out as perhaps the leading sociology department on the island of Ireland. The recently established politics degree plays a subsidiary role in the department, with a small number of staff and a relatively low number of students remaining in the programme after first year. One of the challenges is how to embed the politics programme within the departmental offerings in ways which are equitable to staff and students alike. There are also some challenges around inclusivity and staff development, which are not uncommon in teaching-intensive and research active departments elsewhere. The most glaring and worrying departmental problem is the poor state of its offices, which are sub-standard and in urgent need of attention from the university.

4.2 Self-Assessment Report

The Self-Assessment Report (SAR) was a highly accessible and coherent account of the department's activities and priorities. Building on a departmental 'away day' it demonstrated an impressive input from staff as well as a considered reflection on the department's mission, strengths and challenges. It demonstrated a willingness to monitor the social composition of first year students and the relationship between student attendance and degree performance. The PRG appreciated its scope and directness. We requested a small amount of supplementary information, such as external examiners' reports and student handbooks, which were furnished to us expeditiously and efficiently.

Findings

6.1 Overview

Teaching, learning, assessment and student feedback

The department provides a supportive environment for a diverse student body with complex needs. The complexity and diversity of the work of the Department is coupled with an upward trend in FTE at the undergraduate level, input to the provision of Criminology from 2017-2018, as well as continued provision of taught MA offerings. These developments afford opportunities and challenges for the Department and the University. In particular, the physical infrastructure (see *Resources and Facilities below*) and additional human resource requirements, at both administrative and academic grades, are critical to improving the quality of the entire student educational experience.

The sociology degree offers a wide range of modules with appropriate coverage of the breath of the discipline and clear progression across the three years of the programme. The politics programme has a narrower range of modules due to the size of its staffing complement. Some extremely large class sizes have been problematical; the new first year structure (2016-2017) has improved this situation somewhat. Numerous modules are assessed *via* terminal examination only; this approach is driven by attempts to manage workload rather than pedagogy, and has been repeatedly highlighted as a concern in reports from the External Examiners.

Special topic groups in 3rd year offer students a valuable learning experience as evidenced in discussions with students as well as reports from External Examiners. There is a diversity of practice in terms of supervision and feedback, which require review. More systematic oversight is needed in relation to ethical issues for student projects, in particular in the politics programme. Adjunct lecturers are contributing substantial energy and time to the special topics and could benefit from formal induction to the Department, as well as structured guidance on norms and expectations in terms of delivery and feedback to students. In assessing the special topics dissertations, the extent of guidance and feedback given should be considered in awarding grades. The first and second year tutorial system is highly resource and time intensive and may not be sustainable in the longer term; the Department may wish to consider diversification of delivery.

Student handbooks are of a very high quality; the students consider them very helpful resources and are appreciative of the clarity and comprehensiveness of content.

The institution wide system of student feedback (SELE) is not fit for purpose from either staff and student perspectives. Both students and staff remarked on the unsatisfactory nature of course evaluation instruments and low student response rates.

Given the size and diversity of the student body in sociology, considerable pastoral care is needed and provided; however this puts additional time pressures on the staff most directly

involved. Student attendance at lectures is a perennial problem although this is a common problem in other universities also. In Maynooth, it may be exacerbated by the composition of the student body. The Self Assessment Report provided some evidence of a correlation between poor attendance and poor degree performance. This problem provides one of the main challenges for staff in delivering degree courses.

Research activities and output

The department has generated an impressive range of publications (an average of 37 per annum over six years), research and grant income in a teaching intensive department.

There is a good mix of funded and non-externally funded research and challenges in facilitating both, e.g., *via* protected research time and more appropriate travel grants.

The departmental research culture is strong as evidenced in the impressive output of completed PhDs. There are challenges in maintaining this output and in sustaining a viable MA programme.

There is clear evidence of active engagement with MUSSI, but challenges remain in how to progress it. Overcoming them is as much the responsibility of MUSSI as the department, and will be facilitated by clear and timely communication. The department has considerable potential to be a major contributor to a more coherent university research strategy in the future.

There is excellent engagement by sociology and politics staff with the media in raising the public profile of the department and its component disciplines.

Resources and Facilities

We found the departmental offices to be entirely unacceptable. They are pervaded by an oppressive smell, probably related to dampness and present urgent health and safety issues that have not been addressed by the university. Overall access to the building is poor not least for individuals with disabilities; the lifts do not work well, and the whole building is unsuitable for staff and students alike.

6.2 Commendations

We commend the department for its commitment to the pastoral care of a large student body with diverse and complex demands.

The department is adaptive, flexible and agile in responding to institutional initiatives.

We are impressed by the engagement and activity of staff on University-level committees and in wider initiatives

We commend the way in which staff have developed a public and media –profile for the department.

We were impressed by the efficiency with which the department is run, and by the way staff work with departmental administrators to service departmental needs. The departmental administrators are highly efficient and professional.

We commend the strength of the research culture in the department at staff and post-graduate level.

6.3 Recommendations for Improvement

Institutional Recommendations

Number	Recommendation	Additional PRG Comments
I.1	New accommodation is required as a matter of urgency.	As a learning, research and work environment, the Auxillia building is fundamentally unfit for purpose and presents significant health and safety issues.
I.2	The staff-student ratio should not be increased.	More academic staff are needed in order to maintain the level of teaching and student-centred activities that currently characterise the department.
I.3	There is an urgent need to clarify University research policy, the role of research institutes and their relationships with departments.	

Recommendations to the Department

Number	Recommendation	Additional PRG Comments
D.1	We recommend that care be taken to develop inclusiveness by recognising all staff research interests, particularly those whose areas are not central to the department's main clusters.	
D.2	The department needs to develop further a flexible and multi-layered research strategy that includes protected time for research.	
D.3	Potential collaborations might be developed with other cognate disciplines, with a view to sharing expertise and resources. For example, postgraduate led inter-departmental research seminars might be encouraged.	
D.4	The department should consider introducing a structured system of staff mentoring for career development.	
D.5	There needs to be a formal ongoing conversation about the relationship between sociology and politics. This should encompass both the identity of the students on both the Politics and degree, and the roles and responsibilities and workloads of staff.	
D.6	We recommend a regular review of teaching and administration duties aiming for equity and transparency in distribution.	
D.7	We suggest the introduction of a module co-ordinator for the Special Topics module, with responsibility for ensuring consistency in the process of supervision and marking.	Currently there is too much variability between tutors in terms of how much input they have into students' written work. Review of the application of ethics process for student

		research projects is also needed.
D.8	We recognise the extremely efficient administrative team that supports most activities in a large department; a review of whether extra support is needed is required.	

APPENDIX 1: DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY: PEER REVIEW GROUP SITE VISIT TIMETABLE

Tuesday, 28th March, 2017														
Time	Description	Venue												
19:00	<p>Convening of the Peer Review Group.</p> <p>Briefing by: Siobhán Harkin, Director of Strategy and Quality PRG agrees a Chair, and discuss the visit. Identification of any aspects requiring clarification or additional information.</p> <p>Dinner for members of the Peer Review Group and Director for Strategy & Quality & University Executive Member</p>	<p>Booked Carton House Hotel at 7pm for 6 people under the name Harkin</p> <p>Siobhan Harkin Maurice Devlin Liam O'Dowd Steve Garner Catherine Hurley Deirdre Desmond</p>												
Wednesday, 29th March, 2017														
Time	Description	Venue												
8:15 - 8.45	Convening of Peer Review Group; Director of Quality available to group	Council Room												
8:45 - 9:30	Professor Mary Corcoran, Head of Department	Council Room												
9:30 - 10:30	Group meeting with all Department staff (Head of Department recused)	Council Room												
10:30 - 11:15	Visit to core facilities of Department, escorted by Professor Mary Corcoran	Auxilia /Library/North Campus												
11:15 - 11:30	Refreshments	Council Room												
11:30-11.50 11.50-12.10 12.10-12.30 12.30-12.50 12.50-13.10	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Parallel Session1/CR</th> <th>Parallel Session2/PB</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Dr Delma Byrne</td> <td>Dr Colin Coulter</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Prof Honor Fagan</td> <td>Dr Brian Conway</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Dr Becky King O'Riain</td> <td>Prof John O'Brennan</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Dr Aphra Kerr</td> <td>Prof Sean O'Riain</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Dr Pauline Cullen</td> <td>Dr Barry Cannon</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Parallel Session1/CR	Parallel Session2/PB	Dr Delma Byrne	Dr Colin Coulter	Prof Honor Fagan	Dr Brian Conway	Dr Becky King O'Riain	Prof John O'Brennan	Dr Aphra Kerr	Prof Sean O'Riain	Dr Pauline Cullen	Dr Barry Cannon	Council Room & Presidents Boardroom Booked
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13.30 - 14:30	Working Lunch	Reserve Pugin Hall/Table with service for Quality/4 people												
14.30-15.15 15.15-16.00	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Meet with Students: Parallel Session 1/CR</th> <th>Parallel Session 2/PB</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Undergrad Soc (12)</td> <td>Undergrad Pol (10) L/P</td> </tr> <tr> <td>PGT (6) W</td> <td>PhD (5)</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Meet with Students: Parallel Session 1/CR	Parallel Session 2/PB	Undergrad Soc (12)	Undergrad Pol (10) L/P	PGT (6) W	PhD (5)	Council Room & Presidents Boardroom Booked						
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16:00-16:30	Break		Council Room
16:30-17:00	Parallel Session 1/CR Professor Linda Connolly Director MUSSI	Parallel Session 2/PB Professor Ray O'Neill, VP for Research	Council Room & PB Booked
17.00-17.30	Professor Aidan Mulkeen, VP Academic & Registrar	Professor Maurice Devlin, Faculty Dean	
17.30	PRG meeting – identification of any areas for clarification and finalisation of tasks for following day		Council Room
19:00	PRG private working dinner		Booked Carton House Hotel at 7pm for 4 people under the name Desmond

Thursday, 30th March, 2017

Time	Description		Venue
8:30-9:00	Convening of Peer Review Group		Council Room
9:00-9.20	External Stakeholder Calls Mr James Wickham, Director of TASC		Council Room
9.40-10.10	Mr Peter Miller, Senior HR Manager		Council Room
10.10-10.30	Break		Council Room
10:30-10.50 10.50-11.10 11.10-11.30 11.30-11.50 11.50-12.10	Parallel Session1/CR Ms Aine Edmonds & Ms Trish Connerty Professor Jane Gray Ms Michelle Maher Ms Patricia Kettle	Parallel Session2/RCR Dr Mary Benson Dr Laurence Cox Dr Eamon Slater Ms Clodagh O'Malley Gannon Dr Mary Murphy	Council Room & Registrars Conference Room Booked
12.30-13.00	Professor Brian Donnellan, Dean of International		Council Room
13:00-14:00	Working Lunch		Book Pugin Hall/Table booked with service for Quality, 4 people
14.15-14.30	External Stakeholder Ms Marian Quinn/Tallaght West Childhood Development Initiative Ph: 087 3158836		Council Room
14:30-16:30	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