



NUI MAYNOOTH

Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

DEPARTMENT OF PERSONNEL

QUALITY REVIEW 2001

PEER REVIEW REPORT 2001

Report of the External Assessors to the
Quality Assessment Review of the
Personnel Office at the
National University of Ireland, Maynooth
(NUIM)

June 2001

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The following report sets out the findings of the External Reviewers to the Quality Assurance Review of the Personnel Office at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM). The Review Group consisted of two internal and two external members:

Internal Members

Dr. W.J. Smyth - President, NUIM
Dr. Frank Mulligan - Vice President, NUIM

External Members

Ms. Margaret Ramsay - Head of Personnel, UCD
Mr. Brian Thornburgh, Staff Secretary Trinity College

- 1.2 In advance of the site visit, which took place from 19-21 June, each member of the Review Group was provided with a copy of the Self Assessment Report and a comprehensive set of supporting documentation.

A copy of the site visit programme is attached as Appendix 1.

- 1.3 The findings of the External Reviewers are based on a review of the Self Assessment Report and supporting documentation, combined with observations made and feedback received during the site visit. The site visit programme included meetings with internal members of the Review team, all staff of the Personnel Office, a group of newly appointed staff of the University, a group of Heads of Department / Professors of the University and a group of staff representatives. A meeting was held also with Mr Pat Dalton, Bursar.

- 1.4 Items of supplementary information were requested and supplied, including:
- Contracts of appointment and documentation issued on appointment;
 - Detailed terms of reference of the Human Resources Committee and sample agendas and minutes;
 - Draft job grading scheme for administrative staff;
 - Back copies of Staff Newsletter;
 - Details of Performance Development Review (PDR) scheme in the library; Breakdown of staff statistics;
 - Outline of Induction Programme for new staff

Copies of the supplementary information provided are included in the appendices

2. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS / OVERVIEW OF SITE VISIT

- 2.1 The Personnel Office seems to be highly efficient in all its operations and in all the services it provides. The staff are highly regarded by their customers, including staff and management of the University. During the course of the visit we heard them described as outstanding individuals with a high level of commitment to their jobs.

- 2.2 The staff of four appear to operate as a closely-knit team with effective communications, high levels of interaction and co-operation, with each having a good knowledge and understanding of the procedures operated. Staff, management and staff representatives find them accessible, approachable, responsive and efficient.
- 2.3 Staff of the Personnel Office must be complimented for their enthusiastic commitment to their jobs and the staff they serve. They seem to take on new functions with alacrity and apply the same diligence and efficiency to their operation. However, the University should consider the appropriateness of vesting some of the more recently acquired responsibilities, in particular the role of Returning Officer, in the Personnel Office. There is a danger that the Office could develop in an ad-hoc way with a collection of duties and responsibilities rather than as a human resources department which will support the University in developing well integrated and effective human resource policies and strategies. It is appreciated that the University's Act 1997 brought with it particular challenges for NUIM and duties and responsibilities were allocated in such a way as to assure immediate requirements were met. This approach served the University well at the time, but certain of those duties may need to be considered for the future.
- 2.4 A great deal of effort went into the preparation of the self assessment report. It was noted that all the staff of the Personnel Office attended a day-long workshop off campus and all were involved in the preparation of the report. The report was thorough in the detailed descriptions of the systems and procedures operated by the Office and included detailed documentation of all policies, procedures and agreements together with evaluations of key client groups of the services provided.
- 2.5 In summary, the Personnel Office is highly effective and efficient in all the services and functions it currently provides. Some recommendations which may assist in building on this efficiency and ensuring that high standards are maintained are proposed in the following paragraphs.

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

The following paragraphs contain some general comments, which relate to the role and positioning of the Personnel Office within the University and to the range of functions which a Personnel Office should encompass. They are matters for discussion at an institutional level, in consultation with the Personnel Officer.

- 3.1 The location of the role of the Returning Officer in the Personnel Office should be reconsidered. It served a purpose at the time but is not logically located in Personnel and might deflect Personnel from its core role and impede it from developing its contribution to Human Resources management within the University.
- 3.2 It is unusual that the Staff Development function is not located in the Personnel Office. It was noted that the current arrangement seems to work well for NUIM. However, there was no opportunity in our brief to explore in detail how the dynamics would work in the nurturing of a Human Resources strategy. It is

essential that there are effective links between Personnel and the Quality Promotion Unit. The role of the Personnel Office in developing institutional approaches to issues such as performance management and personnel development planning should be developed. The Personnel Office should have a meaningful input into Staff Development in its broadest sense of aligning individual and departmental performance towards organisational goals.

In addition, there are a number of training needs which arise from policy initiatives and legislative requirements, such as the need for recruitment and selection training, equality awareness, dignity and respect and management training for Heads of Department. In such cases, there is an onus on the Personnel Department to ensure that a strategic approach to the development of such training is adopted, in order that the University is compliant with its legal obligations.

- 3.3 It seems that the Human Resources Committee may be too involved in operational matters and should perhaps focus more on developing longer term policies and strategies rather than on procedural issues such as promotions and retirements. Again, time did not allow for a detailed analysis of the range of issues with which this Committee is involved. However, in order to ensure that it is instrumental in driving forward the development of Human Resources strategy for the University, the question of the Secretaryship should be considered. It is proposed that the Personnel Officer should play a more active role in setting the agenda and the direction of the Committee. The relationship between the Human Resources Committee and the Personnel Office in planning and implementing an integrated human resources strategy needs to be clarified.

4 ORGANISATION AND STRUCTURE OF THE PERSONNEL OFFICE

The following paragraphs relate in the main to the organisation and structure of the Personnel Office, some of which will need to be considered at institutional level, and others of which are for the consideration of the Personnel Office itself.

- 4.1 Consideration should be given to the establishment of a second human resources professional post, partly as a Deputy for the Personnel Officer, to ensure cover at all times and also to allow the Personnel Officer to become more proactive in the development and formulation of human resources policy and strategies. In addition, such an appointment may be necessary in order to ensure that the University is equipped to deal with the many future challenges arising from increasingly more regulatory employment legislation, equality and quality imperatives and a range of other external impactors.
- 4.2 The title and grade of the Personnel Officer should be reviewed to reflect the role of the post holder, his status within the organisation and his contribution at a senior level to the management of the University. (It should be noted that the title "Personnel Officer" is used throughout the sector at a more junior level). In this regard, account should be taken of the role and grades of recent appointments and existing posts within the sector. Account should also be taken of the high regard with which the current post-holder is held and the unique nature of his qualifications and contribution.

- 4.3 The Administrative Officer is responsible for most operational/service aspects of the office and it is recommended that the title and grade of the post be reviewed to more accurately reflect her role in the provision of a broad range of personnel services, rather than simply administration.
- 4.4 There should be up-to-date job descriptions for all staff. Their roles have developed and evolved. The purpose of each post and its principal areas of responsibility need to be documented. In addition, the general distribution of duties between the two Executive Assistants should be documented. It is noted that the flexibility that currently exists is a major factor in the general efficiency of the office and it is not suggested that this should be' compromised in any way by the clear documentation of job duties.
- 4.5 Staff are extremely satisfied with their new accommodation, and feel it enables them to provide enhanced service to staff of the University. It is recognised that any recommendations to increase staff may have difficulties in regard to the allocation of space.
- 4.6 Whilst it is noted that currently work seems to be allocated amongst the staff of the office with great ease, it is recommended that consideration be given to more regular planning meetings, perhaps two to four per annum in order to ensure that the office is proactive in planning and developing services and in the formulation of positive human resources strategies while ensuring the contribution of all Personnel Office staff to such developments.
- 4.7 The introduction of Core Pay and Personnel System seems to have been effected relatively easily. However, the proposal that all casual pay claims (approximately 900 staff claim hourly pay on a monthly basis) be routed through the Personnel Office will have resource implications which should be analysed and kept under review. Consideration should be given to placing a number of hourly paid staff on annual contracts with a regular payroll transaction in order to minimise the inputs to the system and provide maximum control.
- 4.8 The devolution of system responsibility to end user groups has become the norm. NUIM should consider the allocation of dedicated systems support - perhaps shared between Finance and Personnel, and possibly even with student systems, in order to exploit the full potential of the new IT systems.

5. SPECIFIC AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The following are a number of small issues which emerged during the site visit, none of which have major policy or institutional implications and may indeed represent no more than a snapshot of problems or "complaints" which can be easily addressed:

- Frustration at the delay in establishing a partnership process and providing training for same;
- Concern at the lack of specificity on hours and annual leave in academic contracts (a sectoral issue);

- Insufficient documentation/information received at appointment;
- There appears to be some confusion in regard to the letter of appointment whether it constituted a formal "contract";
- Consideration should be given to the development of a staff handbook which should be given to all staff at the time of appointment;
- Lack of structured departmental induction;
- Unexplained delays between acknowledgement of application and invitation to interview. Whilst on occasions these delays may be unavoidable, communication with applicants is essential in order to keep them informed and hopefully maintain their interest in the job;
- Requirement for more communication with Heads of Department regarding contractual changes in the appointment of lecturing staff;
- Requirement for briefing of Heads of Department on the use of contract posts and the development of an institutional policy;
- Consideration should be given to the production of a Personnel procedures manual for the use of Heads of Department.

6. OVERALL CONCLUSION

NUIM should be well satisfied that it has an efficient, effective and well motivated Personnel/Human Resources function. Our comments and recommendations should be seen in this context. We would like to thank, most sincerely, all those who we met during our visit for their willing cooperation and helpful suggestions during our visit.