



NUI MAYNOOTH

Ólascail na hÉireann Mhá Nuad

Quality Review of the Department of Philosophy

24 - 25 February 2011

Peer Review Report

Peer Review Group:

External Reviewers:

**Dr Eoin Cassidy,
Head of Philosophy Department,
Mater Dei Institute of Education;
Professor William Desmond,
Professor of Philosophy,
K.U. Leuven.**

Internal Reviewers:

**Dr Honor Fagan,
Dean of Graduate Studies,
NUI Maynooth;
Professor Margaret Kelleher,
Director, An Foras Feasa,**

NUI Maynooth

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

QUALITY REVIEW 2011

EXTERNAL ASSESSORS PEER GROUP REPORT

24-25 FEBRUARY 2011

EXTERNAL ASSESSORS

PROFESSOR WILLIAM DESMOND (KUL, LEUVEN, BELGIUM)

DR EOIN CASSIDY (MDI, DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY)

The external assessors visited the Department of Philosophy during the period 24th – 25th February 2011, and met with the following:

The President of NUI Maynooth;

The President of St. Patrick's College;

Internal members of the Peer Review group;

Faculty Deans;

The Head of the Department of Philosophy;

The Head of the Department of Sociology;

Members of the academic staff of the department;

Members of administrative staff (Dept of Philosophy Administrative Officer, Quality Promotion Office members, executive assistants, departmental secretaries);

The Professor of Faith and Culture and co-ordinator of the Seminarist course in St. Patrick's College;

Groups of undergraduate student from different years, postgraduate students and tutors;

The academic coordinator of Continuing Education, as well as the Executive Assistant and Acting Head of the Kilkenny Campus.

The report is also based on a variety of documentation provided by the Quality Promotion Office, the Department's own self-review, as well as a number of brochures dealing with different academic programmes and years of study.

The assessors paid particular attention to the following:

The fact that a Chair of Philosophy has yet to be appointed;

The challenging situation faced by the Head of Department;

The staffing situation in the department in relation to full-time and contract members and the challenges occasioned by this;

The quality of teaching at both the undergraduate and graduate levels;

The commitment to research and the achievements of members of the department;
The contribution of the administrative staff;
The burden of academic administration for teaching staff and its equitable distribution;
The quality of the working environment for administrators, staff, and students;
The pedagogic interaction of staff and students, and the responses of the students to this.

Overall the assessors were impressed by the high quality of the work that was being done in teaching, research and service to the University, in circumstances that place great strains on available resources. There is a commendable commitment to excellence in teaching and research. The administration is also subject to many demands, but these are being met in a spirit of responsibility and service.

As we review the different areas of importance, staffing, curriculum, teaching and learning, research, administrative responsibility, and so on, we would like primarily to highlight, in addition to excellences already in play, important recommendations, some to meet pressing needs, others to improve existing practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. STAFFING ISSUES

The Philosophy Department has been hit with a number of traumatic events in recent years, in addition to the severe restrictions that have been imposed by current economic circumstances in Ireland generally. In the face of these difficulties and with resources that are subject to severe pressures, the Department has not only managed to survive but to take steps promising a better future. These qualifying factors have to be kept in mind in the following.

At the heart of all our recommendations is the issue of staffing.

Despite the addition of two new members of staff (both on three-year contracts), the untimely deaths of Prof. Thomas Kelly and Prof. John Cleary and the retirement of Dr. Harry McCauley have effectively halved the number of full-time members of staff in the Department of Philosophy. One must also factor into the equation the following considerations:

(a) Despite the commitment of the university to filling the chair of the Department of Philosophy, and despite an attempt to fill it some years ago, the fact remains that the position of chair has not yet been filled. As long as this remains the case, the Department will not be able to function to its optimum.

(b) There is also an ever-increasing administrative workload associated with growing student numbers, the servicing of existing programmes, as well as the development of new programmes, especially of an interdisciplinary nature.

Taken together these factors give one some sense of the staffing crisis that currently exists in the Department.

We are conscious of the recruitment embargo that exists in the public service, and the constraints which this imposes on management in attempting to address this issue. And yet we have no option but to state clearly that in the absence of significant movement on this issue in the current academic year, not only will it prove increasingly difficult to implement many of the recommendations listed below but, much more seriously, it will prove impossible to sustain the current level of excellence that characterises the work of the Department across all categories.

There are four separate but interrelated prongs to the current staffing crisis in the Department:

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- (1) The filling of the professorial chair to address the strategic needs of the department
 - (2) The upgrading of the status of the current head of the Department to reflect the duties and responsibilities associated with his current post as head of Department.
 - (3) The appointment of a lecturer position in the Department to replace expertise in the core areas of Metaphysics, Ethics and classical philosophy of God occasioned by the death of Professor Thomas Kelly and the retirement of Dr. Harry McCauley. To address the growing importance which the Department attaches to Ph.D. supervision, it is envisaged that this person would assume responsibility also in this area.
 - (4) The need to provide for continuity of staffing if the entirely legitimate expectations for further employment on the part of both the existing staff on three-year contracts, and the strategic aims of the Department, are to be met.
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THE CURRICULUM

The assessors want to commend the excellent job the current Department is doing in meeting its responsibilities to provide a philosophical curriculum that covers the tradition of philosophy, the basic areas of philosophical research, and contemporary developments in thought that are important. The Department is doing this with resources that at times are strained to the limit. That said, it must also be borne in mind that the Department has recently put itself through an extensive review of its curriculum, and has made significant efforts to broaden its offerings, without harm to the core undergraduate curriculum. The Department has always been strong in the history of philosophy, with special expertise in medieval thought, but now in addition there is a fresh openness to current developments, giving the lie to any anticipation that the curriculum is narrowly focussed. Part of the burden of that broadening is carried by staff members who are on contracts and whose contribution is to be strongly commended, but here the question of continuity of coverage is an important question. In this broadening there is also a response by the Department to responding to the diversity of traditions in a world perspective. Hence a successful course on Chinese philosophy has been introduced. Here again we need to keep in mind the continuity of

teaching coverage. If more international students will be coming to Maynooth in the future, the importance of intercultural philosophy may increase.

It must be acknowledged that the current Department has special strengths in the areas of Medieval and Renaissance thought. These should be supported and enhanced, and below we will suggest the immediate establishment of an MA in Medieval and Renaissance Thought – with a special emphasis on the attracting of international students to Maynooth.

THE CURRICULUM - DEVELOPMENTS

The Philosophy Department has undertaken a number of initiatives to broaden its offerings in cooperation with other departments. In some cases this entails the deployment or redeployment of existing resources, while in other cases some new offerings may yet have to be developed. First we draw attention to and warmly welcome the new PPE (Philosophy, Politics and Economics) degree which is being developed in collaboration with the Economics and Sociology Departments. This is an initiative of which, we gather, the university authorities in general are very supportive. The Sociology Department, through its representative, also warmly approved and supported this initiative, even though we got the sense that the Philosophy Department is taking the pole position, so to say. We would recommend, if it at all possible, that the three departments work together to have the new programme up and running by September 2011. Among the benefits of the PPE Programme would be the furthering of career opportunities for graduates of Maynooth in the areas of political and public life. This programme might be potentially unique in the Irish context, making possible the education of possible leaders in politics, business and public life in general. It would provide something similar to what can be found in the USA, namely, a well-rounded education wedded to important career skills.

Two other areas in which initiatives for interdepartmental cooperation are at stake are Philosophy in relation to Computer Science (BSc in Computational Thinking), and Philosophy in relation to Classical Culture.

The first draws on the strengths of the Department to put it in dialogue with the most contemporary of intellectual and technological developments – a development worthy of consideration.

The second draws on the strengths of the Department in relation to the longer Western tradition. There are ongoing discussions with the Classics Department to establish an MA with emphasis on Ancient Philosophy and Culture. The expertise is there in both departments to make this an academically attractive offering, continuous with the traditional strengths of Maynooth in the longer tradition of Western Culture.

Finally, as has been mentioned above, we suggest strongly the merits of a new MA in Medieval and Renaissance Thought.

This reflects something of the distinctive academic profile of the department. There are departments with expertise in Medieval thought, but it is hard to find a department with expertise in Renaissance thought also. Such an MA offers the opportunity to create a niche market with very strong international potential at both the MA and the PhD levels. While such an MA would speak to the very real strengths of the Department, one could anticipate much welcome collaboration with

other humanities subjects such as Irish, English, French and History, perhaps even with the German Department.

This proposal has sufficiently strong merits that we suggest that every effort be made to have it up and running as soon as possible. The Dean of Graduate Studies indicated her willingness to help with this process. This initiative has the potential to put the University on the International map and to do so for all the right reasons.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Of course, the Philosophy Department, like any department in a genuine university, is a place of teaching – a vocation too easily overlooked in our time of sometimes one-sided stress on research. The divorce of teaching and research is often to the detriment of both, and not least in philosophy where the most important issues are not arcane specialization for mandarins but the fundamental perplexities of life and its meaning. This need not involve any stinting in support for the vocation of serious research, but a Department has to fulfil both functions. We are not simply dealing with an Institute of Research.

The overwhelming impression the assessors received from talking to the faculty is the strength of their commitment to being good teachers, to undergraduate students as well as to graduate. A similarly positive response was found in general when we sought feedback from the students, and again at both undergraduate and graduate levels. Perhaps the students we saw were there by self-selection, but while the students were not devoid of suggestions, an impressive satisfaction with the teaching of the Department was communicated to us.

We want to underline the inseparability of teaching and research and stress that the pedagogy of the faculty continue to keep the different needs of different bodies of students in mind. Undergraduate teaching forms the base of a pyramid that might rise up to more specialized competences, but this means acknowledging the general character of Maynooth undergraduates, namely that their exposure to philosophy will be the first of their lives. We are dealing with a graduated learning process in which the first initiation into philosophical thinking is undertaken. For this reason the first-year programme of the BA is of crucial importance. It is necessary that challenging and inspiring teachers be assigned the teaching of first-year students. If there is not retention from the first year, the whole of the programme and the Department will suffer. This is of course a matter for the wise judgement of the head of the department.

At the more advanced levels, obviously specialization becomes both necessary and challenging. This is where teaching requirements are sometimes even more onerous, since the supervisor of an MA or PhD is required to spend much time in one-to-one contact with the developing students. This is time-intensive and a small Department will have difficulties due to its size in being able to dedicate the needed time. Again we report that the impression we got is a general level of satisfaction by students at both the MA and the PhD levels. Both postgraduate teaching and PhD supervision elicited by and large very good student feedback.

We have to caution, however, that with such a small number of faculty, not all of whom are in permanent positions, there is the need for vigilance to ensure for best practice, particularly in terms of PhD supervision.

TEACHING AND LEARNING: THE ROLE OF TUTORS

The role of tutors deserves mention, since they function essentially as mediators, enabling liaison between the students and the various lecturers. Their role should not be undervalued, and it was noted with appreciation, by both tutors and students, when lecturers took the trouble to visit the tutorials themselves. This perhaps has primarily symbolic value but it does add to the sense of collegiality and care coming from the department.

We suggest that tutors deserve appropriate recognition for the contribution they make, and we recommend that they are offered representation in Department meetings on matters that pertain to their responsibilities.

RESEARCH

This is an area which has received much attention in recent years, and its importance for any university worthy of the name goes without saying. We have already mentioned the potential symbiosis of teaching and research, and of course a serious case can be made that without fresh research the teaching élan of the lecturer can become stale and desiccated.

In addition, the research profile of the individual lecturer is very important in defining the distinctive character of a department, as well as contributing to the intellectual character of the university as a whole. All of the members of the Department have distinctive and strong profiles as researchers. A perusal of their respective CVs will bear this out, though it is worth mentioning that in the last decade, following in the footsteps of Professor Thomas Kelly, Dr. Mette Lebeck and Dr. Michael Dunne have served as Presidents of the Irish Philosophical Society. Some staff are in a more advanced stage of their careers, others in an earlier stage, but in all cases, individual researchers show themselves to be busy and engaged with their respective intellectual interests.

It goes without saying that research should be promoted and supported by the Department, and indeed by the University which might be tempted by false economies in a time of freezes and cutbacks.

We draw particular attention to the research needs of lecturers in the earlier stages of their professional careers. Again in times of economic strain, the temptation is to load them with undue responsibilities.

In particular, the professional research needs of the contract staff of the Department ought to be protected.

Both the Department and the University have a duty of justice and care to ensure that legitimate expectations in this area are not hindered by work overload.

ADMINISTRATIVE RESPONSIBILITY

The assessors want to praise the immense contribution of the administrative staff in ensuring that best practice is the norm in the manner in which the Department operates. An immense amount of work is being done to a high standard of efficiency. Significant stability has been achieved in the administrative functioning of the Department, despite the diverse turbulences that have affected its affairs in recent years.

The contribution of **Ms. Anne Gleeson in particular is to be praised** in helping to make this situation possible. Attention was brought to the need that all members of the Department cooperate in making sure that all affairs are conducted through the right channels, and with the appropriate paper work properly taken care of. Such cooperative efficiencies will help the entire Department in its day-to-day running.

Great credit must also be given to Dr. Michael Dunne who as Head of the Department has expended significant time and effort to putting the Department on a sound administrative basis. This is not only a matter of managerial skill, but speaks to his ability to create with his colleagues, students and fellow workers a very collegial atmosphere.

We recommend also that a suitable room be made available for the postgraduate students where they can meet students they are tutoring, where they can meet with each other and study when on campus. Such a room would enhance not only day- to-day communication but the feeling that post-graduate students are a valued part of the intellectual community of the Department.

Finally, questions did arise for us about the balance and distribution of duties to the faculty who are employed under contract. It was a question whether a properly proportionate burden was being assumed by **all** of the full-time staff.

This is a question also relating to the need to allow contract lecturers fair opportunities to develop their own academic research profile.

Relations with St. Patrick's College

Philosophy has always had an historical and unique connection with St. Patrick's College, since in addition to degrees from the National University of Ireland it also offers degrees to the Pontifical University. This continues, even though the student body of St. Patrick's is much diminished from former times. Students can take a BPhil at the Pontifical University by meeting, in addition to the BA requirements of the National University, the extra requirement of writing a final research paper. The Department is the only Department with connections to the two universities, and continues to fulfil its mediating role in this regard.

In our consultation with the President of St. Patrick's, it was evident that the relations between the Department and St. Patrick's were very good and the hope was expressed that this would continue.

Adult Education

The Department is also engaged in the area of adult education, and we were given the opportunity to meet with educators and administrators at work in this area. Without exception they praised the accessibility and willingness of the Department in connection with initiatives in this area. All in all, there is a productive relationship with adult education and through its work here, the Department offers a well-received service to the wider community.
