



NUI MAYNOOTH

Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

Quality Review of the Department of Psychology

March 2009

Peer Review Report

Peer Review Group:

External Reviewer: Professor Noel Sheehy,
Liverpool John Moores University.

Internal Reviewer: Professor Jim Walsh,
Deputy President, NUIM.

Department of Psychology NUI Maynooth Quality Review 2009

Introduction

The Department of Psychology at NUIM was established in September 1999. The Department is part of the Faculty of Science and Engineering.

At undergraduate level the Department offers two undergraduate degree programmes (BA, BSc). These programmes have been externally accredited by the Psychological Society of Ireland and by international agreement are recognised by the British Psychological Society as providing the Graduate Basis for Registration (GBR).

The quality of student intake is of a consistently high standard, as indicated in Table 3.1 (CAO entry points requirements 2005-2008) of the self-evaluation document. These standards are commensurate with peer colleges in the National University of Ireland and universities in the UK in which I have been an external reviewer for quality assurance.

At postgraduate level the Department has introduced an MSc/Doctorate in Psychological Science – Behaviour Analysis and Therapy. This offering is unique on the island of Ireland and is of significant value for the identity of the department.

As of February 2009 the Departmental staff comprise: ten permanent members of academic staff, one full-time contract lecturer, an administrative assistant, two (part-time/job-sharing) senior executive assistants and one senior technician.

Academic staff have achieved an international reputation in quality assurance through their roles as External Examiners on programmes in peer universities in Ireland and internationally (UK, Netherlands, Pakistan).

Recommendations of the Quality Review Peer Report 2005

I found evidence, written (in the self-evaluation document) and oral (through meetings with staff and students), that the Department has addressed the 8 recommendations of the Quality Review Peer Report 2005. Specifically:

1. The publications listed in Appendix B of the Department's Complementary Quality Review Document indicate an increased number of publications in journals of international quality;
2. The Department is delivering a MSc/Doctorate in Psychological Science – Behavioural Analysis and Therapy;
3. The university has appointed staff to support its strengths in health psychology;
4. At departmental and senior university management levels there is a shared awareness of the issues regarding the location of staff on two sites and in a

- collegiate culture are working together to achieve a shared objective for a single site;
5. The work-load model implemented by staff is exemplary but for one minor issue, the weight/loading attributed the role of Head of Department is, in my opinion, too low and should be reviewed;
 6. Staff are working with senior university management to provide sufficient support resources for students in Year 1, as indicated in the Department's budgetary prioritisation;
 7. A curriculum planning committee has been established and it has made a significant contribution to the Quality Review 2009 document provided to me;
 8. The library holdings and subscriptions to e-journals are to a high standard.

Student progression

Student progression is very strong as indicated by completion rates reported in Table 3.5 (Degree classification by year and grade) of the self-evaluation document.

From 2005 there has been a decline in the percentage of degrees awarded at 1st class level from 44% to 29%. I would infer this to reflect:

- (i) comments from external examiners as to the awarding standards;
- (ii) the burden of teaching and supervision imposed on teaching staff.

I would discount my first inference because the reports of external examiners have been positive and strongly supportive of the investment of staff in helping students to realise their potential. Student achievement is very strong as indicated by figures for 2008 in which 29% of graduating students achieved a 1st class degree.

Response to the Self-assessment document

The aims and objectives of the Department's programmes are clearly articulated. I have conducted quality assurance reviews, internally and externally, in several universities in the UK and I would regard the Department's self-assessment document as one of the best I have had the pleasure of reading. It has significant strengths in terms of breadth of coverage and critical reflection in depth. The document is comprehensively supported with evidence as to its strengths and development requirements.

Staff are planning to examine, through surveys, the impact of the competitive entry route for those who are not successful. The findings will have wider implications for other programmes in the University. For example, were the surveys to show that those who were unsuccessful found themselves on second-preference programmes it might explain some negative implications for progression and completion rates on those programmes. On the other hand, were the surveys to indicate that students on second-preference programmes were content with their programmes of studies it would reflect positively on the University's offering.

Conclusions

The Department is well organized and offers students and staff opportunities to engage in a highly motivated creative learning and working environment. The culture and ethos is characterized by a positive professional work ethic which is shared by students and staff. Students describe staff as approachable, supportive, personable and genuinely interested in sharing and developing the science and practice of psychology. There is an exceptionally strong collegiate atmosphere.

Undergraduate and postgraduate students acknowledge and appreciate the efforts of all staff to provide the best possible learning experience within available budgets. Senior managers within the university recognize and value the contribution of the Department to the values, vision and life of the University.

The quality review process was conducted in an inclusive, participative manner characterised by transparency and critical reflection.

Commendations

- The culture and ethos of the Department is exceptionally strong in terms of its collegiate values and professional work ethic
- The staff are to be congratulated for developing and maintaining a lively, well-organized postgraduate portfolio of research and taught programmes.
- The University's SMT team recognizes the accommodation needs of the Department and makes provision to prioritize those needs within its resources.
- Undergraduate students, particularly at Year 2 and Year 3, and postgraduate students feel they are valued and feel they are informed about the activities, aspirations and challenges facing the Department; they feel they are kept 'in the loop'.
- Staff are to be congratulated for the quality and quantity of research outputs and their success in securing external research funding. They are highly research efficient in their use of resources producing high quality and quantity outputs at a low cost to the University; this represents excellent value for money.

Recommendations

- Staff consider ways of raising visibility, within the University, of their contribution to its research mission;
- Staff reflect further on their plans for the Department over the next decade in particular with regard to the development of a distinctive identity, the foundations for which are well established in its undergraduate and postgraduate provisions, that will distinguish it from other departments of psychology both regionally and nationally;
- The Senior Management Team within the University continues to recognize and prioritize the need to locate staff in the Department on to a single site;

- The level of technical support is very low and poses a significant risk for the University and the Department. Approaches to reducing this risk through an additional allocation of technical support staff should be pursued.
- The procedures for purchasing small items of equipment and consumables should be reviewed with a view to achieving better value for money, for example through the use of a departmental purchase card.

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External Reviewer

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