Quality Improvement Plan

Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

2016-2017

Guided by the philosophy of Friedrich Froebel and the principles and values of Maynooth University, our mission is to:

**Prepare and inspire caring educators in their pursuit of excellence
in teaching, learning and research towards the holistic education
of every child in a changing Ireland**

Contents

Introduction

The staff within the Froebel Department engaged with the Quality Review Process in a constructive manner and viewed it as an opportunity to

- reflect upon, renew, and refresh the Department's mission, vision, goals and strategies for growth and development;
- review existing Departmental academic and administrative practices and identify changes which may be necessary;
- formulate an overall Quality Improvement Plan for the Department

The Department has been affirmed by many of the highly positive comments made by the Peer Review Group (PRG) in their report, most noteworthy are the remarks made in relation to student-centred teaching, a point of particular pride and a key element of the Department's ethos and identity. Validation of such student-centred practices became evident through "formal conversations with external stakeholders, such as national support agencies and the principals of schools that employ Department graduates, confirm that the work of the Froebel Department is held in high esteem and its graduates are highly regarded" (p. 6). Overall, the Department is gratified by the PRG's acknowledgment of the ardent efforts made by the Department to uphold high standards despite the remarkable transition experienced in the previous three to five years. In particular, we welcome the commendation by the PRG which gives high praise to the "number and diversity of student placements and the quality of supervision" as well as the success the Department has had in "forging and maintaining successful partnerships with schools" … "given the considerable challenges posed by the move from its former school hinterland in south Dublin" (p. 8). In relation to the Self-Assessment Report itself, their recognition of the efforts made to ensure inclusivity and collaborative involvement during the preparation of the SAR is an endorsement of the collective commitment and dedication of the staff.

An expression of gratitude must be paid to the PRG for agreeing to undertake this task and for compiling a very comprehensive and insightful report. Furthermore, the Department wishes to acknowledge all internal and external stakeholders – staff, students and colleagues from partner organisations for giving of their time so generously to contribute to this process. Finally, we would like to convey our thanks to our colleagues in the Quality Office for their support before, during and after the process.

General Response

The Department also welcomes many of the recommendations made by the PRG particularly those which point to the need for additional University support to enhance research capacity in the form of seed funding and dedicated sabbatical schemes. Such a recommendation, if supported by the University, will serve to provide sustenance for a Departmental Research Strategy and should address a number of interconnected recommendations which relate to Research and Scholarship and the development of postgraduate programmes. Many of the recommendations are aligned to those reflected in the Department's Self-Assessment Report (SAR).

The PRG recommends a number of recommendations which fall under four categories:
    a. Procedural and Infrastructural
    b. Teaching and Learning;
    c. Research and Scholarship;
    d. Profile, Visibility: Engagement, Collaboration and Outreach

Some of the key recommendations from each of these categories are summarised below:

Procedural and Infrastructural:
- the availability of campus accommodation and technical support outside of the normal working hours and the usual University term times
- use of hallway space for display, and ease of access between indoor and outdoor spaces
- mechanisms for regular review of organisational structures and processes
- development of an effective student-staff communication policy

Visibility and Profile: Engagement, Collaboration and Outreach
- Publicise the Department's activities through enhanced visibility across Maynooth University and on the Department's website
- Address the perception of being associated with early years teaching only
- Continue to expand engagement with outreach initiatives to promote Froebelian ideas
- Develop proposals for publicising national and international profile

Teaching and Learning
- Investigate opportunities to develop new postgraduate programmes and to move toward recruiting international and research students
- Clearly state marking criteria and provide meaningful, timely feedback for written assessment
- Consider offering a greater range of electives, resources permitting
- Enhance guidelines for students in the Dissertation Handbook on supervision issues
- Undertake a systematic review of all programmes and gather student feedback to assist in programme evaluation.
- Ensure sufficient levels of language competence by all students
- Continue to differentiate appropriately between the BEd and the PMEd programmes
- Ensure Erasmus students are not disadvantaged by missing out on programmed learning
- Develop customised software to co-ordinate, supervise and evaluate student placements.
- Refer to rationales on grading criteria and feedback in school placement handbooks

Research and Scholarship
- Provide for a dedicated sabbatical scheme and a seed-fund for research and scholarship.
- Develop a transparent workload allocation model and state office hours
- Claim ownership and leadership of what research in their field – not only but especially practitioner-led research -- should be like
- Address the divergent views within the Department regarding the professional role of the academic within the University.
- Engage externally with local and international professional bodies in order to enhance research funding and research-related networking opportunities for staff. E.g. The Froebel Trust
- A 5-year Departmental research strategy for 2018-2023 should:
  - present a vision for research development with specific and measurable goals
  - consider plans for encouraging experienced practitioners toward postgraduate degrees
  - support the dissemination of Department-based researchers' work, e.g. by actively encouraging academic staff's participation at national and international conferences
  - develop research which maintain and emphasise the strengths of the Froebelian ethos,
  - dedicate time staff meetings for the discussion of research and research-related matters
  - develop a clearly formulated policy and application procedure for staff members seeking to spend time doing something which furthers the Department's own goals
  - explore avenues for developing synergies with other University Departments
  - consider the extent to which placements, HOPE and DICE could serve as sites for research as well
  - consider establishing a regular Research Seminar series

In the next section, each of the recommendations has been considered and responses proposed by the Department.

	INFRASTRUCTURAL & PROCEDURAL	
S.2 **U**	The University should try to ensure **campus accommodation** is available outside of the University term times particularly early in their teaching placement.	This is an on-going issue. Students refer to the lack of available services at the beginning of the academic term, during evenings and weekend. A meeting was held with Director of Campus Services who assures the Department that this issue is being addressed. The Department will continue to monitor this matter but believes it is a broader University issue not just affecting the Froebel Department.
S.3 **U** **F**	The University should provide **technical support** for seminars outside of the normal working hours, e.g. on Saturdays or in the evenings.	At times when lectures and workshops are held outside of the regular lecture time and on occasions when the Department hosts conferences over weekends or evenings, the lack of access to technical support is noticeable and inconvenient. As above, this is a broader University issue not just affecting the Froebel Department.
U.2 **U** **F**	Meet with a representative of the University's Health and Safety Office to discuss questions and concerns about the use of the new physical space which relate directly to their teaching philosophy and practice, such as the possibility of using hallway space for display of **3-D objects,** and easy access between indoor and outdoor spaces via classrooms.	Displaying students work within the learning environment is a significant instructional feature of the department, particularly in arts education. Some recent developments have supported this recommendation. However, concerns have been raised about placing display cabinets on the corridors for safety reasons. To realise this recommendation, alternative suggestions from health and safety would be welcomed. Alternatively, Froebel staff could develop proposals and costings for displays that are not obstructive or hazardous, with the support of the University.
U.2	Develop mechanisms for regular review of organisational structures and processes, including feedback for courses, time management, distribution of responsibilities, etc. Clarification of Departmental roles and responsibilities is needed, particularly pertaining to course leaders	The Department will address this recommendation through the Academic Committee by listing organisational structures, processes for developing a cycle of periodic reviews and role definition.
U.5	We welcome the Department's commitment to developing an **effective student-staff communication policy** as expressed in its SAR.	A policy has been developed which clarifies the parameters of and appropriate mechanisms for staff-student communication.

		PROFILE & VISIBILITY: ENGAGEMENT, COLLABORATION & OUTREACH
S.5	Adopt a more outward looking profile. Efforts to publicise the Department 's activities and profile should be made at the University level as well.	A number of actions have been taken to pro-actively address this recommendation e.g., staff are regularly reminded to feature Froebel Departmental activities in the University Newsletter; a Froebel Twitter account is now active; a Froebel newsletter is in the process of being developed. Efforts to encourage profiling the work of the Department on the website is also encouraged. Ongoing encouragement will be a regular feature at staff meetings and opportunities to develop greater visibility seized;
U.33	Increase engagement with the wider University community, e.g., with the Centre for Teaching and Learning, with cognate Departments (such as Irish, Music, Education), and at the level of the Faculty. Liaise with HR and other relevant offices (Research Support Office) to identify professional development opportunities and to consider ways it can become more visible e.g. by offering brownbag presentations. Consultation with the University's Communications and Marketing Office may prove fruitful in this regard.	Engagement with staff from other departments is emerging organically as needs and opportunities arise or interests coalesce. The intention of the peer review panel in making this recommendation may have been with a view to collaborate through co-teaching, co-supervision and joint applications for funding. However, the needs of the Department are very specifically in the area of music education/maths education etc. That said, constructive links have been made with the Irish department and interesting opportunities are already under discussion. Emergent opportunities will be explored;
U.36	The Department's website should be updated, e.g. by inserting biographic, research and data (as well as links to online publications, reports, unpublished papers, etc. where relevant) for every staff member, so that the Department becomes more visible and recognisable on Campus and beyond.	This is in train; Staff have been urged to update their profiles; A request to Communications to have staff photographs taken has been submitted. Training on how to update research profiles through RIS has been provided for staff. (link with **S5** above)
U.40 **U.38** **F**	External stakeholders commented that Froebel tends to be associated only with early years teaching and the move to Maynooth is an opportunity to work with stakeholders in the sector outside of primary schools. The Department should consider how it will address this perception, how it will engage with these sectors and how it will communicate its strategy and achievements in this area in the future. Given the unique experience with Froebelian ideas of early childhood primary education, the Department should continue to expand their engagement with outreach initiatives.	**U. 40 and U 38 are** historical challenges as people associate the Froebel philosophies other with early years' philosophies such as e.g. Maria Montessori. However, every opportunity to demystify this perception will be maximised by the Department – particularly through the usual promotional events hosted by the University and in conjunction with admissions who liaise with secondary schools. The use of the Departmental newsletter would certainly support this. The provision of internal support for graphic design from within the University to professionalise the appearance of the newsletter would be helpful;
U.13	We note that the Department has committed to maximising opportunities for **publicising its profile at national and international leve**l and we recommend that	The Department would be very much in favour of publicising its profile nationally and internationally; The cost of presenting at international conferences however is

	the Department should as a matter of priority develop concrete proposals for how this is to be done.	prohibitive. Other opportunities will be maximised through encouraging and facilitating academic staff's engagement with national and international committees and stakeholders, Erasmus projects and other international engagements;
U.31	The Department should strive to enhance its visibility across Maynooth University by fully engaging with the existing research clusters and Faculty roles, responsibilities and committees, including regular attendance of Faculty meetings and including Departmental research outputs in the University's searchable institutional repository, the ePrints Archive.	Due to the range of commitments from within the Department as a result of the nature of the ITE, it is not always possible to attend to meetings. However, academic staff will be encouraged and supported to represent the Department on any committee or institutional group which will enhance engagement within and across the University.

		TEACHING & LEARNING	
U.7	Investigate opportunities to develop new programmes, particularly taught postgraduate programmes. The Department has undergone an adaptation, stabilisation and consolidation process but now needs to move increasingly into a developmental phase where it embraces new opportunities to diversify and expand.	A number of whole-staff workshops were held in June 2017 to progress a plan for the development of postgraduate programmes. One proposal for a cohort of students to enrol on a Masters in 2018 is already in train. The potential for Masters and Doctorate by research to be in place within the next five years are also being investigated;	
U.15	Clear statements of the marking criteria and meaningful and timely feedback for assessed written work should be implemented in an effort to contribute to making assessment and student feedback transparent and constructive.	The Department engaged in a review of the diversity, volume and timing of all assessment and the types of feedback afforded to students; The Academic Committee will examine the criteria for assessment and the timing of feedback given to students;	
U. 16	As resources allow, it is recommended that the BEd programme should offer students a greater range of electives.	The Department contends that there is a sufficient range of electives across curriculum areas. An analysis of the provision of electives over the past number of years shows an extensive evolving range of electives. Such courses are added to in response to current systemic needs and student demand. Furthermore, student numbers in these electives are relatively small to maximise active participation, experiential learning and dialogical interaction. Additional electives could prove costly;	
U.17	Feedback from staff and students indicated that there is a need for more comprehensive guidelines for students in the Dissertation Handbook, especially in relation to supervision issues;	Dissertation handbooks have been updated and revisions communicated to staff and students.	
U. 18	Following each academic year, the Academic Committee should undertake a **systematic review of all programmes**, taking account of staff feedback, student exit survey data and the relevant external examiner's/examiners' report(s). A short written report should be produced on each programme which identifies key programme developments, emerging issues and recommendations for change. These reports should then be included for discussion at meetings of the Department	The Department engages continuously in programmatic review and makes revisions to programmes based on feedback from staff, students and externs; The Department is streamlining processes pertaining to programmatic and module review. The recommendation to write a report is now in progress**;** A review of programmes and modules is planned pre-Christmas as an immediate response to this recommendation. The Academic Committee will oversee this process.	
U.21	Some external examiners noted certain weaknesses of some students in English and Irish language competence. We recommend that the Department ensure that sufficient levels of language competence will be achieved by all students, if necessary by expanding the offerings in these fields; however, students should be held accountable for their own learning within the standard course schedules, without pressuring instructors to offer extra lectures as exams near.	The Froebel Department made a conscious decision to place considerable emphasis on Irish and English competency in the new BEd and PMEd programmes; Upon successfully completing their degree, all students leave the Froebel Department with 70% in both languages. These courses have a balance of face-to-face class time, independent work, self-directed learning and ongoing assessment whilst also compiling an individualised plan of work for each student. Class sizes are small (16 students/Irish) (30 students/English) allowing for one-to-one feedback and differentiation during lecture time.	

		The number of hours comprising these module has been increased with the additional time for voluntary uptake. Moodle is used to provide students with ongoing feedback and ongoing independent work. Errors identified are explicitly taught in lectures with support material provided on Moodle. In addition to the formal supports put in place students are encouraged to develop study groups, successfully complete a Placement in a Gaelscoil and in the Gaeltacht (4 weeks in total). An integrated approach to Irish is adopted by linking competency, Irish methodologies and Irish children's literature.
U.22	Given the marked difference in duration between the BEd and the PMEd, and the different structural requirements of the two programmes, it is recommended that the Department continues its efforts to differentiate appropriately between the two programmes in curriculum content terms.	The Department is concerned with ensuring that the students on both programmes are sufficiently prepared to enter the profession of teaching. The entry level, prior knowledge and experience are taken into account. Further discussion with staff around the pace, structure, expectations independent autonomous learning and research requirements will be explored.
U.34	The Department is encouraged to expand its palette of postgraduate offerings and to move toward recruiting international and research students, not only for generating research income but also for enhancing its international profile.	The Department met in June to discuss possibilities around the development of new graduate programmes. An agreed plan is in place to begin the process of developing a suite of postgraduate programmes with a view to ultimately offering degrees at postgraduate level once there is sufficient capacity for research supervision at this level.
U.19	The Department's adoption in 2013 of the University's Student Evaluation of Learning Experience (SELE) system is an important element in obtaining feedback from students. According to the SAR, the system currently does not have the potential to generate sufficient detail at module and programme level to contribute to an evaluation of module and programme effectiveness. The Department should examine how it can gather student feedback that is sufficiently fine-grained to assist in programme evaluation.	It has been customary for module leaders and individual lecturers to conduct evaluations of modules and develop a short report. These were collated by the Head of Education who utilises the feedback to inform programme development. However, the need to centrally gather programmatic data was identified as part of the SAR. To that end, the Department agreed a customised series of questions for surveying the students. This was implemented successfully at the end of this year; Further formalisation of student evaluation of programmes will be on-going and under the remit of the Academic Committee.
U.29	The Department should be aware that some of its students have been having difficulties integrating with the rest of the University (mirroring the concerns of many staff members about their own experience). The students put this down to the course hours, and to their time spent in placements off campus, as well as to the lack of knowledge around the University as to what "Froebel" is. Students described the Froebel Society as one possible means to work on the latter, but found its ability to do so curtailed by its often functioning as an organ of the Department. As a student society, the Froebel Society should be left to the students themselves.	The staff accepts the autonomy and independence of the Froebel Society as a SU society. A meeting with students will be convened reach clarity on the rationale for the society with a view to ensuring it is preserved for the promotion of the Froebelian philosophy rather than purely for social events. Further discussion on how best to facilitate better integration will also be facilitated.
U.20	The Department should ensure that students on **Erasmus placement are not**	All Y3 BEd lecture materials are available to outgoing students online and students may

	disadvantaged by missing out on one semester's worth of programmed learning. This could be addressed by methods of blended learning or other internet-based forms of delivery.	access it remotely while abroad. The spirit of the Erasmus programme is such that students should not be required to duplicate work in the home base if they are taking an equivalent amount of modules abroad. Students are also encouraged to adopt a proactive approach towards ensuring Irish language fluency is practised when abroad.
S.3 & 4 **F**	There is a high burden of administration associated with organisation of teaching placements. We recommend that the Department should review how this is currently carried out and identify any resource requirements. We endorse the Departments' intention to develop **customised software** to alleviate the administrative workload necessary to co-ordinate, supervise and evaluate student placements. The University should then look at ways to support provision of any resources identified.	The administration associated with the co-ordination of School Placement is onerous and high stakes. An investment in modern, robust IT systems is required for greater efficiency and reliability. Comparable institutions involved in the placement of student teachers have sophisticated levels of support in place for this work. The specifics required in the design of an effective and efficient administrative system was developed in conjunction with the Department of Education and sent to the IT VP. There are resource Implications for the University arising from this recommendation;
U.14	The student handbook for school placement should refer to rationales on grading criteria and feedback. It is further recommended that there be student representation on the School Placement Committee. Several issues were raised by ITE students in relation to school placement, centring mainly on grading criteria and feedback. Although it was evident to the Panel that there are compelling reasons for many of the practices highlighted, these need to be discussed with students embarking on school placement, preferably in briefing sessions which openly address "difficult" issues and which provide rationales for how things operate.	Final grades for School Placement are issued in June with the rest of the student results on the official transcript. Following extensive deliberation and discussion with students and staff, it has been decided not to release the provisional results immediately after placement, as, in the past, it was found not to be a productive exercise, causing upset and tension within class groupings which impacted on the quality of teaching and learning for the remainder of the semester. This issue is reviewed regularly by staff. Action: The Director of School Placement explains the rationale for the above response to students prior to school placement. Comprehensive grading criteria are shared with students on Moodle. The breakdown for different elements of school placement grades are available to the student in the School Placement Handbooks. The Director of School Placement holds regular meetings with class representatives to discuss any issues emerging from School Placement. Following SP, students complete an on-line survey on their school experience. Any issues emerging are brought to the attention of the School Placement committee. To date, students response to these surveys indicate that School Placement is a very positive and enriching aspect of the programme.

		RESEARCH & SCHOLARSHIP
S.1	As an exercise in capacity building, we recommend that the University make provision for a dedicated sabbatical scheme and also a dedicated seed-fund for research and scholarship.	The Department welcomes this recommendation as it serves to build capacity within the Department and develop a stronger research profile amongst staff; A meeting has been held with the Vice President for Research who has indicated that he will bring this recommendation to the University Executive for consideration;
U.1	Develop a transparent **workload allocation** model which valorises the full range of academic activities.	A draft workload model has been developed in consultation with the staff within the Department. A mock-up of the model was presented by two staff members in June. Based on this, academic staff members have been asked to pilot the model for 2017-2018 with a view to gathering feedback at the end of the academic year.
U.4	**Office hours** should be clearly stated outside the respective office doors so students can be sure when to make personal contact with the lecturers. By extension, this might help lecturers reserve other hours for other aspects of their work, including those essential for the achievement of their own career-development or research-related goals.	Staff have been asked to communicate their office hours to students.
U.6	Claim ownership and leadership of what research in their field – not only but especially practitioner-led research -- should be like. We are aware that the question of what is recognised as research in the field of education can be problematic, but see this as an opening for the Department to step into and define the state of the art.	The response to this recommendation was mixed. Some staff requested that a broader definition of research be associated with the work of the Department as not all academic staff engage in practitioner-related research. A workshop was held in June with staff to facilitate a discussion on the purpose, forms and nature of research appropriate to the Department. Further discussions and engagement in research may serve to clarify this concept. This will be embedded into the Research Strategic Plan 2018-2023 for the Department;
U.8 **F**	We suggest the Department organise a session, facilitated by an external person, to constructively address the divergent views within the Department regarding the professional role of the academic within the University. This would provide an opportunity for the Department to demonstrate leadership in this area.	A number of workshops were held in June 2017 one of which was with a facilitator to discuss the role of an academic. Additional discussion may be required to further develop a clearer refinement of the role of academic within the context of initial teacher education**.** This may form part of our priorities in the Department's Strategic Plan for Research and support from the newly appointed Professor for Educational Research may support this work;
U.9	Engage externally with local and international professional bodies in order to enhance **research funding** and **research-related networking opportunities** for staff. E.g. The Froebel Trust	This will constitute part of the Strategic Plan which is currently in development and assistance from the newly appointed Professor for Educational Research may support this work.
U.10	We note that the Department is intent on creating a 5-year Departmental Research Strategy and would recommend that this include the articulation of **a vision for research development** and for **research leadership**, as well as specific and measurable **research-related goals**. As part of its strategy, the Department should	This was proposed by staff in the SAR and is already in development. Support from the newly appointed Professor for Educational Research may assist with the development of a vision which will support the differentiated needs of the academic staff within the Department.

	consider plans for developing a **pipeline of experienced practitioners** whom it can encourage toward PhD/research degrees, thereby providing a pool of practitioner-researchers who might sustain and expand the Department's strengths in the short and long term. It should also support the **dissemination** of department-based researchers' work, e.g. by actively encouraging staff participation at conferences.	
U.11	We were made aware of the challenges of maintaining a **distinct Froebelian ethos** in the Department following the move to Maynooth University, which is seen by some as posing a threat to this ethos. We recommend that the Department should develop **research programmes** as a way forward to maintain and emphasise the strengths of the Froebelian ethos, both within and outside of the University.	The Department welcomes this recommendation and continues to be committed to preserving the Froebel ethos. This will be prioritised as part of the 5-year Strategic Plan.
U.12	We recommend the Department **dedicate time at regular staff meetings** for the discussion of **research and research-related** matters.	This was recommended by staff in the SAR and is already in train.
U.25	The Department should develop a clearly formulated policy and application procedure for staff members seeking to spend time outside the Department doing something which furthers the Department's own goals (e.g. to attend conferences or participate in CPD activities, or go on research leave), whether during term time or outside of term. In this way staff members know in advance what is likely to be approved, when and how often, and need not worry about 'leaving colleagues or students in the lurch' in their pursuit of what are also Departmental goals.	This will be addressed but with a clear emphasis on ensuring that requests for release time should be oriented towards furthering the goals of the Department; A procedure will be drafted in consultation with staff. This will fall under the remit of the Research Committee.
U.26	Having transitioned to the Maynooth University campus, the Department is now in a position to explore avenues for developing **synergies with other Departments** in terms of research and teaching and learning.	The Department recently recorded an impressive list of collaborations between Departments to date. Therefore, there is evidence of a wide range of collaborations already in existence. Procedures for more formal collaborations between departments are in place. Staff will be encouraged to continue to collaborate across disciplines/faculties but with due regard for continuing to maintain and preserve time and quality of engagement in Department related responsibilities;
U.30	Given the existence of three Education Departments in the same building on MU campus, the Department should explore avenues for the three Departments to develop **synergies and cross-fertilisation** in teaching, scholarship and research.	The Department welcomes this recommendation. Some synergies are already evident and natural collaborations are already emerging; The recruitment of a Professor with responsibility for leading Educational Research may streamline research activity for more focussed and strategic output. The ambition of the Department to develop a 5-year strategic plan will also consider this recommendation.
U.35	The Department should consider the extent to which placements could serve as **sites**	Now that partnerships with schools are well developed, there will be greater opportunities for this to be realised. This can be addressed as a

	for research as well.	context for furthering the research agenda within the 5-year Strategic Plan; Both the Research and School Placement Committee may co-ordinate a response to this recommendation.
U.37	The Department should consider establishing a **regular Research Seminar series** to engage with the rich research culture at Maynooth University, to highlight the various research activities of the Department and to explore and expand the diverse range of modes of research in the field.	The Department welcomes this opportunity. This can be addressed as a feature of the 5-year Strategic Plan.
U.24	Students and members of staff referred to the Department's HOPE Partnership and DICE programme as very valuable offerings which are central to the Department's practice of Froebelian ideals. Concerns about these programmes' sustainability were also expressed; with these in mind, the Department should consider both the potential for research related to HOPE and DICE, as well as ways to garner support and recognition for them (and for staff who work on them) within the University context (such as their alignment with the University's internationalization strategy).	The Department welcomes this opportunity; This can serve as a viable context for research in the context of the 5-year strategic plan.