

Quality Improvement and Assurance

Quality Improvement Plan

*Law*

2016/2017

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## Introduction

The Law Department engaged fully and enthusiastically with the Quality Review process, viewing it as an opportunity to effectively review the 'lifetime' of the Department to date. The Department is gratified by the positive response of the Peer Review Group (PRG) to the Self-Assessment Report (SAR), notably its comments that 'there was very strong congruence between the SAR and the discussions during the review visit itself', and that 'it was evident that members of the staff were familiar with the contents of the SAR...[which] represents good practice in terms of enhancing ownership of the review process and ensuring transparency' (page 5).

The Department is grateful, in particular, to the PRG members for their dedication to the process, and for their very thorough and incisive report. The Department is also extremely grateful to colleagues within Maynooth who organised and supported the process (notably Siobhán Harkin, Helen Berry, and Jim Walsh), and to all of the staff members and students who gave of their time to help put together the SAR. The Department is also grateful to the external stakeholders who spoke with the PRG.

A draft Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) was prepared by the Head of Department, and discussed extensively at a Department meeting on April 12<sup>th</sup> 2017. This updated Draft Plan reflects those discussions.

In the next section, the QIP highlights some of the general points raised by the PRG, which the Department feels to be particularly important. The Department is, naturally, very pleased with the 'Commendations' section of the PRG report, and sees no need to comment further on this section. Arising from that, the QIP may read as a somewhat negative document. This is not to suggest the Department has not reflected closely on the positive aspects of the PRG report; it is simply to note that the Department has chosen to focus in the QIP on the challenges, and potential responses to these.

## General Observations

As noted by the PRG, 'the Department is confronted by a set of interlinked challenges that are related to a rapid and substantial growth in student numbers' (page 5). The rapid growth in undergraduate numbers, PGR students, and taught postgraduates, is the overarching challenge faced by the Department. This issue hangs over many of the PRG recommendations. In particular, the Department would flag (specific recommendations are listed below):

- The flexible structures, and Arts transfer routes;
- Graduate employability;
- Teaching loads (noting that large classes generate more administration/marketing, etc.);
- Class sizes;
- Various recommendations around research leave/ teaching reductions are rendered difficult by the curriculum structures and timetable, and staff-student ratios.

The PRG recommends that 'that additional resources be provided to sustain the Department's impressive research achievements, and in particular to prevent excessive teaching workloads' (page 5). The growth in student numbers, and the complex nature of the Law structures, as well as all of the external linkages praised by the PRG, generate extensive demands on the administrative and

academic staff. The Department feels an urgent review of staffing levels, and grading of administrative staff, is appropriate.

The PRG recommends 'further Staff training/development in all areas' (page 5). Some of this can be provided internally (via mentoring schemes, etc), but the Department is of the view that a University-wide approach to continual professional development (CPD) is required, and should be a focal point of the new Strategic Plan. This includes, *inter alia*:

- Induction for new staff;
- Induction for key administrative posts (e.g. HoD; T&L Director, etc);
- Research mentoring and support;
- Support in developing T&L skills;
- Support for those new to PhD supervision.

The Department sees the recommendation that 'Departmental facilities be upgraded' (page 5), as one that is a priority; particularly the accessibility of New House.

Internal to the Department are recommendations relating to organisation and governance; in particular, 'that a degree of formalisation may be necessary in the governance and organisation of the Department' (page 5). Sections of the SAR (compiled by the HoD) had flagged the heavy centralisation of decision-making in the HoD. The PRG recommends a greater use of committee structures. There is a prevailing view in the Department that committee structures may lead to overly-bureaucratised decision-making processes, and may not yield any efficiencies. However, the Department considers there are areas where these may be appropriate (in relation to PGR students, for example).

Sections of the SAR (compiled by the HoD) had also flagged possible issues with the flat workload model, and the fact that teaching allocation for each staff member is decided upon by the HoD, in consultation with the individual in question. The Department is committed to greater transparency in workload allocation (in particular, formally circulating teaching allocation lists to all staff). However, again, there is a concern that a more granulated workload model may lead to overly-bureaucratised decision-making structures, lack transparency, and may not yield results in terms of equity. There is also some concern that the thrust of the PRG recommendations involve 'time off module teaching', potentially downgrading the value of the teaching role. Again, however, the Department is committed to, collectively, reviewing the flat workload model.

The PRG noted that the Department, perhaps, lacks a distinctive identity (page 7). The Department had considered this issue at its away day. It was noted that the small size of the Department, and the need for a spread of teaching expertise that covers professional accreditation requirements, means that carving out a distinctive 'niche' in terms of research interests is difficult. However, the PRG suggestions that the Department reflect further on this (notably in the context of 'impact') are welcomed.

The PRG has suggested that ‘specific strategies should be designed through a process of consultation within the Department’ (page 5); all recommendations will be considered, and implemented/rejected, only after full and transparent Departmental consultations.

## Responses to PRG

In this section, the Department responds to the recommendations of the PRG. The recommendations will be grouped under three main headings:

- i. Recommendations which the Department could implement unaided (‘D’);
- ii. Recommendations which the Department could implement only with assistance from other bodies within the University and without cost implications (‘U’);
- iii. Recommendations which the Department could implement only if additional resources are provided by the University (‘U+’).

In the case of each recommendation, the Department will indicate:

1. whether or not the recommendation has already been implemented since the PRG Visit (‘C’), whether it is proposed to implement the recommendation (‘P’), or whether the recommendation is not to be implemented (‘R’). In some cases, this field is left blank, where action can only be taken by the University;
2. if the recommendation has been implemented, what actions were taken by the Department or other bodies to achieve implementation, and what resources and costs were involved;
3. in the case of a recommendation, which it is hoped will be implemented:
  - i. what actions are required, by the Department or other bodies, in order that the recommendation be implemented;
  - ii. what resources might be required, including an indication of the level of capital or recurrent expenditure involved;
  - iii. what the proposed timeframe is for the actions required to implement the recommendation;
4. if it has been decided not to implement the recommendation, what the reasons are for this decision.

<u>Recommendation</u>	<u>C/ P/ R</u>	<u>Action Taken/ Proposed/ Reason for non-implementation</u>	<u>Resources/Cost</u>	<u>D/ U/ U+</u>
S.1 The University should review how 'electives' are delivered in the new curriculum.	P	Electives are not open to BCL students (too few credits for accreditation purposes).  Proposed: For University to review, as part of ongoing curriculum reform.	Impact on curriculum/student flexibility.	U
S. 2 The University and Department should review the process by which Arts students can transfer into Law.	P	The Department shares the concerns of the PRG around class sizes, staff/student ratios/ student experience. A particular source of concern is future graduate employment rates.  Proposed: The entry routes, and progression paths, for Law should be reviewed in the context of the University's overall planning in relation to student numbers, entry routes, and progression paths.	Impact on curriculum/student flexibility.	D/U/U+
S.3 It is crucial that staffing in the Department be sustained at a level adequate to support and expand the substantial achievements of the Department while responding to the continuing expansion in student numbers.	P	Two lecturer posts, and a University Tutor post, filled in 2017.  Proposed: Further actions in relation to staffing levels to be agreed in the context of the University Staffing Review Process by early-2018.	Urgent need for further academic <u>and</u> administrative staff.	U+
S. 4 The University should reconsider the Sabbatical Leave Scheme, including by ensuring that it is competitive with schemes in operation at competitor institutions.	P	Proposed: For University to review	Financial	U+

<p>S5. Training for leadership/career development should be strengthened. New initiatives could include a role for the Faculty or University in sharing and circulating best practice in teaching and research e.g. feedback, mentoring, PGR supervision, grant applications, publication strategies etc.</p>	<p>P</p>	<p>The Head, via the FSSE, engages in informal discussions with colleagues on best practice models.</p> <p>Proposed: Department to work with other University units (HR, CTL, RDO, UE) to develop holistic continual professional development (CPD) framework. This should be a core element of the new University Strategic Plan.</p>	<p>Some costs to central University units to facilitate</p>	<p>D/U/U+</p>
<p>S. 6 The University's awareness of the benefits of involving legal researchers in large-scale grant applications, including by benefiting from the familiarity of legal academics with impact pathways, is welcome and could be further enhanced and acted upon.</p>	<p>C/P</p>	<p>A number of staff have been involved in interdisciplinary research bids (Jean Monnet/ IRC/ H2020)</p> <p>Comment: MUSSI to help drive future agenda here.</p> <p>NB: MU does not currently support bids to the European Commission DG Justice. This policy to be raised with VP Research and Innovation, with a view to having this position modified.</p>	<p>Support from RDO/ Review of situation re DG Justice.</p>	<p>D/U/U+</p>
<p>S.7 The University should recognise that there is value for academics in an Irish University to publish in both Irish and international outlets.</p>	<p>C/P</p>	<p>Departmental policy is to encourage a balanced approach, recognising the importance of academic staff in an Irish institution publishing on/contributing to the Irish Legal system (as it recognises the value of publishing in journals not in the English language, where appropriate).</p> <p>Comment: It is important that this be reflected in promotion processes</p>		<p>D/U</p>

S.8 The University should take steps to raise awareness of the Erasmus+ scheme and to streamline the application process.	P	The Department has tried to access this scheme and found it difficult.  Proposed: review operation of scheme in MU with relevant colleagues (International Office, etc)		D/U
S.9 The University should address the accessibility problems of the Law Department (wheelchair access).	P	Extremely urgent. Although New House is an old building, it should be possible to provide access to the Ground Floor, at the very least.  Proposed: Relevant University offices to review	Financial Cost	U+
S. 10 The University should consider how to address the space needs of the Law Department e.g. meeting room space.	P	Key problems are space for meetings/ space for PhD and post-doctoral students. Could there be space provided in other South Campus Buildings?  Proposed: review with relevant stakeholders (e.g Estates, etc)	Possible financial cost	U/U+

<u>Recommendation</u>	<u>C/ P/ R</u>	<u>Action Taken/ Proposed/ Reason for non-implementation</u>	<u>Resources/Cost</u>	<u>D/ U/ U+</u>
U.1 The Department's workload model should be reconsidered, potentially to encompass at least certain crucial incremental adjustments. These initiatives could include e.g. teaching reduction for research-related administrative roles and for PGR supervision.	C/P	There is a spectrum of views on this issue within the Department, but a general sense of caution about 'excessive formalisation'.  Details on individuals' workload circulated to all staff.	Reductions in teaching loads will increase pressure on occasional pay budget, particularly in light of increasing student numbers	D/U+



		Proposed: Review of workload model to be undertaken in 2017-18 academic year, in consultation with staff members.		
U.2 The Department should consider the use of a more formal committee structure to carry out certain responsibilities.	C	A Committee structure has been established covering Undergraduate Studies; Postgraduate Studies; Teaching and Learning; Postgraduate Research; Research; and International Outreach and Engagement.	Possible increases in admin workload for some staff/ reductions for others	D
U.3 The Department should consider a formal process for staff/student consultation, especially in the light of the diverse pathways and increasing student numbers.	C	The Department considers it has very clear, and incremental, structures in place (module coordinators→ programme coordinators→ Director of UG, and PG, Studies→ HoD). Meetings held once a semester with class reps.  Consultation structures have been communicated to students on a 'rolling' basis.		D
U.4 The Department should consider how to address undergraduate student requests for more tutorials or other forms of small group teaching.	P	Proposed: Increased numbers of tutorials. Explore resource-neutral methods ('drop-in' clinics, etc) during 2017-18, noting that occasional pay budget and timetabling restrictions may make this difficult to implement	Financial/ timetable	D/U/ U+
U.5 We recommend the Department keep the new feedback policy under review and consider how to provide feedback efficiently even in large classes.	P	Departmental policy is that <u>all</u> students receive feedback on <u>all</u> continuous assessment.  Proposed: Review to ensure policy is being observed. Discussions with CTL around models of 'feedback for large		D

		classes' to take place during summer 2017.		
U.6 The Department should review how it communicates careers advice to students and should seek to develop an alumni network.	C	The Department engages actively with alumni, keeping a database of contacts, and informing alumni or events/ inviting alumni back (e.g. to judge competitions, give Orientation talks, etc)	Support from Careers Office	D/U/U+
U.7 The Department should discuss how research space might be created within the teaching calendar.	C/P	Teaching allocation is agreed between the HoD and staff members before the summer. Two factors inhibit 'front-loading' and 'back-loading'. First, programme structures are quite inflexible given timetabling and curriculum restrictions. Secondly, teaching allocation tries to ensure staff teach in their areas of speciality.  Proposed: Notwithstanding the above, the possibilities for front-, or back-, loading to be discussed as part of teaching allocation for 2017-18.		D
U.8 The Department should consider whether the Department and its staff are being spread too thinly.	P	As a new Law School, the Department has worked very hard on promotion (e.g. designing and financing its own promotional materials) and outreach (school visits/ taster days, etc).  Proposed: Department to review promotional/outreach activities with a view to scaling back	Other units in the University might need to fulfil extra functions in terms of outreach and engagement	D/U
U.9 The Department should consider how library purchases benefit different student cohorts.	P	The Department has requested the Library increase holdings of core UG	None (library budget remains in surplus)	D/U

		<p>texts (which, for Irish law, are generally expensive and not available as e-books).</p> <p>PGR students have been asked to submit requests for library resources.</p> <p>Proposed: Department to continue to engage with library around core texts. Department to continue to ask PGR students to specify needs</p>		
U. 10 The Department should take heed of external examiner advice that it is appropriate to use the full range of first class marks.	P	Proposed: Advice to be re-emphasised to examiners ahead of 2017-18 exam period.		D
U. 11 The establishment of a Research Committee could be considered as part of the introduction of a committee structure.	C	As part of the overall review of workload/ administrative responsibilities, a Research Committee has been established.		D
U. 12 The annual review process for research students could be reconsidered to ensure that it is not unduly burdensome. Staff review panels would be particularly welcome.	C	<p>The Departmental Review Process operates within the University framework. A Departmental Research Student Progress Committee (DRSPC) has been established.</p> <p>Consultation has begun, and will continue, with the new Dean of Graduate Studies, around broad issues related to PGR students.</p>		D/U
U. 13 The Department should continue to reflect collectively on its publication strategy e.g. publishing rates, placement etc.	P	Proposed: Departmental models of peer-support/mentoring to be established (for staff willing to engage in such a process) during 2017-18. Consultations will take place with relevant stakeholders (Director of MUSSI, etc)		D/U

<p>U. 14 The research elements of the promotion strategy should be transparent and staff should be provided with appropriate support in achieving these targets.</p>	<p>P</p>	<p>Proposed: Support from HR/ UE on transparency of the promotion strategy.</p> <p>Department to introduce, following consultation with staff, model of 'research leave' for 2018-19.</p>	<p>Reductions in teaching loads will increase pressure on occasional pay budget, particularly in light of increasing student numbers</p>	<p>D/ U+</p>
<p>U. 15 Continued efforts to attract external funding are welcome</p>	<p>P</p>	<p>Proposed: Continuing focus on research mentorship (U.13) and exploration with MUSSI as to how to best pursue inter-disciplinary bids. Research Leave (U.14) to include time to prepare major funding applications.</p>	<p>Reductions in teaching loads will increase pressure on occasional pay budget, particularly in light of increasing student numbers</p>	<p>D/ U+</p>
<p>U. 16 The Advisory Board would ideally play an increased role in supporting the Department's internal and external engagement</p>	<p>C/P</p>	<p>The Advisory Board has been extremely supportive in, <i>inter alia</i>, giving seminars/talks, facilitating work placement/ providing funded scholarships, etc. This work will continue.</p> <p>Proposed: The PRG feels that the level of Departmental 'impact' is perhaps insufficiently acknowledged and/or promoted (internally and externally), and insufficiently co-ordinated. Consultations will be held within the Department to consider a more strategic approach, and with the Director of External Affairs.</p>		<p>D/U</p>
<p>U. 17 The results of a recent academic staff planning review were not available to us, but the PGR strongly supports the Department's application for new staff.</p>	<p>C/P</p>	<p>4 posts approved in advance of 2017-18.</p> <p>Further actions in relation to staffing levels to be agreed in the context of the University Staffing Review Process by early-2018.</p>	<p>Urgent need for more academic staff. Possible impact on curriculum/ student flexibility.</p>	<p>U+</p>

<p>U. 18 The PRG recommends additional help for the administrative staff, and the Department should also investigate, with the appropriate University office, whether some tasks (e.g. student transfers, the logistics of mature-student entrance exams) could be handled centrally rather than at Departmental level.</p>	<p>C/P</p>	<p>Additional administrative position approved in 2017.</p> <p>Proposed: University to review balance of Departmental/ central administration allocation of tasks. The Department will request an urgent review of levels, and grading, of administrative staff in Law, with senior management.</p>	<p>Increases in numbers of administrative staff (centrally and/or Departmentally); review of the grading of administrative staff in law</p>	<p>U+</p>
<p>U. 19 The PRG recommends that Faculty-wide <i>fora</i> for the exchange of ideas be investigated, so that there is an opportunity to learn best-practice (e.g. grant-writing, giving student feedback) from more senior colleagues in cognate disciplines.</p>	<p>P</p>	<p>Proposed: In addition to proposals at S.5, U.1, U.11, and U.13, the Department will consult with colleagues in the FSS, the Deans, and CTL, with a view to the establishment of such fora.</p>		<p>D/U</p>
<p>U. 20 The PRG recommends increasing the provision of formal career development training opportunities and the clear promotion of these and existing schemes (Aurora, mentoring).</p>	<p>P</p>	<p>Proposed: In addition to proposals at S.5, S.8, U.13, U.14 ,U.15 and U.18, the Department will consult with colleagues in relevant offices (HR, CTL, MUSSI, RDO, etc) with a view to enhancing career development training opportunities.</p>	<p>University may need to resource CPD measures.</p>	<p>D/U/U+</p>