

Quality Improvement and Assurance

Quality Improvement Plan

Department of Sociology, Maynooth University

2016-2017

Date: November 2017

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The Sociology Department engaged fully with the Quality Review process, viewing it as opportunity to reflect on our achievements since the last Quality Review in 2008 and to consider how we might plan into the future. The Department was very encouraged by the overwhelmingly positive response of the Peer Review Group (PRG) to the Self-Assessment Report (SAR) notably its comment that “we were furnished with a highly accessible and well-structured ‘Self-Assessment Review’ which outlined clearly the activities and record of the Department since 2008,” (page 3). The PRG described the Department as “an impressive, efficiently-run unit,” (page 4). Despite the Department’s profile as “teaching intensive with a high staff-student ratio” the PRG commended the Department for its “impressive research culture which marks it out as perhaps the leading sociology department on the island of Ireland.” (page 4).

We welcome the list of commendations that appear in Section 6.2 (page 6) of the PRG Report and which are worth reproducing here:

- We commend the department for its commitment to the pastoral care of a large student body with diverse and complex demands.
- The department is adaptive, flexible and agile in responding to institutional initiatives.
- We are impressed by the engagement and activity of staff on University-level committees and in wider initiatives
- We commend the way in which staff have developed a public and media –profile for the department.
- We were impressed by the efficiency with which the department is run, and by the way staff work with departmental administrators to service departmental needs. The departmental administrators are highly efficient and professional.
- We commend the strength of the research culture in the department at staff and post-graduate level.

With regard to the recommendations, we have listed them below alongside our responses in terms of proposals/actions taken; reflection on resources/costs, and identification of key responsible agent. Our responses are informed by our core aim of maintaining and enhancing a culture of mutual respect and collegiality.

The Department of Sociology is grateful to the members of the PRG for the professionalism and thoroughness with which they undertook the task of the review and for their clear and precise report. The Department is very grateful to a large number of people including: colleagues within Maynooth University who organised and supported the SAR process and PRG Site visit (Siobhan Harkin, Helen Berry and Jim Walsh of the Strategy and Quality Office); Sociology staff members who fully engaged with the process; undergraduate and postgraduate students and adjunct staff who met with the PRG group, and the internal management members and external stakeholders who also provided their valuable perspective to the PRG. We would also like to thank the administrative staff in Sociology, Trish Connerty, Aine Edmonds and Deirdre Ward who made a significant contribution at every stage of the process. Finally, our thanks to postgraduate student Madhu Kambamettu who compiled several of the Appendices that accompanied the SAR.

A draft Quality Improvement Plan was prepared by the HoD in August 2017 and circulated to staff for comment. After comments were received, the draft was amended and tabled for approval at the Department meeting on Wednesday, October 4, 2017. The HoD subsequently submitted the draft to the

Strategy and Quality Office, and met with Siobhan Harkin to review. On Siobhan’s advice, the HoD met with the Dean of FSS, Dr. Mark Maguire, who suggested amendments that have now been made to this final draft, which was formally approved at the Department meeting on Wednesday, Nov 8, 2017.

#### Institutional Recommendations

Recommendation	Additional PRG comment	Action taken or proposed	Resources/costs	Key responsible agent
<p>I.1 New accommodation is required as a matter of urgency</p>	<p>As a learning, research and work environment, the Auxilia building is fundamentally unfit for purpose and presents significant health and safety issues for staff and postgraduate students.</p>	<p>The Department has had ongoing engagement with the maintenance office, health and safety office and campus services office over building issues since Auxilia was tenanted following refurbishment in 2007. As recently as September 2017, office accommodation in the building was flooded and required remedial works.</p> <p>We are aware that the University is scoping out a new Humanities and Social Science building into which it is intended to decant those currently located in “hostel” accommodation. However, there is no firm timeline on this project at present, nor a commitment</p>	<p>We do not believe that spending more money on the maintenance of Auxilia is justified given its chronic problems. Nor do we think that stop gap solutions such as relocating staff to other “hostel” type accommodation (such as the old Education House) is acceptable. We welcome the University’s proposal to develop new, fit for purpose office space for its staff. We appreciate there is a significant cost involved but this must be weighed against the deleterious effects on staff and postgraduates of working long-term in substandard accommodation.</p>	<p>University</p>

		<p>as to which Departments will be prioritised for relocation.</p> <p>The HoD met with the new VP for Estates and Capital Investment on Aug 11, 2017 where PRG issues were reiterated, but no immediate plans to rehouse Sociology staff are in train.</p> <p>We propose that the University identify the Sociology Department's staff and postgraduate students as a "priority" for rehousing in any new university development.</p>		
I.2 The staff-student ratio should not be increased	<p>More academic staff are needed in order to maintain the level of teaching and student-centred activities that currently characterise the department.</p> <p>Sociology and Politics have retained their footprint in First Arts in 2017-18 while other disciplines have recorded a significant drop in student numbers.</p>	<p>One lecturer post was advertised in May 2017 and filled in June 2017. This will allow the Department to maintain its staff student ratio at current level for the academic year 2017-18, and begin the process of supporting the new Criminology degree. Indications are that the provision of core modules in the criminology degree from</p>	<p>Replacement of posts as retirements occur in 2018 and 2019. Effectively, this will not add to existing staff cost but rather reduce it slightly since the posts are likely to be advertised as entry-level positions.</p> <p>However, given that over 400 students are registered in First Year Criminology we anticipate an influx of up to 200 students into our second year programme to take two core, Sociology-provided Criminology</p>	University

		<p>2018-19 will significantly increase the Departmental work load.</p> <p>The Department is facing the retirement of two long-serving members of staff, one in 2018 and the other in 2019.</p> <p>We propose that both posts be replaced and that a new post (possibly shared with Law) be put in place to help service the Criminology degree as it beds down in the programme.</p>	<p>modules. We may also see higher numbers taking Sociology and Criminology combination and Politics and Criminology combination. Increased student numbers will merit (and fund) an additional Sociology/Criminology post.</p>	
<p>I.3 There is an urgent need to clarify University research policy, the role of research institutes and their relationship with departments</p>		<p>We envision that the New Strategic Plan (to which the Department has made a submission) will clarify university research policy. The Department has strong links to MUSSI through existing research projects and intends to work with MUSSI and the University research infrastructure, to optimise our research opportunities including collaborative projects.</p>	<p>Supports for staff to engage in research have costs attached. Seed funding for staff to scope out research projects, realistic travel grants to attend international conferences and a viable sabbatical leave scheme are basic supports required to maintain the outstanding research profile in the Department, despite our relatively high teaching load.</p>	<p>University and Department's sub-committee on research</p>

## Recommendations for the Department

Recommendation	Action taken/or proposed	Resource/cost implications	Key responsible agent
<p>D.1 We recommend that care be taken to develop inclusiveness by recognising all staff research interests, particularly those whose areas are not central to the Department's main clusters.</p>	<p>The Department is proud of its research strengths that put us on a par with comparable institutions internationally. We have an outstanding record of high quality publications.</p> <p>A key priority identified in the SAR is to renew our efforts to help and support each other and our postgraduate students in respect of research epistemologies, methodologies and career pathways. We will identify and develop practical actions towards achieving greater inclusiveness.</p> <p>We hope to trial a "Chill and Chat" event on a scheduled basis in the Resource Room with lunch provided by the Department in 2017-18; staff are encouraged to tell others what they are doing, ask others what they are doing; and be</p>	<p>Department will fund costs associated with running research support activities within reason. Funds should be available also from the Research Development Office.</p>	<p>Departmental sub-committee on research, Research Development Office</p>

	<p>aware of including and interacting with others in the Department.</p> <p>We propose a regular staff/postgraduate departmental seminar to include the presentation of the work of recent PhDs, both within the context of the clusters, and without.</p> <p>Staff members found the January 2017 Away Day very useful for a full and frank exchange on a range of work-related issues. We will explore the utility of a Department Away Day to ventilate issues that arise from time to time and seek workable solutions.</p>	<p>Away Day funding should be provided by the Quality and Strategy Office/Human Resources since such activities have implications for staff morale and well-being.</p>	<p>Human Resources, Quality and Strategy Office.</p>
<p>D.2 The Department needs to develop further a flexible and multi-layered research strategy that includes protected time for research</p>	<p>Please see I.3 above. The Department affirms its commitment to supporting independent, pure research objectives <i>and</i> more targeted, institutional research objectives. The Department has a strong track record of securing research funding and will endeavour to maintain that record into the future, while acknowledging that not all research has to be funded.</p>	<p>Much of staff time is taken up with teaching large numbers of students, assessing large numbers of student work/examinations and supervising significant numbers of BA/MA projects throughout the academic year. To safeguard the research function, additional staff will be required so that the teaching/administrative workload of individual colleagues is reduced. (See I.2 above)</p>	<p>University and Department</p>

	<p>We will work toward devising a multi-layered research strategy and identify the kinds of supports required to create protected time for research.</p>	<p>We will draw on the support and expertise of the Dean of Research and the RDO office to help devise supports for more protected research time.</p>	
<p>D.3 Potential collaborations might be developed with other cognate disciplines with a view to sharing expertise and resources. For example, postgraduate led inter-departmental research seminars might be encouraged</p>	<p>The Department of Sociology has been at the forefront of interdisciplinary postgraduate education and already welcomes students from cognate disciplines onto postgraduate programmes. The Department also cross lists modules with a number of other Departments, and has a number of co-supervision arrangements (with cognate depts.) for doctoral students.</p> <p>There is scope for greater integration across the Faculty but this should ideally be driven by the Dean rather than a single Department.</p> <p>The HoD has already briefed the incoming Dean at a meeting on June 26, 2017 on the need to address this issue in a Faculty context.</p>	<p>The FSS should make a concerted effort to develop a shared graduate student strategy that would involve closer collaboration and sharing of expertise and resources across Departments and possibly faculties.</p> <p>If resources and expertise were better utilized it might result in certain savings particularly by eliminating overlaps in modules.</p> <p>However, if there is a financial disincentive for sharing resources rather than securing them for one's own Department, this strategy will not work.</p>	<p>Faculty, Dean of Graduate Studies and Department</p>



<p>D.4 The Department should consider introducing a structured system of staff mentoring for career development.</p>	<p>The Department accepts that staff mentoring tends to take place in an informal rather than a structured way.</p> <p>Professional development for academics is to be welcome but should be preserved in the main within academic units and professional associations in order to maintain professional independence and academic freedom.</p> <p>For a mentoring system to work, time, energy and resources have to be put in place. Such a system would also need “buy-in” not just from an individual Department but across the University. For instance, it might be best to match junior people with senior people in cognate rather than the same Department.</p> <p>The Department believes that instituting a mentoring system (whether structured or informal) is the responsibility of the institution rather than an individual Department. The Department is happy to engage in a pilot version</p>	<p>There would be costs associated with the provision of mentoring training that would have to be borne by the University.</p> <p>The university should expand its offerings of professional development opportunities to staff, including mentoring.</p> <p>There would be a cost (for staff) in terms of time devoted to such training and follow up mentoring relationship by both parties, but particularly, the mentor. Professional development and mentoring programmes would need to be recognised for example, as a service contribution for promotion.</p>	<p>University/Strategy and Quality Office /Staff Development Office</p>
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	of such a scheme in the context of a university-wide approach to continual professional development (CPD).		
D.5 There needs to be a formal ongoing conversation about the relationship between sociology and politics. This should encompass both the identity of the students on both the Politics and Sociology degrees, and the roles, responsibilities and workload of staff.	<p>The Department recognises the need to review the Sociology and Politics relationship, ten years after the Politics degree was introduced.</p> <p>The Department has established a special sub-committee in the year 2017-18 chaired by the Dean of Social Science to examine ways of making the Politics programme more sustainable into the future. The Director of Admissions is a member of the sub-committee.</p>	While the Institutional Research Office and Admissions Office can play a role in generating data for the Politics evaluation (presumably at no extra cost) there may be costs involved in conducting research, gathering information, designing new brochures and web page for politics, and marketing Politics more actively to teachers and target groups of students.	University, Communications Offices, Admissions Office, Faculty Office, Special sub-committee on sustaining the Politics degree
D.6 We recommend a regular review of teaching and administration duties aiming for equity and transparency in distribution	<p>The Department has a strong commitment to excellence in Teaching and Learning. We also have highly robust quality assurance procedures in place. We regularly review our teaching provision.</p> <p>The First Year programme was re-structured in 2016-17 as part of the Curriculum Initiative. We propose a review of the first year</p>		Departmental Undergraduate Sub-Committee/Centre for Teaching and Learning

	<p>changes after the third year of its operation is complete (2019-2020).</p> <p>Given that we have introduced a number of new MA programmes in recent years, with variable success, we are keeping our Taught MA offerings under review. We are mindful of the degree to which factors beyond our control such as the reduction in postgraduate grants have impacted on programme take-up.</p> <p>In terms of administrative allocation, The HoD generally makes a list of administrative duties at the beginning of the academic year, and in consultation with staff makes an allocation of tasks. This is published and posted in the Departmental office. Due to a variety of reasons, the administrative workload may fall short of being fully equitable. This issue was raised at the Away Day and it was agreed that the sub-committee system in the Department be re-vamped and a more distributed form of power be introduced, to share the administrative workload more evenly.</p>	<p>We believe that as part of the Strategic Plan, the University should develop a faculty-wide strategy for the provision of Taught MA programmes, including promotion/communications and Internationalisation. This may help to address duplication and make for more equitable workloads across the university. We are happy to contribute to such an initiative.</p> <p>There is always a challenge in attaining equity in allocating teaching and administrative tasks. Some tasks are more onerous than others, some people put more into the assigned task than do others, some people have personal situations that impact on their work lives and limit the range of tasks to which they can be assigned, some people are more “present” than others in the Department and end up expending more “face-time” with students. It is not possible to control for all the variables and ensure a fully equitable distribution of resources.</p> <p>However, we could try to weight each role, and circulate people into and out of administrative roles on a three-year basis. Service in a heavily weighted role could be followed by service in a less heavily weighted role.</p> <p>The Department plans to submit a case for more administrative support to the next Staffing Review round given the increasing student numbers, increased complexity of administrative tasks and</p>	<p>University/FSS Departmental Sub- committee on MA programmes/Graduate Studies Office/International Office</p> <p>University</p>
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		the additional pressure that is impacting on both administrative and academic staff.	
D. 7 We suggest the introduction of a module co-ordinator for the Special Topics module, with responsibility for ensuring consistency in the process of supervision and marking. Currently, there is too much variability between tutors [Special Topic leaders] in terms of how much input they have into students' written work. Review of the application of ethics process for student research projects is also needed.	As noted in D.6 above, the Department regularly reviews the programme of study. In the interests of academic freedom we have been flexible about how individual Special Topic groups are organised. However, we have assigned the role of Special Topics Co-ordinator for 2017-18 to a senior member of staff, with a view to addressing the core concerns raised by the PRG.	An additional administrative role has been created which increases the administrative workload across the board for the Department.	Special Topics Co-ordinator and HoD
D.8 We recognise the extremely efficient administrative team that supports most activities in a large department; a review of whether extra support is needed is required.	<p>The Department recognises the stellar work of the existing administrative staff. The HoD met with HR Manager (13/7/2017) to discuss the possibilities of securing further administrative resources.</p> <p>The Department intends to undertake a review of whether and what extra support is required as per the PRG recommendation with a view to making a submission later this year. (see also D. 6 above)</p> <p>One of our priorities arising from the SAR is to secure the services of</p>	<p>There would be a marginal increase in cost to the University if our administrative support was increased, but this would only bring us into line with other comparable Departments.</p> <p>There is a strong case (linked to the case we intend to make for extra administrative resources) for a</p>	<p>University</p> <p>University</p>

	<p>a part-time media &amp; communications officer/administrative support to enable us to be proactive about promoting our work, and in particular to identify ways of profiling our public sociology role our contribution to civil society and our Politics programme.</p> <p>Many of the staff have done media training offered by the University and we have a section on our website on public engagement with links to videos, podcasts, etc.</p>	<p>post that focuses on promoting and increasing the visibility of the Department, nationally and internationally. The cost of such a post would be offset by improvements in our national and international profile and a greater capacity to attract students, especially to our postgraduate programmes.</p>	
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