



NUI MAYNOOTH
Ollscoil na hÉireann Mhá Nuad

**Quality Review of the
Research Support Office
21 – 22 September 2010**

Peer Review Report

Peer Review Group:

External Reviewer:

**Dr Peter Hedges,
Director, Research Support Services,
University of Warwick, UK.**

Internal Reviewer:

**Professor Jim Walsh,
Deputy President & Vice-President for
Innovation, NUI Maynooth.**

Executive Summary

This Peer Review Assessment Report on the NUIM Research Support Office (RSO) has been compiled following a review visit held on 21-22nd September 2010. The key conclusions and recommendations of the Review are as follows:

- NUIM's recent research funding performance has been strong and the contribution of the RSO to this success is recognised widely by University stakeholders. While the quality of support provided by the Office is recognised and acknowledged, all agree that there is scope for further improvement in the support services the Office provides. A key challenge is to ensure that, while appropriate focus is maintained on large funding proposals, RSO must provide appropriate levels of support to all Faculties. Consistent and strong feedback was received on the performance of RSO staff in their provision of support for academic staff. RSO is a small office staffed with motivated and talented individuals that have the respect of academy. It would appear to offer excellent value for money given the level of research income generated by NUIM.
- The University should acknowledge that tensions exist between RSO and the Research Accounts Office (RAO). Workloads in the RAO appear to be a significant issue and opportunities to rebalance workloads should be explored: the Vice President for Research and University Bursar must be fully involved in this dialogue. There is a case for increased support for the management of research support, however this need spans the pre/post award interface, hence funding for new posts should be considered as part of a wider review, including the potential integration of the two functions.
- The RSO has devoted significant effort to support and deliver an effective Research Information System (RIS). The Proposal Tracking module appears to be delivering effective support for RSO and the RAO and any development of the InfoEd suite at NUIM should concentrate on improved functionality to enhance effective working between the two offices. In contrast, the real or perceived lack of usability of the Genius system will be a major barrier to its increased use by academic staff. Improved research performance management information will aid research planning at the University.
- The process for ensuring senior management oversight of submission of research proposals appears relatively weak, although current practice appears to be a significant improvement over that seen previously at NUIM. Opportunities exist to clarify and develop policies and procedures, for example on costing and pricing of research, and could be included within the responsibilities of the proposed Head of RSO post. A significant burden of academic oversight of research proposals rests with the Vice President for Research – in contrast, Heads of Academic Departments and Deans appear to have little oversight of the submission of applications from their Departments.
- Given the relatively limited scale of high risk contract work at NUIM it would appear that any resource available to recruit professional contract staff would appear best dedicated within the Commercialisation Office. Training and development of existing RSO staff should enable them to undertake effectively the lower risk contract work, for example research collaboration agreements.
- Further development of NUIM European Strategy would appear to be timely – NUIM's aspirations for Framework 7 funding are appropriate but competition for that funding will increase as national funding across Europe contracts. Existing activities already in train at NUIM to develop EU funding opportunities appear to be appropriate.
- NUIM could consider further refining its definitions of success in achieving its strategic goals in research. The objectives of the RSO should be set, and its success in achieving

its objectives should be judged, as far as is possible, in terms of its support for the University's broad strategy for research not just specific research income targets.

The NUIM Research Support Office

This RSO is a young organisation, developed from the Department of Research and Graduate Studies, itself only founded in 2002. The Office, while still relatively small, has expanded rapidly in recent years, reflecting the growth in NUIM's external research income which, at 25% of turnover, appears impressive for a relatively small University. Recent improvement in NUIM's performance against other external research benchmarks such as citation indices reflect the importance of the role of the RSO in underpinning the continued generation of relatively high levels of external research income.

RSO has three strategic objectives: to provide high quality support for active researchers; development of a research culture that will support international competitiveness; and to provide high quality support for the VPR in policy formulation and management information. RSO employs six members of staff, four of which have broadly executive functions, and two of whom have a primarily administrative role. The Office is directly line managed by the Vice-President for Research (VPR) and forms a key part of his core responsibilities alongside the Commercialisation Office and the Graduate Studies Office.

RSO largely manages what are usually referred to as "pre-award" processes in research, in particular the submission of applications for external research funding, support for the development and implementation of research policy, and delivery of research information systems. The RSO works closely with the RAO, part of the University core finance function, that deals with what are usually referred to a "post-award" processes, in particular management of invoices and claims. This division of responsibility between pre-award and post-award teams is relatively common in Universities, although the management of such teams is often integrated within a broader research management function. A constructive and important relationship is also maintained with the Commercialisation Office. RSO's other key internal interfaces are with academic departments, research institutes and individual academic members of staff.

NUIM's recent research funding performance has been strong and the contribution of the RSO to this success is recognised widely by University stakeholders. While the quality of support provided by the Office is recognised and acknowledged, all agree that there is scope for further improvement in the support services the Office provides. Recent changes to management of current or former functions of the RSO, for example the management of ethical oversight of research, and the separation of responsibility for management of the Graduate School, appear appropriate and have the support of the academic community. Importantly, these changes appear to have been implemented by current (and former) RSO staff very effectively.

Support for Active Researchers

RSO core activities include (i) provision of information on research funding opportunities and NUIM's policies and procedures; (ii) support for the RIS; (iii) training workshops and seminars; (iv) assistance with the preparation and submission of research proposals; (v) preparation of research contracts and agreements; (vi) delivery of internal funding schemes. Of these key services, support for the preparation and submission of proposals is the highest profile and was the basis of particularly strong positive feedback during the peer review visit. Issues that arose during the visit on these key activities, and potential actions to address them, are as follows:

- Information provision: In an ideal word, information on research funding should be provided to key academic staff in a highly tailored format, designed to suit the specific needs of the individual academic. Feedback received at the visit indicated that academic staff would prefer information to be much more tailored to their needs in line with this ideal. In practice, this ideal is virtually impossible to achieve given: firstly, many funding opportunities, for example fellowship deadlines, apply to all; secondly, potential applicants attention should ideally be drawn to unexpected opportunities that may not necessarily lie within their core area of expertise; and thirdly, the vast scale of the work necessary to tailor information to individual staff makes this impractical. RSO provides NUIM staff with access to Researchresearch.com, widely regarded as best in class of funding opportunity databases and registered users of the site can develop their own bespoke searches for funding opportunities. That said, RSO should continue to, where possible and as resources allow, circulate tailored information on funding opportunities to their potential recipients, ideally at least at Faculty level. Further refinement and targeting of information on funding opportunities will be important as competition for funding increases both nationally and internationally. One-to-one dissemination of funding opportunities is the ideal, and could be achieved through the expanded use of Departmental surgeries held by RSO staff.
- Support for the RIS: The RSO has devoted significant effort to support and deliver an effective Research Information System (RIS). System operators and users are not, in general, well served by InfoEd – the experience at Warwick is that the software is relatively unstable, unreliable and requires significant maintenance support. NUIM's use of InfoEd appears sensible and appropriate, and feedback from RSO and RAO staff on the Proposal Tracking module was generally very favourable. Feedback from academic users of the Genius module was universally poor, although RSO appear to have done an excellent job in tailoring its use to meet core requirements, for example the generation of the President's Report. The proposed additional investments to enhance and upgrade the RIS appear to be sensible and appropriate given NUIM's existing exploitation of InfoEd's capabilities.

Given that the PT module appears to be delivering effective support for RSO and the RAO, any development of the InfoEd suite at NUIM should concentrate on improved functionality to enhance effective working between the two offices. The strategy to concentrate on a "stripped down" application of the Genius module is very sensible, but the real or perceived lack of usability of system will be a major barrier to its increased use by academic staff. Senior Management support will be essential if NUIM wishes to significantly improve data input to the RIS, for example on publications, by academic staff. RSO recognises the importance of good quality management information on research application performance, for example funding success rates, and InfoEd will provide good quality data on this over time.

- Training workshops and seminars: RSO activities appear appropriate but could be repeated on a more regular basis, assuming that there is sufficient academic interest. Future training events should continue to focus on new funding sources given the aspiration to grow and diversify NUIM's research income.
- Support for research proposals: The most important role of the RSO is to provide support for active researchers at NUIM in the development of high quality research proposals. Consistent and strong feedback was received on the performance of RSO staff in this regard, for example citing that RSO is approachable, flexible and can get things done. RSO staff can, and do, contribute to the development and shaping of research proposals and should not undersell their ability to contribute well beyond the provision of guidance on funding rules, costing of proposals and the administration of the application process.

A key challenge for the operation of all research support offices is to manage and prioritise activities and ensure that support is delivered to the maximum benefit of the University. It is easy for offices to, by default, concentrate activity on the development of large funding proposals, while arguably the greater longer term priority is to develop and maintain key relationships with research-active academic staff. RSO staff should seek to expand and maximise their opportunities to interact with the University faculty, for example exploring opportunities to hot desk in Departments or hold regular drop-in or “surgery” sessions in key areas.

It is clear that tensions exist between RSO and the RAO and improvement of working across this interface would appear to be a priority. Recent benchmarking undertaken by the University of Warwick on staffing levels in post-award finance functions at UK Universities would indicate that staffing levels in the RAO are low, and hence pressure of workloads in the RAO are an issue. There may be opportunities to rebalance workloads through further clarification and redistribution of some elements of the post-award function, for example in-award and post-hoc reporting. The Vice President for Research and University Bursar must be fully involved in this dialogue to ensure that a full and effective discussion of all options is undertaken. There is a case for increased investment in the management of research support, however this need spans the pre/post award interface. Given the apparent pressures with RAO, and the imperative to improve joint working across this interface, the proposed role of Head of the RSO should be considered but as part of a wider review of the potential integration of the two functions.

The senior management oversight of submission of research proposals appears relatively weak, although current practice appears to be significantly improved over that seen previously at NUIM. Opportunities exist to clarify and develop policies and procedures, for example on costing and pricing of research, and could be included within the responsibilities of the proposed Head of RSO. A significant burden of academic oversight of research proposals rests with the Vice President for Research and this burden will only increase as NUIM achieves its vision of a significant increase in the number of highly research active staff. In particular, it is surprising that Heads of Academic Departments and Deans appear to have little oversight of the submission of applications from their Departments.

Some additional technical suggestions on areas where RSO could develop its expertise include: (i) development of a fully rigorous process for the costing, pricing and Department/Faculty approval of research proposal proposals; (ii) proposal submission and success rate statistics and trends analysis for Departments, Research Institutes, and ideally for individual applicants; (iii) University-wide performance statistics and trends analysis for key funding agencies; and (iv) an “opportunity analysis” to identify new potential funding sources that could offer at least €1 million/annum to NUIM over the next 3-5 years.

- **Research contracts:** NUIM has seen an increasing throughput of research contracts and agreements and the most significant risks from this appears to arise from commercially-funded research contracts, responsibility for which rests with the Commercialisation Office. RSO has identified the need to increase its core skill base in contracts, but given the relatively limited scale of high risk contract work at NUIM it would appear that any resource available to recruit professional contract staff would appear best dedicated within the Commercialisation Office. Training and development of existing RSO staff should enable them to undertake effectively the lower risk contract work, for example research collaboration agreements.

Research contracts are a problematic area, particularly regarding institutional decision making and the quantification of risk. This is a particular problem in medically-related research, or where products may have human application. NUIM’s approach to

contracting seems pragmatic and sensible given the relatively low volume of activity, hence while additional investment in this area would be valuable, it would not appear to be as high a priority as increased investment in post award management.

- *Delivery of internal funding schemes*: This service appears to be appropriate and well managed. No specific feedback on these activities was received during the peer review visit, and hence no specific recommendations have been made for change in this area.

Development of Research Culture

Perhaps unsurprisingly, less feedback was received during the peer review visit on these areas of RSO activity. NUIM's activities in this area, and RSO's support for them, appear to be timely and appropriate based on the information presented in the self assessment report. The recent changes to the management of ethical oversight of research appear to have been implemented very effectively – as NUIM does not have a Medical School, the burden of ethical oversight of research at the University is relatively low. As an observation, the number of proposals requiring ethical approval appears to be low, and it may be prudent to undertake a review of active research projects to ensure that work involving human subjects has not bypassed NUIM's ethical approval processes as a result of lack of understanding by the research leaders rather than any malicious intent.

Support for Policy Formulation and Information Management

RSO clearly has an important role to play in supporting the development of NUIM's research strategy, most importantly through the provision of high quality management information of funding performance. Specific recommendations on additional management information that may usefully be sought and developed have been identified earlier in this report.

RSO is directly impacted itself by the Research Strategy as it should be a key guiding principal in determining the priorities for the Office's work. Recognising this, NUIM should consider further refining its definitions of success in achieving its strategic goals in research. Current definitions of success are either not specific (e.g. "recognised strengths in targeted areas of the humanities, social sciences and science and engineering" or are very specific (e.g. "to increase research income to €25 million by 2011". The objectives of the RSO should be set, and its success in achieving its objectives should be judged as far as is possible, in terms of its support for the University's broad strategy for research not just specific research income targets.

Further development of NUIM European Strategy would appear to be timely, for example to develop specific aspirations and targets for agencies such as the European Research Council. NUIM's aspirations for Framework 7 funding are appropriate although it must be appreciated that many leading European Universities will be looking to increase funding from EU sources and hence competition for funding will increase. Existing activities in train at NUIM to develop EU funding opportunities appear to be appropriate.

The monitoring of progress on funded research programmes is likely to be an increasingly important priority, particularly in the event that NUIM achieves its objectives in increasing funding from the EU. This has already been identified as an important area for discussion regarding the pre/post award interface, and crucially the RSO/RAO interface, and consideration should be given to RSO taking over external reporting responsibilities from RAO where this is possible thereby allowing the RAO to focus on its accounting/audit function.

Professional and External Interactions

The Self Assessment report describes a range of external and professional interactions which appear appropriate given NUIM's aspiration to operate high quality services benchmarked against other players in the HE Sector both within Ireland and overseas. Feedback received from two of NUIM's key funding agencies (SFI and IRCHSS) was very positive regarding the professionalism of the office and its wider interactions with its stakeholders.

Leadership and Management

It can be argued that there is no "ideal" model for the management of research administration in the HE Sector. It is not uncommon for research administration to report through the Finance Director or equivalent (for example, the University of Birmingham & Nottingham), while at Warwick the reporting line is through the Academic Registrar. Hence while it is possible to contrast aspects of the management of the RSO with larger Universities such as Warwick, it is not clear that there is a strong case to argue that the existing management and reporting structure of the RSO should be changed. On the evidence seen during the peer review visit, it would appear that the NUIM approach of the RSO reporting to the VPR is appropriate given local circumstances.

The practicalities of the day-to-day management of the RSO present some challenges given that the VPR has a very busy diary. However, some of these difficulties could be addressed by changes to the academic oversight of research proposals – for example, individual Heads of Departments could/should be responsible for the approval of individual proposals. The executive staff in RSO do not appear to require extensive management on a day-to-day basis, and the role of Research Coordinator should be sufficient in this regard.

Given the importance of external research income to the University turnover there is a case for increased investment in the management of research support at NUIM, however this need spans the pre/post award interface. Given the apparent pressures with RAO, and the imperative to improve joint working across this interface, the proposed role of Head of the RSO should be considered but as part of a wider review of the potential integration of the two functions.

Integration of Support Services

The Self Assessment report identifies a number of potential opportunities for improved systems integration. It has already been stated that given that the PT module appears to be delivering effective support for RSO and the RAO, any development of the InfoEd suite at NUIM should concentrate on improved functionality to enhance effective working between the two offices. Extension of PT functionality to include Departmental Administrators as proposed may also be relatively straight forward and offer some significant advantages. The introduction of the ESA module could allow improved integration with the University's HR or finance systems while improved information exchange with the Commercialisation Office would also appear to be a priority.

Survey of Past Performance

The RSO should be commended for the thorough manner in which it undertook surveys of its customers' perceptions of its performance. The analysis of these surveys as presented in the Self Assessment report is candid and realistic, and the feedback received during the Peer Review visit was consistent with the survey results.

Overall reflections on the Self Assessment

RSO should also be commended for its overall Self Assessment report which was honest and realistic. The SWOT Analysis presents a very useful summary of the strengths weaknesses, opportunities and threats that the Office faces, hence the recommendations in this Peer review report are largely consistent with this assessment.

Summary & Conclusions

This Peer Review Assessment Report on the NUIM Research Support Office (RSO) has been compiled following a review visit held on 21-22nd September 2010. The key inputs to the Peer Review Assessment were the Self Assessment Report prepared by the Department, some additional background information on NUIM's recent performance in gaining external research funding, and a series of interviews held with Department staff and key University stakeholders of the RSO. The key conclusions of the Review are:

- NUIM's recent research funding performance has been strong and the contribution of the RSO to this success is recognised widely by University stakeholders. While the quality of support provided by the Office is recognised and acknowledged, all agree that there is scope for further improvement in the support services the Office provides.
- A key role of the RSO is to provide support for active researchers at NUIM. Consistent and strong feedback was received on the performance of RSO staff in this regard, for example citing that RSO is approachable, flexible and can get things done. RSO staff can, and do, contribute to the development and shaping of research proposals and should not undersell their ability to contribute well beyond the provision of guidance on funding rules, costing of proposals and the administration of the application process.
- A key challenge for the operation of all research support offices is to manage and prioritise activities and ensure that support is delivered to the maximum benefit of the University. It is easy for offices to, by default, concentrate activity on the development of large funding proposals, while arguably the greater longer term priority is to develop and maintain key relationships with all research-active academic staff. RSO staff should seek to expand and maximise their opportunities to interact with the University faculty, for example exploring opportunities to hot desk in Departments or hold regular drop-in or "surgery" sessions in key areas.
- The RSO has devoted significant effort to support and deliver an effective Research Information System (RIS). The Proposal Tracking module appears to be delivering effective support for RSO and the RAO and any development of the InfoEd suite at NUIM should concentrate on improved functionality to enhance effective working between the two offices. The strategy to concentrate on a "stripped down" application of the Genius module is very sensible, but the real or perceived lack of usability of system will be a major barrier to its increased use by academic staff. Senior Management support will be essential if NUIM wishes to significantly improve data input to the RIS, for example on publications, by academic staff. RSO recognises the importance of good quality management information on research application performance, for example funding success rates, and InfoEd will provide good quality data on this over time.
- Recent changes to current or former functions of the RSO, for example the management of ethical oversight of research, and the separation of responsibility for management of the Graduate School, appear appropriate and have been implemented very effectively.

Recognising that some areas of RSO performance can be improved, specific issues identified during the review where action is recommended are as follows:

- It is clear that tensions exist between RSO and the RAO and improvement of working across this interface would appear to be a priority. Recent benchmarking undertaken by the University of Warwick on staffing levels in post-award finance functions at UK Universities would indicate that staffing levels in the RAO are low, and hence pressure of workloads in the RAO are an issue. There may be opportunities to rebalance workloads through further clarification and redistribution of some elements of the post-award function, for example in-award and post-hoc reporting. The Vice President for Research and University Bursar must be fully involved in this dialogue to ensure that a full and effective discussion of all options is undertaken. There is a case for increased support for the management of research support at NUIM, however this need spans the pre/post award interface. Given the apparent pressures within RAO, and the imperative to improve joint working across this interface, the proposed role of Head of the RSO should be considered but as part of a wider review, including the potential integration of the RSO and RAO functions.
- The senior management oversight of submission of research proposals appears relatively weak, although current practice appears to be significantly improved over that seen previously at NUIM. Opportunities exist to clarify and develop policies and procedures, for example on costing and pricing of research, and could be included within the responsibilities of the proposed Head of RSO. A significant burden of academic oversight of research proposals rests with the Vice President for Research and this burden will only increase as NUIM achieves its visions of a significant increase in the number of highly research active staff. It is surprising that Heads of Academic Departments and Deans appear to have little oversight of the submission of applications from their Departments.
- NUIM has seen an increasing throughput of research contracts and agreements and the most significant risks from this appears to arise from commercially-funded research contracts, responsibility for which rests with the Commercialisation Office. RSO has identified the need to increase its core skill base in contracts, but given the relatively limited scale of high risk contract work at NUIM it would appear that any resource available to recruit professional contract staff would appear best dedicated within the Commercialisation Office. Training and development of existing RSO staff should enable them to undertake effectively the lower risk contract work, for example research collaboration agreements.
- Further development of NUIM European Strategy would appear to be timely, for example to develop specific aspirations and targets for agencies such as the European Research Council. NUIM's aspirations for Framework 7 funding are appropriate although it must be appreciated that many leading European Universities will be looking to increase funding from EU sources and hence competition for funding will increase. Existing activities in train at NUIM to develop EU funding opportunities appear to be appropriate.
- Further refinement and targeting of information on funding opportunities will be important as competition for funding increases both nationally and internationally. One-to-one dissemination of funding opportunities is the ideal, and could be achieved through the expanded use of Departmental surgeries held by RSO staff.
- NUIM could further refine its definitions of success in achieving its strategic goals in research. Current definitions of success are either not specific (e.g. "recognised strengths in targeted areas of the humanities, social sciences and science and engineering" or are very specific (e.g. "to increase research income to €25 million by 2011". The objectives of the RSO should be set, and its success in achieving its

objectives should be judged, as far as is possible, in terms of its support for the University's broad strategy for research not just specific research income targets.

Dr Peter Hedges
External Reviewer

Professor Jim Walsh
Internal Reviewer