

## **Response of the Education Department to the Quality Review Report**

### **1. The Education Department's Values**

1.1 The Quality Review Report stated the “The Education Department is clearly inspired by a set of values which permeate all its work.” However, it states that the “values-led approach” is underplayed in the documentation and suggests that “it would be appropriate for these to be stated as part of the strength of the Education Department.” We accept that we may have been too modest in the articulation of the department’s values. They are expressed in a more integrated way in the Self-Assessment Report as, for instance, in the sections dealing with aims and objectives of individual courses, and in the organisational features of courses designed to give practical expression to them. We now set out hereunder a short statement of the values and convictions which inform the work of the Education Department in N.U.I. Maynooth.

#### **Education as a human undertaking**

- 1.2 The responsibilities inherent in education are frequently taken to be familiar, even mundane ones. Yet this commonplace view obscures what is most crucial, for to succeed well in this undertaking is to accomplish something of measureless significance. Far from being merely commonplace, the responsibilities of education are concerned to enlighten human understanding and to advance humankind’s more worthy aspirations through teaching and learning.
- 1.3 The uncovering of each student’s individuality and promise, students’ demands for acknowledgement and encouragement, the quality of their encounters with inheritances of learning, their discoveries of personal achievement and limitation, their contributions to interpersonal and community life; these feature rarely enough in the public discourse on education, yet they are the realities that confront teachers most closely in their day-to-day work. To engage seriously with such realities as a teacher is to become involved in a caring and a just way in building and sustaining relationships of learning; relationships that give imaginative and judicious attention to the *experienced quality* of the learning itself. None of this is to displace questions of the learner’s social and economic utility from educational thought or practice. Rather it is to call attention to those regions that remain largely unvisited among the more familiar **concerns** of public educational discourse – where nowadays the macro issues of economic and social policy are invariably writ large.
- 1.4 If the specifically educational concerns mentioned above identify the tenor of the central responsibilities of education, these concerns also alert us to some rights which must be

acknowledged when education as a defensible undertaking is seriously attempted. These are rights that are worthy of public support, rights whose integrity must be respected. They are thus, in a qualified sense, independent rights. Perhaps the most important one is the right to learning itself: to become what our inherent potentials might enable us to become when these are addressed in a learning climate which is properly conducive to their nourishment and disciplined realisation. So justice as an educational issue features centrally here, but in a way that must continually be reviewed, given that the active context where education is now undertaken is one where cultural plurality and rapid social change are prevailing characteristics.

### **The Education of Teachers**

- 1.5 To view teachers as learners as much as teachers, leads to an understanding that differs in central respects from the conventional “transmission” view which holds that teaching is essentially a set of transferable skills or techniques. As a way of life committed to the ideals of learning, teaching reveals itself as a jointly undertaken quest by teachers and students which seeks to build enduring solidarities while nourishing genuine diversity. At its heart it is a communicative interplay rather than a transmission.
- 1.6 Teacher education must set this interplay consciously under way among student teachers themselves, and in at least three major ways.
- (1) Firstly, there is the cultivation of an active, sustained and reflective interplay between the student teachers and their pupils
  - (2) Secondly, there is an imaginative interplay to be nourished between the student teachers and the subjects in which they are striving to achieve an assured fluency for teaching purposes.
  - (3) Thirdly, there is the necessity to bring both of these interplays into a fruitful relation *with each other*, and here a further range of contingent features enters the picture, including teaching colleagues, school authorities, parents, school structures and resources, curriculum constraints and so on.
- 1.7 The kind of learning involved here includes not just skill acquisition, but more importantly the deepening of insight, judgement and *self*-understanding in a complex occupational field; a field which is itself about advancing the understanding of pupils and students, and in circumstances which are ever changing.
- 1.8 As distinct from a mere training in skills and techniques, teacher education is therefore the natural nursery (or academy) for those dispositions cultivated by the self-critical discipline of dialogue. Where the initial preparation of teachers is successful in getting this kind of cultural and communicative discipline under way, the discipline itself must be sustained and perfected

thereafter through the induction phase and recurrent in-service phases of a teaching career. All of this is premised on the understanding that teacher education is a paradigm instance of lifelong learning.

- 1.9 The professional and practical demands arising from this understanding of education and of teacher education make it imperative that the values to which the Department is committed are informed by, indeed continually challenged by, fresh research perspectives; particularly ones that combine empirical knowledge in intricate ways with more qualitative forms of understanding, and with a range of practical dispositions to action.
- 1.10 In the design of its overall work profile the Education Department has been informed and guided by this set of values – for instance: in the allocation of its resources to the most desirable ends, in the range of courses being offered, in the limitation of the size of classes so as to enable meaningful group sessions, in the forms of learning and teaching practised, in the guidance of students and the supervision of theses, in the modes of assessment of courses, in the kinds of research and development initiatives engaged in, and not least in the Department’s sense of public service. It is our view that this embodiment of values in action has provided a recognisable cohesiveness and coherence to the Department’s work. The outcomes of the extensive range of evaluations of course participants and of others connected with the work of the Department, included in the Self-Assessment Report, bear testimony to this and to the values underpinning the work.

## **2. Comments on the Findings of The Review Body.**

- 2.1. **Overview:** The Education Department is encouraged and affirmed by the extensive range of positive endorsements given by the Review Team to the work of the Department. We note their significance for the profile and on-going work of the Department.
- 2.2. **Distinguished standing of the Department:** We are pleased with the Team’s view of the Department’s place in Irish and international education, when it states, “The Education Department holds a significant and prominent place in Irish education and a reputation for high standards internationally.” In a period of significant change in education and teacher education, this is a valuable positioning both for the Education Department and the university.
- 2.3 **Commitment to innovation:** The Self Assessment Report highlighted the Department’s pro-active approaches to course provision, policy formulation and research engagement.

It is gratifying that this is recognised by the Reviewers when it states, “The Department has a reputation of being innovative and at the leading edge of thinking in university education provision” (p.1) The Department’s proactive approach to course provision is rooted in a coherent response to emergent needs of the school system.

2.4 **Quality of relationships of learning:** The Education Department is a solely post-graduate one, and many of its students are of mature age and experienced. A prevailing concern of the Department has been to achieve integrating and respectful relationships with this student clientele. We are glad that the Reviewers recognise the quality of relationships as one of the strengths of the Department (p.1) One of the reasons we target a figure of 25 students for all the post-graduate courses, apart from the Higher Diploma in Education (which is organised to include small-group structures of its own) is specifically to facilitate this quality of relationships, and the associated quality of pedagogic engagement by in-career teachers, who bring much experience and expertise to bear to the seminar-learning style involved. In short, we feel it is essential that the values we proclaim publicly are meaningfully carried through in our practices. In this connection, the students’ evaluations are an encouraging endorsement of these practices and of the policy decisions that underlie them.

2.5 **Public Service commitment:** Irish education has been undergoing a period of unprecedented policy change since the early nineties. It has been a conscious decision by members of the Education Department to seek to assist the Ministry and the Government both in policy formulation and in its implementation. This has been recognised by the Reviewers who state that they are “aware that the national profile of the Education Department is very high and that many of its staff contribute significantly to the education debate and to policy-making at a national level” (p.2). They go on to state “in the past two decades, the Education Department in Maynooth raised the credibility of, and respect for university Education Departments among national policy makers and politicians.”(p.12) A unique feature of this public service commitment has been the Department’s work, from the early nineties to the present, on pioneering research and development initiatives such as *Schools for Active Learning* (1990-94), *School and Curriculum Development Initiative* (1995-2001), *Dissolving Boundaries* (1998-present) and the project *Teaching and Learning for the Twenty-First Century*, which is just getting under way.

Here we would wish to add however that the Department’s involvement with national policy issues also includes an emphasis on constructive criticism, which is proper to any serious engagement of research with policy.

- 2.6 **Nature of relationships with schools:** The two full-time professional courses offered by the Department, the H. Dip. in Education and the H. Dip. in School Guidance and Counselling, include a significant level of school-based experience, as part of professional formation. To ensure the quality of this experience, the Department has nurtured close working relationships with the schools involved, and as the self Assessment Report states, is keen to work with other involved parties to deepen this form of partnership. The Reviewers endorse this position stating, “the links with schools are cordial and well established” (p.5), and they support further development. It is also the case, however, that links with schools have been very significantly advanced by the Department’s R & D projects since the early nineties – *Schools for Active Learning*, *School and Curriculum Development*, *Dissolving Boundaries*, and various other contributions to continuing professional development of teachers.
- 2.7 **Administrative and support arrangements:** In a department such as the Education Department, with so many elements requiring attention, and so many external linkages, it is crucial to its efficient functioning that its administrative and support arrangements are of the highest quality. It is very affirming to find the Reviewers giving such strong endorsement to this aspect of the Department when it states “There is a strong commitment of support within the Department from a dedicated and experienced administrative and technical staff. This is an effective system which is well managed and works well.” This view is endorsed by all the evaluations of the personnel who need to liaise with the Administrative Office. Many systems of operation have been evolved over the years with the proactive assistance of the administrative staff, and these systems are effectively implemented. As distinct from being mere tools of efficiency however, these arrangements are practical ways of realising the Department’s commitment to an ethic of care.
- 2.8 **ICT in teaching and learning:** Over the last eight years the Education Department has taken a variety of initiatives to ensure that it was in a position to make maximum use of ICT in support of its various teacher education courses. The reviewers give a strong endorsement to this aspect of the Department’s activity. They state, “The Department is served especially well in this area both in terms of quality and quantity of support. The work in ICT is of a very high standard and this demonstrates a clear commitment to methods of teaching and ways of dealing with new technologies”(p.5) The pioneering work of the *Dissolving Boundaries* project, with its strong North-South dimension, was not commented on by the Review Team.

- 2.9 **Nature and scope of staff's teaching responsibilities:** Obviously, the academic staff are the most critical element with regard to the quality of the Department's academic work. The reviewers recognise that "The Education Department is a relatively small Department" (p.4), but goes on to state "The Department is widely recognised as having academic and professional strengths among its staff members." The Report also acknowledges, "The staff are highly committed to teaching which is all undertaken at post-graduate level." As it happens, all the staff deal with Higher Diploma and Masters students and, depending on theme, supervise the expanding pool of Ph. D research theses.
- The commitment to close and active engagement with the professional work of schools, which marks a highly distinctive feature Department's research and development initiatives since 1990, has been strengthened by the staff appointments made since the mid-nineties. The scope of the Department's teaching commitment has thus continued to expand in a way which combines pedagogical and research action in its work with experienced teachers in developing schools, teaching practices and teachers themselves.
- 2.10 **Facilities:** The Department and the University have made sustained efforts to improve the environment and resources for the work of the Department. It is heartening to note the positive endorsement of the Reviewers on the facilities they found. They commend these as follows: "At present there are very good resources available to the Education Department in terms of accommodation and information technology infrastructure. The physical accommodation is exceptionally suitable for its purpose and is impressive. This is an excellent aspect of the Department." (p.11). Further developments in the Department's work will require additional facilities and resources however, as the existing facilities, including space, are fully utilised.
- 2.12 **International Dimension:** Referring to the international context of the Department, the Reviewers state that "Staff in the Department have many significant links and areas of professional and academic contact." The Reviewers suggest that this work "would benefit from wider exposure." In case this feature of the Department's work may have been understated in the self-assessment report, it is worth summarising it explicitly now. Most of the staff have recent and current wide-ranging involvements with international colleagues and agencies. Such involvements include: engaging in an extensive range of commissioned projects for bodies like the European Commission, OECD, Council of Europe, World Bank; participation in international publishing ventures; presentations at

conferences on education in all five continents; membership of the Editorial Boards of international journals.

### **3 Departmental Response to Recommendations**

- 3.1. The orientation of the Education Department is to be open and proactive towards improvement. Accordingly, we receive recommendations from the Review Team in a positive spirit. We are glad to note that some of these recommendations coincide with what the Department itself proposed to do in its Self-Assessment Report, such as closer partnership with schools, establishing a specific assessment policy and experimenting with distance education/e-learning.
- 3.2. Recommendations 10.1 and 10.2 relate to the University, which is encouraged “to express with clarity and conviction the values which imbue the University with justice and care, excellence in human development and service to the wider community in Ireland and beyond.” The Education Department very much shares these as core values, and is pleased to interface with the University in continuing to promote such values into the future.
- 3.3. Recommendation 10.11 also focuses on action by the University to put in place a planning process, over a three or four year period to develop a School or Faculty of Education. As is indicated in the Department’s Self-Assessment Report (p.142), the Department is very willing to participate in any such planning process initiated by the University.
- 3.4. Recommendations 10.3, 10.4 and 10.9 suggest that the work of the Department would benefit from the preparation of a strategic plan to act as a point of reference for developing the Department in the medium term. It is recommended that such a strategic plan would incorporate policies on curriculum support, assessment, partnerships with schools and research. The Education Department accepts this recommendation and will work on a strategic plan, in consultation with University authorities.
- 3.5. Recommendation 10.5 recommends specific resourcing of staff development for part-time staff. Over the years, the Department has conducted seminars and workshops for part-time staff and such staff have been contributors to such sessions. On a similar vein, recommendation 10.14 suggests a review be undertaken of “planned staff development activity for staff”. At present, staff are strongly supported to engage in forms of staff development which fit with their needs and interests. Accordingly, staff engage in staff development courses within the university, as well as externally in the context of seminars, courses, conferences in their areas of professional concern. On a regular basis, staff engage collectively in Departmental meetings, reviews,

seminars and colloquia. Staff will continue to be supported and facilitated to engage in such staff development activities. The Department will review whether improved facilitation of collegial staff development can be promoted.

- 3.6. Recommendation 10.6 suggests more formalisation and systemisation of procedures and practices. Many of these are already formalised and are operated efficiently through the administrative staff. However, scope exists for documenting some practices better e.g. procedures to deal with students in difficulties on teaching practice. The Department will examine areas that would benefit from more systemisation.
- 3.7 Recommendation 10.7 deals with closer relationships with schools.  
The relationships with schools operate on a variety of levels. In the first instance, the Education Department has carefully built up a co-operative relationship with teaching practice schools over many years. It may be worth noting that in the responses from schools on the quality of information and communication with schools on student teaching practice 100% of principals indicated that they were ‘happy’ or ‘very happy’ with this, and very high percentages were recorded for other aspects of the relationship. (Appendix L, p.132) Similar good relationships exist with schools where students on the Higher Diploma in School Guidance and Counselling Course are on work-experience placement. It is also the case that many of the teachers who participate in our in-service courses come from schools in the region with which the Department has a lot of interaction. The Department is engaged in pioneering research and development programmes with schools in the region e.g. *Schools for Active Learning* (1990-1994), *School and Curriculum Development* (1995-2001) and *Dissolving Boundaries* (1998 - ). However, these programmes have involved very integrated partnerships with schools in the region, as the Department supported the schools’ efforts to implement national policies. The new Research and Development project, “*Teaching and Learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*” (TL21) is, again, designed on close partnership relations between the Department and schools in its hinterland. The Education Department is keen to promote even closer relationships with schools, as is set out on pages 139-140 of the Self-Assessment Report. This Report also indicated that a working party has been established to explore how best this might be done. The Education Department reiterates its view from the Self-Assessment Report, “The process of building this enhanced relationship is seen as best progressing on a gradual basis, and it is realised that it would be greatly facilitated by action at national level on assisting schools to be more supportive agencies for student teachers’ formation.”(p.40)
- 3.8 Recommendation 10.8 states, “There should be a review of workload planning in the Department to ensure a system of equity and balance of work.” Following discussions at



Departmental level, staff do not view this as an issue of major concern, and express satisfaction with existing arrangements which allow for flexibility and fluidity in relation to varying staff commitments.

- 3.9 Recommendation 10.9 states that “Attention should be given to developing a community of scholars through international links and activities”. As was noted in 2.12 above, and in the Self-Assessment Report (pp.121-124), the Education Department has always eschewed an insular approach and has embraced scholarly relationship with a host of agencies external to the university in Ireland and abroad. As was stated in the Self-Assessment Report, “The Department intends to maintain its outward-looking tradition and to engage with appropriate scholarly networks.” Links are actively maintained with international academic organisations such as the Association of Teacher Education in Europe, the International Standing Conference for the History of Education, the Philosophy of Education society. Likewise, the Department maintains active engagement with other academics through international organisations such as the O.E.C.D., U.N.E.S.C.O., Council of Europe and the World Bank. Another example of sustaining international scholarly links is the establishment of an International Panel of world renowned educationalists for the TL21 project.
- 3.10 Recommendation 10.12 encourages the Department to give attention to “developing national policies for teacher education in areas such as partnership with schools, regional policies for research and assessment practices”. As has been well recognised in the Report of the Reviewers, the Education Department has held a pre-eminent position in formulating national education policy and in helping its implementation. It is the Department’s intention to continue this activity, as is stated in the Self-Assessment Report, “Staff in the Department also intend to continue contributing to the formulation and implementation of national education policy” (p.134). Staff are pleased to note the Reviewers encouragement in this regard.
- 3.11 Recommendation 10.14 urged the Department to review “using September for Higher Diploma in Education students in schools”. However, it needs to be noted that a large part of September is already being used for the Higher Diploma in Education course. The Department has long held the view that student teachers should not be viewed by schools as if they were qualified teachers for timetable purposes. Staff have sought to have this distinction clearly recognised by schools. The staff’s key concern is the qualitative experience of the early trainee. The rationale for our course has been clearly explained to students and school personnel. The Department has traditionally favoured a more gradual introduction through an Orientation Week and an Observation Week, usually beginning about 15<sup>th</sup> September. However, it will be

part of the remit of the working party (3.7) on partnership with schools to examine whether students' presence in schools at the start of the school year as observers would be in their best interests.

- 3.12 Overall, the Education Department wishes to record its appreciation to the Review Team for their recommendations. They are accepted in the spirit in which they were offered by the Review Team, "The following comments are offered in a constructive and supportive manner and we hope that these will contribute to the on-going development of the Department" (p.1). The staff consider that the recommendations will achieve this aspiration, as so many of them are congruent with the Department's own self analysis. Staff look forward with confidence from the Education Department's quality review process. They draw affirmation and encouragement from the many endorsements of the quality of the Department's work. The quality review acts as a stimulus towards further improvement, within a fast-changing education environment. The Reviewers' Report located the Education Department within a very positive context, and it has helped to map the strategic way forward to ensure the continuing progressive development of the Department.

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