



NUI MAYNOOTH

GIBRISTÍ na hÉirann Mhí Bhaile

Department of Sociology

Peer Review Report

Peer Review Group

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Quality Review Report

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INTRODUCTION

Our overall view is that the NUI Maynooth Sociology Department is very strong in the three areas of research, teaching and administration; in fact it is one of the leading departments of sociology in the country. All department members are actively engaged in research, covering a wide range of intellectual areas and publishing work of high (and in some cases very high) quality. They collaborate on research projects and have had considerable success in obtaining research funding. They publish in international and Irish journals and with international and Irish publishers. Teaching in the department is equally impressive. Written documentation and interviews with undergraduate and postgraduate students provide ample evidence of teaching effectiveness at all levels. During our campus visit, we heard much praise of staff members' commitment to their subject, their teaching, and their accessibility to students. The administration of the department was praised for its efficiency and its caring attitude to students. Morale is good as are relations between administrative and academic staff. These achievements are all the more remarkable in a context of rising student numbers and an undergraduate staff/student ratio that is one of the highest in the university.

The department will face major challenges in the coming period arising from outside trends and forces that are altering the context in which it operates. National and international economic problems are creating new uncertainties about future departmental funding; they may impact on student enrolment at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and they will affect the availability of money for research. Past success in obtaining Irish government funding, in particular through the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTL), has created new research and teaching opportunities, but also new challenges. For example, the continued development of the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA) offers the possibility of ever closer collaboration with other disciplines, but also raises questions about the identity of sociology as a discipline at NUIM. The Irish government through the Higher Education Authority (HEA) is pursuing a programme of organisational and cultural reform in Irish universities. To achieve this it is increasing pressure for ever greater performance from university staff and pressing for organisational reforms based partially on a corporate model. This model is at variance with the traditional academic one and has implications for staff morale. It may contribute to quality teaching and research in some ways while detracting in other ways. There are other challenges also, including the tendency for students to be passive consumers of knowledge rather than active in their own learning.

The department's Self-Assessment Report draws out some of the implications of these changes for its practice, and we explored others in discussions with staff. It is the department's stated goal to build on its successful performance at the national level to become an internationally recognised centre of research. In developing this assessment, we paid particular attention to this goal and to the changes that may be necessary to achieve it.

METHODOLOGY OF THIS REPORT

Before coming to campus, the three members of the review team carefully read the comprehensive Self-Assessment Report prepared by the department; the main report and appendices contain a large accumulation of data. We also reviewed the department's handbook and course descriptions and the department's website.

The campus visit comprised 2½ days in total. We met with the Director of Quality Review and the 2 internal members of the review committee; the president of NUIM; the acting head of department; 9 core staff; 4 contract staff; 5 tutors; 15 undergraduate students, 5 students on the taught MA course; 9 postgraduate students; the Director of NIRSA; 3 postdoctoral students based in NIRSA; 2 sociology department administrative staff.

We inspected the department's spatial facilities. It has recently moved from St. Anne's to Auxilia, which has turned out to be an unsuitable building in many ways. It is dispersed across several floors which makes it difficult to sustain a sense of community¹. It has structural problems which make it subject to flooding and damp and to mould contamination. We understand that efforts are currently underway to ameliorate this problem. We also toured the NIRSA building with its impressive facilities.

At the time of our visit, the Professor of Sociology and a senior member of staff were on leave. Another long established member of staff had recently been promoted to a senior position in the university and was not interviewed.

THE DEPARTMENT'S WIDER CONTEXT

The department is currently performing at a high level nationally and in the Self-Assessment Report sets itself as "a further challenging goal": "to establish the department on the international scene as a force in research and postgraduate teaching and learning while maintaining and developing our major contributions to undergraduate teaching and to public life in Ireland and beyond". We take this to be its primary goal in the coming period. Reaching it will require strategic planning that takes account of the increasingly transnational dimensions of higher education in Ireland, the EU, and elsewhere, and the more immediate context: the NUIM and, within that, the Faculty of Social Sciences. The Self-Assessment Report is implicit rather than explicit on what needs to be done. We draw out the main issues coming up at each level and their implications for the department.

Academic work today is increasingly transnational in its research, staff and student body. Disciplines and departments are more global in focus, though this is a network rather than a universalising globality. In Europe there have been for some years well-funded research programmes (the series of Framework Programmes) designed to create a European knowledge economy. Globalising processes are also reflected in the increased mobility of staff, in the emphasis on 'international' staff in assessing the quality of departments and in the building of research linkages and interlocking

1. This issue of dispersion has been partially addressed since the visit

degree programmes with other universities. A further development is the substantial increase in student mobility and the existence of potentially large numbers of foreign students. This is being facilitated by putting in place a common EU degree structure at undergraduate and postgraduate levels based on ECTS (the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) which will enable students to spend time at different universities as they progress towards their degree. These developments create major new opportunities for university departments in Ireland to access research funds and attract high quality students. Notwithstanding, competition is intense, and only very high-performing departments in Ireland will be successful. It is also necessary to take into account the increasing use of internationally standardised measures of performance, including their potentially distorting effects, for example, the downgrading of the book in favour of articles in international journals, each further differentiated in terms of its 'impact factor'.

The Irish university sector has been a latecomer in these developments and since the late 1990s has been trying to catch up. Rapid economic expansion and the tapping of donor funds, especially from the US, made possible a major investment in the university sector, in particular through successive PRTL I programmes. The goal of government is to make Irish universities 'world class' institutions which, through their teaching and research, will create the knowledge economy on which Ireland's future economic success will depend. This means becoming leaders in research, attracting international staff and students and securing major EU research grants. The PRTL I funding programme was designed to provide the infrastructure for this, but also to bring about organisational changes. These developments are set to continue in the coming years, but in a financial climate that has become much less certain. The very rapid expansion of the 'Celtic Tiger' years is over and there is the possibility now of a prolonged recession. This will have consequences for the funding of existing staff positions and programmes, and even more, for the possibility of new staff and programmes. It will also impact on student numbers and perhaps on subject choices

NUIM occupies a distinctive position within the national university system: partly serving its immediate hinterland, partly framed as a Dublin university and partly as a wider island university. This multiple-layered identity enables NUIM to be perceived as a national university as well as one that serves its immediate hinterland. To date NUIM has negotiated the new institutional context well, concentrating on its core sectors. It has had particular success in PRTL I applications in the social sciences and humanities and one of its fruits – NIRSA – is widely regarded as one of the most innovative and successful of the new research institutes. Most recently NIRSA played the lead role in the social science application process for PRTL I4 funding that led to the setting up of the Irish Social Sciences Platform (ISSP). ISSP will be the major organising context for the social sciences in Ireland for some years to come, bringing funding for PhD students and research and facilitating cross-university and interdisciplinary ties. As an integral part of NIRSA, the Department of Sociology can claim credit for all of these developments.

The department's geographical location and strong national focus are a clear strength, but they also mean that it faces competition from the departments of sociology at the two big Dublin universities, which are currently devoting time and resources to re-position themselves internationally. To become a truly international department, with a high level of participation in international research networks and attracting

significant number of foreign students and visiting staff, the Department of Sociology at NUIM will have to behave in a similarly strategic way.

THE DEPARTMENT: ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE; RESEARCH; TEACHING

In national stature, size, and research contributions, Sociology is one of major departments of the Faculty of Social Sciences (FSS) and an important department for the university as a whole. Its strengths derive from the quality and commitment of its staff and the teaching and research programme they have put in place. This is a programme conceived primarily at a national level. As mentioned earlier, the challenge the department has set itself is not simply to maintain and enhance the quality of its existing programme but to bring it to an international level. Its wider context – international, national, university, faculty - provides opportunities for doing this, but it is a competitive environment and there are threats as well as opportunities. After a period of growth, including the addition of a new discipline – Politics – to the curriculum, the department seems now to have hit a plateau in terms of staffing numbers at a time when its environment is becoming increasingly competitive and – in terms of the Irish economy – even hostile.

1. ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

To succeed in its goals, and in particular that of developing a more international focus, the department needs to critically reflect on its internal organisational culture. During our visit we identified three issues on which it might usefully reflect.

Department staff might wish to consider the issue of **different time horizons** and the importance of **keeping long term ends in view**. Academic work involves tasks that demand immediate results; it also requires plans and preparations that take years to bring to fruition. This is all the more important (and difficult) in the current context where universities have to plan with different time horizons in mind and under conditions that vary in their degree of certainty and uncertainty. The department is fully aware of the need for long term planning, but its Self-Assessment Report tended to concentrate on its immediate tasks and challenges. It needs also to consider in greater depth the longer term challenges. This means setting out its goals, the time horizon appropriate to each and the strategies that will ensure progress toward each goal. This applies in particular to the project of becoming an internationally recognised department, a goal that will require a significant measure of well coordinated long term planning.

A second issue is the need for **effective participation in, or networking with, the key decision-making bodies at each of the levels that impinge on the department**. These include the FSS, NIRSA, the university's higher-level decision-making bodies, ISSP, the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS), the HEA. Departmental members participate in many of these bodies or have contacts with their members. But we were conscious of a tendency in the department to view its environment as one in which major decisions are made elsewhere, at times in a sudden and unwelcome way, to which it can only react. We were not in a position to

establish how much this is the result of a top-down approach in the relevant bodies, and how much of inadequate tracking by the department of what is happening at these levels. If it is the former, then it would be in the department's interest to press for a more bottom-up and participatory approach of the relevant bodies. If it is the latter, the department should consider what mechanisms it might put in place to address this.

A third issue concerns **the conflicting imperatives of collectivity and individuality, inclusivity and individuality**. Like sociology departments generally, this is a department that greatly values inclusivity, collegiality and – where possible – decisions by consensus. These are values that are important in their own right; but more than that, they are essential to delivering a collective programme and sustaining a departmental climate conducive to intellectual debate and mutual support. The challenge that it faces is how to maintain these values in a dynamic environment that insists on a rapid and perhaps differentiated response to new developments. It is also necessary, therefore, to support diversity and individuality. In that context, the department needs to be careful about its widespread use of the 'umbrella' principle: seeking to ensure that all its activities are conceived in such a way as to include everyone on equal terms. The effect of this could be a weakening or diluting of the essential thrust of the activity or programme in question. This is not to encourage the abandonment of inclusivity as a principle, rather reflection on different ways in which it might be achieved.

2. RESEARCH

The department has a strong research ethos and an impressive output. Its staff publish in international as well as national outlets, are internationally networked and secure international as well as national sources of research funding. To achieve its goal of upgrading to international level standards, the department does not need to do anything qualitatively new. It simply has to improve on each dimension, in particular on the international side. What this means in practical terms does not need to be spelled out. The department already has a well-developed and finely tuned sense of what this involves.

We therefore concentrate on a specific issue that engaged us while we were carrying out our on-site visit and that is directly relevant to this: the matter of research clusters. The department's intellectual self-presentation is framed by four central themes or clusters. Thus, under 'Research,' the Department website states:

“We are active in a wide range of research areas with particular areas of strength in:

1. Knowledge Society: Technology and Politics;
2. The Politics of Global Change;
3. Social networks, Social Institutions and the Life Course;
4. Urban/Suburban Studies.”

Each of us was impressed by the level of organisational coherence and planning which this seemed to imply. During our site visit, however, we found more hesitancy in discussions of these clusters than we expected. There appeared to be a core within

each cluster that was committed to it; others were much less so. This is perhaps to be expected, and may explain why some staff referred to the need to revise the clusters. But we also heard suggestions to the effect that they be abandoned altogether.

As we see it, the value of clusters is as follows:

- i. To establish the department's national and international profile of advanced skills and specialised interests. A listing of clusters makes the department attractive to prospective students (domestic and foreign) who share those interests (especially those at the postgraduate level, seeking particular types of training). It also invites inquiries by academics elsewhere (at other universities in Ireland and internationally) seeking partners for research or teaching programmes.
- ii. To develop intellectual synergies within the department between staff and students, which will lead to collaborative and cumulative work in key areas.
- iii. To provide a way of linking the department's research with its teaching, especially at the graduate level. This is particularly valuable where departments are moving towards more structured postgraduate curricula.

In our view, the practice of identifying research clusters should not be abandoned lightly, in particular at a time of seeking to become an international department. The current configuration appears to be less than ideal, and it was clear that some department members felt little connection to the stated themes. One suggestion given to us to overcome this problem was to re-name the clusters, to make them more general. However this could prove to be an example of the 'umbrella principle': expanding something to make it more inclusive but at the cost of focus, internal synergy and appeal to prospective students and potential research partners. This would also be seen as an example of allowing an immediate concern (inclusivity) to take priority over a longer term goal (international recognition).

Another suggestion was to further align the department's clusters with the interdisciplinary themes of NIRSA (the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis). These include:

1. Planning Environments;
2. Building Knowledge, Societies, Economies (this one matches the Sociology Department cluster, Knowledge Society);
3. Sustaining Communities (which resonates with the Urban/Suburban cluster in Sociology).

(NIRSA materials also list the sub-themes of Health; Migration; and Governance).

But this option raises further issues. NIRSA is an *interdisciplinary* undertaking, and NIRSA's clusters are intended to support contact across several departments and to secure external funding. As discussed earlier, NIRSA has become one of the forces now driving change in the Sociology Department's curriculum and future planning. There are so many positive aspects to this that we would not wish to discourage it in any way. But we also believe that the Sociology Department should continue to shape its own intellectual contours.

Clusters could have a key role to play in defining these contours. What these should be is a matter for dialogue within the department. In considering how the current configuration might be revised, we stress the relevance of the three general issues that we enunciated in section 1.

3. TEACHING

Interviewees and focus group meetings indicated that the quality of teaching in the department is high. Teaching is taken very seriously; the department has a reputation on campus for good teaching and a ‘caring attitude’ to students. Both undergraduate and post-graduate students were very positive about the department and made particular reference to: (i) the quality of teaching; (ii) the value of tutorials; (iii) availability of personnel; (iv) the care for students; and (v) the general commitment of staff and tutors.

A. UNDERGRADUATE

The undergraduate curriculum is organised to facilitate clear logical progression in content, focus and complexity. The focus during the first year is on critical thinking and the sociological imagination. The second year focuses on the fundamentals of sociology and the third year on doing contemporary sociology. Within the theme of each year, courses are organised into three strands: concepts and theories; the substance of society; and research methods and design. Overall, students found the sociology curriculum to be “very good but challenging,” and they suggested that it helped them to develop “an awareness of self” and “a way of thinking.”

The department offers an impressive first year teaching programme under difficult circumstances which, we understand, are currently being addressed at the university level. We understand that the numbers taking sociology as a first year subject in 2008 exceeded the capacity of the university’s largest lecture hall. The associated requirement for lecturers to ‘double teach’ places significant demands upon already stretched resources and gives rise to additional quality risks; lecturers suggested that it is difficult to convey an enthusiasm for material that is being delivered for a second time over the course of a week. Tutorial arrangements were found to mitigate some of the associated quality risks, and students suggested that the availability/dedication of tutors helped to personalise the subject and learning experience. The downside, particularly at a time of financial retrenchment, is that tutorial costs are high (estimated at between a quarter and a third of the department’s budget²). Overall, however, the tutorial system seems to be worth the expenditure.

Despite the difficulties with which it has to deal, the department’s high retention numbers after the first year indicate the success of its first-year programme. Most students take sociology in first year as their third option. At one point it was seen as an ‘easy option’, but this is no longer the case, and good students are won over to sociology for the second and third years by the quality of first-year teaching and the approachability and supportiveness of the staff. There was also high praise for the

² Cf. Self Assessment Report p. 11.

commitment and pedagogical talents of the first-year tutors, who very frequently are the key point of contact between students and the teaching staff. Staff from the Department of Adult and Community Education had further praise for the quality of service teaching provided by the Sociology Department.

High retention rates after the first year (between 50% and 60% in recent years, with some drop-off in 2007) mean large numbers in second and third years. This has resulted in a high student-to-staff ratio overall: 29.3 to 1 in 2007-2008. Challenges associated with increasing enrolment levels have the potential to adversely affect the quality of student learning, making more difficult, for example, the use of alternative pedagogies, like research-based essays or multi-step research projects. On the other hand all the indications are of a quality programme in both second and third years. There was particular praise from mature students with whom we held a focus group meeting.

There is no simple solution to the problem of high numbers. University funding priorities and the wish to accommodate student choices militate against capping student numbers, at least in the short to medium term, although this step may eventually need to be taken. The high student-to-staff ratio will be taken into account in future decisions about staffing, and the department should be in line to acquire more staff in time, but this is unlikely to be soon. This raises the question of whether anything else can be done.

The Self-Assessment Report suggests that the offering of a choice of elective courses may ease the large size of First Year courses. Another response to the problem of high enrolments would be to take advantage of the potential of modularisation by *actively* encouraging students to take modules currently offered by other departments within the framework of new interdisciplinary courses or streams.

Opportunities to promote modularised linkages with other faculty have increased with the prospect of inter-departmental and interdisciplinary degrees (Economics and Social History; Politics, Economics and Policy; Irish Studies; European Studies). This points to the potential to promote linkages with departments responsible for e.g. Business, Law, Psychology and European Studies to develop courses or 'streams' around themes such as: (i) community advocacy/human rights, (ii) human/employee/international relations, (iii) mediation, (iv) market research, public relations, advertising, etc. Importantly, it might not be necessary to develop separate or additional inter-departmental degrees to do this; instead careful timetabling, planning and the promotion of modular combinations could have the same result.

The rationale for such courses or streams would need to be made clear to students, illustrated in course descriptions, highlighted on the website and forwarded to students prior to enrolment. The future occupational advantages/benefits to be derived from such courses would need to be clearly outlined. In this way the department's teaching burden would be shared with other departments while simultaneously offering students greater career direction.

B. POSTGRADUATE: MA, MLITT/PhD

The current period is one of major transition in the organisation of postgraduate studies in Irish universities. This is an EU-wide process which the Irish government is committed to advancing in Ireland. The EU goal is to put in place a single EU-wide degree programme to facilitate student mobility between European universities in order to contribute to the build-up of Europe's scientific and technological infrastructure.

At the heart of the new policy is the principle of a structured postgraduate programme from MA to PhD. The old system consisted of a taught MA + minor thesis, followed (for those who chose to remain in the system) by a PhD based on an individual research project conducted under one individual supervisor. In the new system the MA continues as a set of taught modules + minor thesis and as a point of positive early departure from the system. The major change is at the MPhil/PhD level where the relatively unstructured 'dissertation-only' model is being replaced by a much more structured 'courses + dissertation' model.

The new system has yet to be worked out in detail and when fully in place may allow for some variation from one country to another. But its elements are already clear: a structured rather than an unstructured programme and ECTS-weighted courses that will permit student mobility from one university to another during the course of their postgraduate years. A further element appears to be an emphasis on the benefits of generic and interdisciplinary courses which could be offered to students on different degree programmes.

i. MA

The department has offered a taught MA programme for many years, but in recent years the numbers taking it have been falling. In September of this year the NUIM sociology staff decided to discontinue it and, beginning next year, to replace it with an interdisciplinary MA offered with Geography, and entitled the MA in Society and Space. The hope is that an interdisciplinary MA will lead to increased numbers of students and to students of higher quality.

The development of an interdisciplinary sociology/geography MA is a bold initiative and, as far as we know, there is no equivalent degree offered elsewhere in the Irish system. It could prove especially attractive to those who did sociology and geography as undergraduates and who feel positive about both disciplines and the synergies that come from studying both. This programme may appeal also to those who missed out on one or other discipline at the undergraduate level. It will also encourage students to think in interdisciplinary terms from the beginning of their postgraduate work and encourage contact and cooperation among members of staff.

It would be possible for the department to participate in the new interdisciplinary MA while also retaining the MA in Sociology. We were given two main reasons for the decision not to do so. One is the decline in the numbers of students taking the MA in Sociology, from a high of 20 some years ago to just 5 this year. We were told that this decline is a college-wide problem and that in general taught Masters courses are

weakening. In that context the interdisciplinary MA appears as a strategic pooling of resources and of student numbers. The other reason given for the decline in student numbers is that in recent years the department has struggled to find an identity for its MA. It had a strong identity some years ago when the theme was Ireland and Modernity. This was also the period when the course attracted 20 students. However the numbers taking that programme began to decline and it was thought that the appeal of the concept of “modernity” had passed. Also Modernity was not a theme with which all members of staff had been able to identify. In 2004 the decision was made to change the theme to Understanding Social Change. This did not, however, arrest the fall in numbers.

It is a major decision on the part of the Department to discontinue its MA, and we are not convinced that it is a wise one (the Self-Assessment Report suggests that additional options are being considered). It would be worth finding out if the decline in the numbers taking the MA is also happening in other Irish universities. Even if this is the case, the trend may not be even across universities and may not explain the decline in the numbers taking the MA in Sociology at NUIM. Moreover the MA in Society and Space may not provide a solution to the problem of numbers. We asked the current MA students how they would have responded if the only MA they had been offered was the interdisciplinary one. Some were positive, others were negative: it was for the MA in sociology they had stayed, not simply for the MA. There is a risk that some students who could not do an MA in sociology at NUIM might go elsewhere to do it.

Rather than discontinuing the MA in Sociology, it might be a better idea to re-invent it. What is striking about the MA focused on Ireland and Modernity was how successful it was, at least in the initial period. It was suggested that this was because the concept behind the course (and perhaps the title) appealed strongly to that particular generation of graduating students, given the changes that Ireland was then going through. It is possible that the decline in numbers owes something to the fact that Understanding Social Change does not speak to anything specific in the experience of the current generation of students, and that the problem of numbers may lie there rather than in an overall decline in the numbers taking the MA. If so, the solution would be to identify themes that would appeal to today’s students. The new conjuncture – perhaps the end of the Celtic Tiger and the adjustment that will follow – would seem to offer fertile ground for relevant themes.

It might be worth considering more than one theme, a possibility also raised in the Self-Assessment Report. We were informed that one of the difficulties with the MA in Modernity was that it lacked inclusivity. This problem could arise again. A single, very broad and inclusive theme might have little resonance for prospective students. A better idea might be to have more than one theme, each with a clear focus, directed at different bodies of students, supported by interlocking courses.

ii. MPHIL/PHD PROGRAMME

The department currently has 35 research postgraduates, with students at different stages of completion. Of these there is an entering cohort of 5 students. All 5 are receiving funding and all are availing of a NIRSA-based structured programme. They

will take modules (courses) in the first year or two, as part of the preparation for their dissertation. Existing PhD students had more freedom in the courses they took and where they have based themselves during the period of their studies. The hope at EU level is that in time all PhD students will be funded and take part in structured programmes. But this may not be a realistic goal in the Irish context for some time to come, and unfunded students are likely to continue to be part of the department's PhD programme.

The NIRSA-based PhD curriculum is a major new resource for the Sociology Department, providing funding and an institutional context that is intellectually stimulating and socially supportive. This is a new development and it is important that progress be closely monitored. In our discussion with the PhD students, we addressed the question of how they found the new structured programme. There was some dissatisfaction with the content of the modules. The compulsory courses are conceived as generic and interdisciplinary, and some students appear to have struggled with this aspect. Generic courses offered by members of the sociology staff in the past (one on writing a research proposal, another on teaching) were well received, which suggests that the problem may stem in part from the interdisciplinary component.

There is a challenge to be met here, of communication but also of devising modules that, while interdisciplinary, take account of the particular interests of the sociology students. Well-conceived interdisciplinary courses can lead students to think in new ways and lay the foundations for a life-time of productive communication across disciplinary boundaries. But at this stage of their career students are still attempting to grasp the contours of their own discipline. It may be necessary to look at the NIRSA-based modules to see how the sociology content is being presented and monitoring how well the content of the NIRSA-based courses relates to the overall (re)structuring of the sociology PhD programme. This will require close communication between the staff of the different departments offering courses in NIRSA.

NIRSA-based structured programmes are likely to be a very important part of the Sociology Department's PhD programme in the coming years. But for as long as it remains, the second track of unfunded or otherwise-funded students must also be provided for. These students may insist on more freedom of choice in the modules they take and may wish for a stronger sociological rather than interdisciplinary emphasis. This will pose a challenge to the department: how best to coordinate the two strands in its PhD programme – the parts that are strongly NIRSA-based and those that are not. Ultimately its goal must be to create a positive departmental climate for all its postgraduate students. The role of department seminars might be reassessed and redesigned with this in mind.

More generally, our view is that while broadening and deepening its engagement with NIRSA at the level of postgraduate teaching and research, the department should continue to steer its own course – shaping its own curricula and models of training, and putting its own intellectual stamp on the courses in which it is involved. The relationship with NIRSA is vital to the department's growth, but it must continue to develop its own project for postgraduate study in sociology.

C. THE POLITICS DEGREE

The very full nature of our schedule made it difficult to fully inform ourselves on the new Politics degree. Also the degree is at a very early stage of its development at NUIM and it is perhaps too early to carry out a Quality Review of it. From what we saw, it is a very positive development that is progressing well. Innovative curricula at the undergraduate level have much to recommend them and in a time of budget cutbacks, drawing cross-disciplinary connections may bring efficiencies, as well as being intellectually broadening. The focus on active citizenship, political sociology and political institutions, with sociology as a background discipline, offers an approach to Politics that is distinctive and valuable in the Irish context.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As stated at the outset, the Sociology Department at NUIM is very strong in the key areas of research, teaching, and administration; in fact, it is one of the leading sociology departments in Ireland. Our recommendations, summarised below, highlight the need for long-range strategic planning informed by attending to larger changes in higher education. Another set of recommendations concern the practicalities of sustaining undergraduate teaching excellence in a period of declining resources and high enrolments. Finally, we have suggestions that may help the department move through a current period of transition in the focus and organisation of its M.A. and PhD programmes.

Recommendations

1. To sustain excellence and move towards its goal of gaining international recognition, **the Sociology Department will need to articulate more clearly its strategic goals and the manner in which it proposes to meet these.** Strategic planning is especially important in a period of expanding enrolments and declining resources, as well as in a context where larger social forces and institutional changes are reshaping the department's options.
2. The department should give time to reflect on its **organisational culture** and on the changes that may be necessary in this to achieve its key goals. We suggest that attention be given to the following issues: different time horizons and the importance of keeping long term ends in view; the need for effective participation and networking at each level where decisions are made that impinge on the department; consideration of the conflicting imperatives of collectivity and individuality, and inclusivity and individuality. Other issues may emerge in the course of the department's reflections.
3. There is some dissatisfaction within the department with the current list of **research clusters**, and some doubt as to whether clusters should be retained at all. We believe that the practice of identifying research clusters has considerable organisational value and should not be abandoned lightly. **The naming of department research clusters should be revisited with an eye on the various**

purposes that clusters serve. In approaching this task it is important for the department to steer its own intellectual course.

4. The Sociology Department faces **the challenge of sustaining quality undergraduate teaching in a time of high enrolments and declining resources. The addition of new staff would help ease this problem; caps on enrolments might also be considered and the department should explore other options. We recommend that students be actively encouraged to take under-enrolled modules within and outside the department. Modularised linkages with other departments and interdisciplinary curricula should be more fully developed and promoted. Associated career opportunities should be identified and promoted.**

5. The new MA program in Society and Space, joint with Geography, has many positive features, but we **recommend that the department's decision to drop the MA in Sociology be reconsidered. We recommend that it be retained, organised around themes that appeal to the current generation of students.**

6. **The transition to a more structured PhD program, with modules offered during the first two years, should be carefully guided. Improved communication with students** would help in designing modules that take account of diverse interests, experiences, and intellectual paths. Modules organised through NIRSA are valuable resources for sociology PhD students, but students with more discipline-centred interests should also be supported. **Staff should work to ensure a better fit between the activities of the department that are strongly NIRSA-based and those that are not.** Ultimately the goal is to create a positive departmental climate for **all** the postgraduate students of the department. Department seminars might be reassessed and redesigned with this in mind.

Professor Barrie Thorne
External Reviewer

Professor Joseph Ruane
External Reviewer

Mr Peter Ryan
External Stakeholder

Professor Peter Denman
Internal Reviewer

Dr Bernard Mahon
Internal Reviewer