



NUI MAYNOOTH

Óliscoll na hÉireann Má Nuad

Quality Review of the Department of Spanish

March 2010

Peer Review Report

Peer Review Group:

External Reviewers: **Professor David Brookshaw,
University of Bristol;
Professor Bill Richardson,
National University of Ireland, Galway.**

Internal Reviewers: **Professor Tom Collins,
Vice President of External Affairs,
NUIM;
Dr Frank Mulligan,
Senior Lecturer, NUI Maynooth**

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Professor John Hughes, President, NUI Maynooth

The members of the Quality Promotion Unit:

Dr Richard Watson
Ms Marguerite Lohan

Dr Tom O'Connor, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Celtic Studies and
Philosophy

Dr Florian Krobb, Head of the School of Modern Languages, Literatures
and Cultures

Ms Regina W. Richardson, Subject Librarian for Spanish
Ms Celia Kehoe, Librarian, The Russell Library

Ms Joana Cortez, Camões Institute

The staff of the Department of Spanish:

Professor John Kinsella
Dr Catherine O'Leary
Dr Catherine Leen
Dr David Barnwell
Dr Jennifer Wood
Ms Sonia Núñez Cortés
Ms Antonia Flores
Ms Nuala Kenny
Ms Elena Prats
Ms Sinéad Conlon
Mr Daniel Zubía Fernández

The undergraduate and postgraduate students of the Dept. of Spanish

1. THE DEPARTMENT

Since the last Quality Review in 2004, and partly as a result of some of the recommendations made, the Department's staff cohort now consists of four academic staff including the Professor, two full-time language assistants, and one full-time executive assistant. It has some part-time support for language teaching, and receives support from the Instituto Camões, Lisbon, to partially fund its Portuguese language provision. It is also seeking support from the Instituto Ramón Llull in Barcelona, to establish its recently introduced provision for Catalan on a firmer basis. The Department would like to re-introduce Basque, the provision of which lapsed with the retirement of a colleague in another department, and is seeking ways to do this through links with the University of Vitoria.

It is a young department, both in terms of the age profile of most of its staff and of its existence at NUIM. It was established in 1999 with the appointment of its first Professor, John Kinsella, under whose leadership Iberian and Latin American Studies have developed and flourished. Teaching is essentially research led, and the Department's undergraduate programme offers an exciting range of units in the field of modern cultural studies. Student numbers have grown consistently over the last ten years, and it is to the credit of the academic staff that they have continued to provide their students with a high level of teaching and pastoral care, while successfully pursuing their research activities at both a national and international level. The Department is in the process of streamlining its undergraduate programme, and as of next year, it will introduce a taught MA in Spanish and Latin American Studies. Since February 2010, the Department has been a constituent member of a newly created School of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures comprising the Departments of French, German and Spanish, and it anticipates collaborating with the other language departments, as well as with other departments and groupings in the Faculty, in new teaching and research synergies.

It is important to stress that Spanish at NUIM is a thriving department and a credit to the University. It is a small department with high aspirations and ambitions in both its teaching and research. The popularity of Spanish as a language means that student numbers have undergone steady growth, and this has inevitably created some strains that staff recognise need to be addressed.

2. CURRICULUM DESIGN

2.1. Undergraduate

The Department has recently reviewed its course structures and is streamlining its curriculum in order to provide greater flexibility. In the first year, and given the high numbers of *ab initio* students in Spanish Language, the curriculum lays emphasis on language acquisition and on a survey of the history and cultures of Spain and Latin America. After the first year, students will be able to choose between two tracks, one of which enables them to focus more specifically on Modern Spanish and Latin American culture, the other catering for those who wish to acquire a second Iberian language in the form of either Portuguese or Catalan. In the final year, students can either continue their study of one of these two languages in addition to Spanish, or choose from a range of options, which coincide with the research interests of staff, including Chicano Studies and Women's Writing. The Department is to be commended for taking this initiative, which promises to provide choice, while playing to the strengths of the teaching staff. In general, the cultural modules seem to be working very effectively, although some students find it difficult to read the set texts in the original. This may have something to do with the problems outlined below (2.1.1.).

2.1.1. Given the diversity of student intake (*ab initio* in Spanish, School Leaving Certificate in Spanish, and some with a pre-acquired informal knowledge of the language), and the diversity of staff involved in language provision, it is perhaps inevitable that the majority of the problems encountered by the assessors lie in this area of the Department's activity. These problems are identified as follows:

- A lack of co-ordination between the different staff responsible for the delivery of the Spanish language. These include the academic staff, the language assistants, and part-time language tutors in the Department itself, as well as the part-time language assistant in the University's Language Centre, where students from the Department go for their language laboratory classes. Specific problems occur when different language groups progress at different speeds, and are exacerbated when the material used in the language laboratory does not reflect what they have learnt in their grammar classes. The assessors felt that this situation could be remedied if the Department instituted a 'language teaching committee', to include all categories of staff involved, which would meet at the beginning of each semester, and at regular intervals thereafter, to ensure that all language groups advanced more or less in tandem, and that the language laboratory classes synchronised with the other types of class in terms of their content. The committee would provide for greater communication among language staff, and guarantee a more integrated and cohesive language provision. The committee would also have the remit to discuss the suitability of the course books used for language, and ensure that the assessment requirements set out in the course handbooks and confirmed by the course tutors at the beginning of the semester, were strictly adhered to.

- The above problem of lack of co-ordination is exacerbated by the existence of mixed ability groups in Spanish Language in Years 2 and 3. In Year 2, ex-beginners find themselves being taught alongside students who have studied the language for several years at school. In Year 3, the situation is further complicated by the fact that some students (whether ex-beginners or ex-Leaving Certificate) have benefited from a year in Spain through an Erasmus exchange, while others have not. The effect of this is that while some students graduate with extremely high levels of proficiency in Spanish, others struggle to achieve an adequate standard in the language. The assessors felt that this situation could be remedied in a number of ways:
 - a) By raising the bar for deciding progression to the second year in Spanish, and abolishing for all modules the practice of passing in the language 'by compensation'. This would help drive up standards in Spanish, especially among those beginning it in their first year at NUIM.
 - b) By radically increasing the number of students who go abroad on Erasmus or other exchanges, which would help to minimise the difference in linguistic ability between ex-beginners and ex-Leaving Certificate students in the final year (currently only 20% of students take a third year abroad). The assessors recommend that the year abroad becomes the default position of the Department for students coming to study Spanish at NUIM, and that those who cannot go away for a full year should be required, as at present, to spend at least three months in Spain. For this position to be consistent across Spanish, French and German, it is important that a School policy should be enunciated on this matter.

2.1.2. There was a feeling among students that they would benefit from more conversation classes in order to increase their communicative skills and thus strengthen their confidence in the spoken language. Students report that Phonetics classes have proven to be beneficial in this respect.

2.1.3. It was also felt that greater use might be made of multimedia materials in language classes and of computer-assisted learning packages, and that the latter might be integrated into the language provision programme as an additional learning tool. A wider range of materials might be made available on a self-access basis in the SALL Room, in terms of newspapers, periodicals, etc.

2.1.4. Students and staff commented on the cramped conditions of many of the classes. This is the positive result of the popularity of Spanish, which has produced larger numbers of students than ever before. It has not been accompanied by an increase in classroom accommodation, which in turn often creates unnecessary difficulties in the teaching/learning process. It is hoped that the new Humanities and Social Sciences Building may improve the physical conditions in which language is taught.

2.1.5 Students interviewed by the assessors made further suggestions in relation to teaching, as follows:

- the possibility that the Department could offer tutorials on Latin American literature, to supplement lectures;
- the desirability of encouraging all tutors to ensure the participation of weaker students in class activities, especially in language classes;
- setting up a formalised system of introducing Spanish Erasmus students to NUIM students of Spanish;
- ensuring that the Department could provide adequate advice and information to students who wished to take summer courses in Spain.

The assessors recommend that the Department consider how best to follow up on the above suggestions, and to implement them where feasible.

2.1.5. The impression gained by the assessors was that the staff of the Spanish department are accessible and responsive to the difficulties encountered by the students, and they acknowledge that changes are being made to improve the student experience in the subject.

2.2. Postgraduate

2.2.1. The Department currently has three postgraduate research students, one of whom has recently submitted a PhD thesis and is awaiting a *viva*. The other two have just begun their research, and one is jointly supervised between Spanish and Anthropology. The assessors were assured that the supervision offered in the Spanish Department was of excellent quality: supervisors were readily available, helped students plan out their research, and ensured that they received regular written work. In one case, funds from the Instituto Camões had enabled a postgraduate student to undertake archival work and attend a conference in Portugal.

2.2.2. The new structured PhD, incorporating research-skills training, is an extremely positive development, and one of the first-year research students had already benefited from the new, more formal training in research methodology.

2.2.3. The new MA programme in Spanish and Latin American Studies beginning in 2010/11 is an exciting new development designed to increase the number of postgraduates in the Department, and to serve as a means to attract postgraduates into doctoral research, thus enhancing the research profile of the Department. The assessors understand that the streamlining of undergraduate provision is being undertaken partly to accommodate the MA in order to attenuate the additional teaching that this will require. However, this is a small department, which has to match its resources to its aspirations, and the MA, if successful (as we are sure it will be), will create added strains on existing resources. The Department will therefore have to seek to make the best possible use of cognate modules in other departments across the Faculty.

3. RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

3.1. Research strengths

3.1.1. For a Department that was only established just over ten years ago, it has built up a dynamic research culture in a number of fields. It is the only centre in Ireland and the UK with a research focus on Chicano Studies, as well as on the literatures of the Portuguese and Spanish Atlantic islands. It has important international collaborative research strengths in the area of Modern Spanish theatre and visual cultures and censorship underpinned by funding from the RIA and the AHRC. It has an important niche area of research in comparative Spanish and Irish linguistics and linguistic history, and in the history of cultural links between Ireland and Latin America. It has a lively programme of guest lectures and seminars, some of which are published in its in-house series, Maynooth Papers in Spanish and Latin American Studies, and has hosted an array of colloquia and conferences over the last five years. In the field of Portuguese Studies, it is involved in a collaborative publishing venture with a UK university through its Faoileán/Seagull translation series, which has also taken under its umbrella the monographic series, *Lusophone Studies*. All staff contribute regularly to international, peer-reviewed journals, participate in conferences, have applied for and been granted funds to pursue their research, and are active members of subject research associations.

3.2. Of further note is the integration of guest lectures and colloquia into the credit system, which encourages undergraduate students to gain an appreciation of their subject and the work of the Department outside the confines of their course syllabus, while also introducing them to the world of research.

3.3. Since the last quality review, the formal designation of a subject librarian for Spanish has facilitated subject- and research-specific acquisitions for the University Library, although it is to be regretted that the Library has recently lost a post of library assistant with responsibility for cataloguing Spanish materials. The new library building, due to be opened in the near future, represents a positive step in the development of facilities for scholarship and research.

3.4. During the course of their visit, the assessors were shown round the Russell Library, and were able to see bibliographical examples from the Salamanca collection, which has begun to be formally catalogued. This collection represents an extremely important and unique source for international research into the history of Hiberno-Spanish relations. It is crucial that scholars at NUIM, with the possible support of An Foras Feasa, are enabled and encouraged to take intellectual charge of a resource that could benefit the Spanish Department (especially through its partnership with the University of Alcalá), as well as other departments in the Faculty.

3.5. Research leave involves the sacrifice of a proportion of the taker's salary, and while the effect of this can be mitigated through tax alleviation on the condition

that the person on sabbatical stays outside Ireland, there is nevertheless a practical and personal cost to this exercise. At the beginning of a research project, an academic may well need to do fieldwork overseas, but if the leave is being taken in order to write up research, this is more often than not done more easily at home. In spite of these limitations, however, the research performance of members of the Spanish department is impressive.

4. ADMINISTRATION, POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

4.1. The School of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures

The Spanish Department is a constituent member of the SMLLC, which has been in existence since February 2010. This move came as a result of the University's desire to enhance the position of modern languages at NUIM, and not as a part of some general, top-down policy of 'schoolification'. The Department will preserve its autonomy and identity, including its own executive assistant, who, in addition to her administrative and secretarial responsibilities, plays an important pastoral role, and is a crucial support for both academics and students. Although the creation of the School is expected to produce teaching and research synergies among its departments, it is not yet clear what the responsibilities of the Head of School are. These will no doubt emerge in the course of time, but in the immediate future, the assessors consider that it would be helpful if the School could formulate a policy on Erasmus and the Year Abroad (see 2.1.1.).

4.2. It was also felt that the position of Dr O'Leary as Acting Head of Department should be clarified (although this was not, in any way, a matter brought to the attention of the assessors by the incumbent). Nevertheless they felt that her authority as Head should be endorsed for the sake of the standing of the Department in both the School and Faculty.

4.3. The assessors also felt that procedures for appointments to language assistantships, including those of indefinite duration, should be made clearer and practice made consistent. Similarly, there appeared to be no clear definition of the duties of the assistants or the part-time tutors, whose marking workload seemed excessive in relation to their role. A clear statement of application procedures and role descriptions for these posts would minimise the possibility of future misunderstanding on the part of these categories of staff.

4.4. The establishment of a language teaching committee, in addition to the matters described above (see 2.1.1.), could also ensure that the language assistants and part-time tutors were performing the roles outlined for them, and provide a channel of communication between them and the management of the Department.

4.5. It was not clear whether the University kept a record of the career destinations of its graduates in Spanish, but providing a mechanism for maintaining contact with past graduates would help enhance the Spanish Department's sense of identity, and also mean that it would be easier to include meetings with former students in the programme of future quality reviews.

4.6. The assessors noted with satisfaction that a system of student feedback in the form of questionnaires had been instituted, and that the intention was to supplement this with regular feedback meetings between staff and students in the future.

5. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

5.1. The years ahead will be challenging for what is still a small department as it seeks to put into effect its aspirations in a time of economic retrenchment across the higher education sector. By streamlining the undergraduate programme, the Department has felt more able to embark on a Master's programme that should deliver it higher numbers of research students, and thus increase its research profile. In order to achieve this, it should make full use of modules offered by other departments in the Faculty as well as in the School. Indeed, it may well be that themed MA programmes involving cross-School participation may emerge over the course of time to complement the Department's own MA.

5.2. The retirement in three years' time of the Department's founding chairholder, Professor John Kinsella, puts a question mark over the future of Portuguese, which he has done much to try and build up over recent years, with the help of the Instituto Camões. The streamlining of the curriculum to include a Portuguese pathway is a statement of intent that the Department is firmly committed to the subject. Experience in other institutions indicates that Portuguese is best protected if there is a member of the academic staff who is research active in the subject, and who can therefore contribute to its teaching and dissemination. Continuing support from the Instituto Camões will depend on the continuation of a healthy intake of students for the subject, and is more likely to be guaranteed if it is allowed to attract students from outside the Spanish catchment area, thus giving it some degree of autonomy. It may well be that this will be facilitated as the School evolves and seeks to include the study of other languages.

5.3. In the future, there will be a potential demand for Spanish (and possibly Portuguese) to be studied with Sociology, which is not currently possible due to choice restrictions. Evidence suggests that Sociology and a Modern Language would be a popular degree combination. The move towards full modularisation should allow for this, but the School might wish to lend its weight in order to render the possibility of a degree combination in Sociology and a Modern Language, to include Spanish and possibly Portuguese, more likely.

6. CONCLUSIONS

6.1 This is a relatively new Department. Since its inception in 1999, it has concentrated its energies on consolidating the provision of undergraduate programmes, and on the development of a healthy research culture. It has achieved these worthwhile objectives while also ensuring that students have access to a range of languages (Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan and Basque). It has also attracted a number of postgraduate research students.

6.2 While maintaining the above provision, the Department now aims to further develop its research base, with the addition of further research students, and to expand the courses on offer to include a taught MA programme. The Department has devised ways in which to streamline its undergraduate provision in order to achieve this, and has well thought-out plans in place to support these developments.

6.3 Matching its aims and objectives with the resources available to it will represent a challenge for the Department as it undertakes the additional activities referred to in this report. It will be important for the Department, the School and the University to monitor developments closely over the coming period, in order to ensure that high standards are maintained in the various areas in which the Department is involved, and, where possible, to ensure that adequate resources are secured for the Department to be able to carry out its mission effectively.

6.4 The recommendations made in this report are aimed at further developing and improving what is clearly a very sound and well-run Department.

6.4.1 Key recommendations in the area of teaching relate to:

- improved co-ordination of the delivery of language classes;
- greater stringency in assessing students for progression from First Year to Second Year;
- significantly increasing the proportion of students who undertake a Year Abroad;
- more extensive provision of conversation classes;
- greater use of computer-assisted language learning packages;
- improvement in the physical conditions of classroom accommodation;

6.4.2 Other key recommendations include:

- that the Department should liaise with the School on the issue of policies relating to the Year Abroad;
- that the status and position of the Acting Head of Spanish be clarified;
- that procedures for all appointments relating to the Department be clarified;
- that a Language Teaching Committee be established in the Department;
- that a mechanism be put in place for ongoing contact between the Department and its alumni;
- that the system of student feedback be further developed and formalised;
- that the Department liaise with other departments in relation to the development of common or joint modules, especially at postgraduate level;
- that the situation of Portuguese be consolidated and that measures be taken to ensure the continued provision of the language upon the retirement of Professor Kinsella;

- that the possibility of offering a programme combining Sociology and Spanish be examined.

6.5 The assessors were impressed by the enthusiasm, commitment and professionalism shown by all members of the Department, and wish to acknowledge the tremendous work that has been carried out by all to date. The collaborative ethos in the Department is a real strength, and it is demonstrated by all the staff, including not only the Professor of Spanish, Acting Head and other academic staff, but also by teaching assistants and the Departmental administrator. It is clear that there is significant expertise in the Department in a wide range of relevant academic areas and that the Department will be well-placed to continue to offer high-quality courses and carry out important research work as it moves forward over the coming years.

Professor David Brookshaw
External Reviewer

Professor Bill Richardson
External Reviewer

Professor Tom Collins
Internal Reviewer

Dr Frank Mulligan
Internal Reviewer