Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

Maynooth University

QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND ASSURANCE

PEER REVIEW GROUP REPORT

ANCIENT CLASSICS Department

ACADEMIC YEAR 2021/22

Date: January 2022

Contents

1.   Introduction

The Department of Ancient Classics came up for review at a particularly difficult time, not only because of the pandemic under which everyone has laboured for almost two years, but because of its own immediate history and current position. From a previously relatively stable staffing of six academics (a small number, but manageable and by no means unique among Classics departments), just as the pandemic hit it was faced with the sudden departure of two members of staff, compounding the planned retirement of the Professor and that of the long-serving senior administrator. After further vicissitudes, the configuration of the department at the time of the review is three permanent staff, two staff on contracts ending in August 2022, and a maternity cover for the replacement administrator. The university has approved the advertisement of one five-year lectureship in Roman history and one half-time five-year tutoring position in Classical languages, to run from September 2022. With the best will in the world, this constitutes an understrength staffing resource with which to stem and hopefully reverse the decline in student FTEs. It was clear to the reviewers, therefore, and confirmed by the representatives of senior management, that the goal of the review should be not only to perform the necessary investigation as to the quality of provision, but also to attempt to identify and propose ways in which the Department might work towards greater flourishing.

That notwithstanding, the Department has begun to take steps towards reversing the decline in student recruitment. These measures include the introduction of a new BA (Classics) and the withdrawal of the separate degree pathways in Greek and Latin. From now on the Classical languages will be available as optional specialisms within the BA (Classics) stream. This change is a sensible response to the reduced staffing complement and the small numbers of student on the language streams. It should help reduce the overworking of staff and the evidence from other universities shows that this approach does produce graduates equipped with strong enough language skills to take on further study in the discipline.

In addition, the Department has begun to offer modules cross-listed with History, Law and Philosophy, which is another very welcome development. However, as our recommendations below indicate, the Review Group is firmly of the belief that more innovations of this type and further and ongoing curriculum review are required.

The review took place online using MS Teams over five days, 29 November - 3 December 2021.

2.   Peer Review Group Members

Name	Affiliation	Role
Dr Edward Herring	NUI Galway	External Reviewer
Professor Alison Sharrock	University of Manchester	External Reviewer
Dr Oliver Mason	Maynooth University	Internal Reviewer
Professor Aislinn O'Donnell	Maynooth University	Internal Reviewer

3.   Timetable of the site visit

The programme of meetings was comprehensive in its coverage, but this made for a demanding schedule. To some extent, this was probably exacerbated by the online nature of this review.

Having short breaks between the meetings is an excellent idea. However, the demands of using Teams for the meetings often put the timetable under pressure, resulting in the break time being squeezed or eliminated. This would probably be less of an issue for in-person reviews. It might be worthwhile for the Quality Office to consider building in slightly longer breaks between meetings for online reviews in order to allow reviewers to debrief and also take a break.

4.   Peer Review Methodology

4.1   Site Visit

The virtual site visit was very well organised. The Review Group was able to meet with a full range of stakeholders, including academic and administrative staff of the department, former staff members, undergraduate and postgraduate students, tutors, colleagues from cognate departments, and University managers. All additional information requirements and requests for further meetings made by the Review Group were met.

4.2   Preparation of the Peer Review Group Report

The Commendations and Recommendations were drafted during the Site Visit. The template supplied by the Quality Office was uploaded onto a Sharepoint site so that all members of the Group could contribute to the drafting of the text. The Commendations and Recommendations emerged naturally out of our discussions of the Self-Assessment Report and the substance of the meetings with stakeholders. By the time of the Exit Presentation, these sections of the report existed in an advanced draft form and were put into a more coherent order for the purposes of the presentation. The members of the Review Group held a short meeting after the presentation to agree a plan for the drafting and editing of key sections of the report. In the week subsequent to the Site Visit, the Chair of the Review Group produced a first draft of all of the sections of the Report that were still outstanding. The other members of the Peer Review Group were then given the opportunity to address any omissions and finesse the draft. Once all members of the Group were happy to sign-off on the Report, it was submitted to the Quality Office for the next stage in the process.

5. Overall Assessment

5.1 Summary Assessment of the Department

The Department's core strengths reside in the commitment of the staff to their subject area and their students. This results in highly enthusiastic teaching, which inspires in the student body a great passion for the study of antiquity. One of the hallmarks of the Department has been its teaching of both Latin and ancient Greek. At times, the staff commitment to language teaching has bordered on the self-sacrificing, with staff carrying unsustainably high teaching loads.

By their own admission, the staff of the Department had been slow to react to the challenges posed by falling student numbers. This trend began in 2011/12 following the Financial Crash of 2009 and was further compounded by changes to the structure of the Omnibus Arts degree in 2016/17. Only recently have meaningful attempts to address the decline begun. It would appear that the Department has a long-established model for its operations that had served it well for many years but, as its effectiveness began to wane, the Department has been slow to recognise that radical change is needed.

While the decline in the staff complement constitutes a major threat, there is an opportunity offered by the appointment of two new five-year contract posts, one a full 1.0 FTE, the other at 0.5 FTE, although the Review Group is concerned that this level of support may not be adequate given the scale of the challenge. With the right appointments, the Department can look to refresh its programme and modular offerings, reach out within the University for teaching and research partners and collaborators, and beyond the University to encourage recruitment and build the reputation of the Ancient Classics at Maynooth both nationally and internationally.

The single biggest threat is that the decline in undergraduate student numbers is not arrested and, at least partially, reversed. The two new posts have a duration of five years, and it is likely that there may be further retirements in the same period. If the situation is not improved in the next five years, the University may have a very serious decision to take about the future viability of the Department. If it were to choose to discontinue the teaching of Ancient Classics, and especially the ancient languages, this would be greatly regretted by colleagues across the Faculty, as well as the discipline nationally and internationally, and would represent a serious diminution of the intellectual ecosystem of the University and of the Omnibus BA programme.

5.2 Self-Assessment Report

The Self-Assessment Report was honest, reflective, and thorough. It ran to 55 pages with a further 205 pages of supporting data in the Appendices. There were no obvious omissions or inaccuracies in the Report.

The methodology of compilation seems wholly appropriate, especially given the challenges of completing the report in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented colleagues from meeting on campus during the Academic Year 2020/21.

6. Findings of the Peer Review Group: Commendations and Recommendations

6.1 Overview

- Department governance and organisation

Because of its small size, the Department functions in a fairly informal way, with a lot of processes dependent on institutional memory and word of mouth. While this works reasonably well, and it was clear from our discussions that senior department staff make great efforts to support and assist new and less experienced colleagues, we did hear of cases where problems arose because of unforeseen circumstances, and some lapses in communication. There was a particular difficulty for the most recent staff, academic and professional, who began in very complex circumstances made worse by the pandemic.

- Teaching, learning, assessment and student feedback

It is clear that staff work extremely hard to provide an excellent education. Teaching is enthusiastic, inspiring, and supportive. Assessment procedures are carefully managed. Student feedback, both in the documentation provided and in our meeting with students, is overwhelmingly positive.

- Research activities and outputs

There is some excellent research produced by the Department, both in terms of individual outputs and in activities such as seminars and conferences. Research productivity is somewhat unevenly spread through the Department, although all staff have produced important work. The recent challenges facing the department along with the heavy teaching and admin loads clearly have an impact here. Opportunities for sabbatical leave are limited.

- Staffing and staff development

There is a wide range of modules and programmes, some with small numbers, and staff appear at capacity in terms of teaching load. The re-conceptualisation of undergraduate degree programmes may alleviate this somewhat. Some staff (including tutors) have availed themselves of staff development opportunities.

- Resourcing and Facilities

The Department's staff complement has been unstable over the past few years, following the retirement/resignation of three members of academic staff and that of the long-serving Senior Administrator. The gaps have been bridged by a succession of short-term contracts. This has clearly been unsatisfactory. However, the appointment of the two five-year contract posts will now give a stability that the Department sorely needs.

The other resource and infrastructure needs of the Department are adequately, but not generously, served. The Review Group does recommend that the Faculty and/or University should provide some modest additional funding to help in the implementation of our recommendations.

- Internal and external engagement

Department members have served on numerous faculty and university boards and committees. More widely, there has also been substantial service to the community as external examiners, reviewers, and noteworthy contributions to scholarly bodies. There has

also been engagement with the Classical Association of Ireland, ClassicsNow, and contributions made to 2nd level curriculum design via the NCCA. In terms of student recruitment, efforts appear to have been largely focussed on internal engagement within existing University structures.

- Implementation of recommendations for improvement made in Peer Review Group Report arising from last quality review

The Department's response to its previous Quality Review was considered and constructive. However, that review was completed in 2009/10, which was prior to the precipitous fall in student numbers that began after the Financial Crash. To a very large extent, the findings of that Quality Review have been completely overtaken by subsequent events and the Department is, not least because of changes to the size and profile of the staffing complement, a very different entity from that which was reviewed in 2009/10.

The Review Group is mindful that the individual staff members of the Department are fully aware of the challenges that face them over the next five years and is, therefore, hopeful that they will respond rapidly and constructively to the recommendations made in this Report.

6.2   Commendations

The Department is commended for:

Its sustained commitment to the teaching of both ancient languages, alongside a range of modules in classical culture, which often requires staff to maintain very heavy teaching loads.

Managing to sustain its teaching and scholarly/research activities through the exceptionally challenging circumstances of the past few years. The level of support and collegiate assistance given by senior staff to occasional and temporary staff who had to step in at short notice is highly commendable.

The passion and enthusiasm displayed in teaching across all programmes, which enthuses and inspires a deep love of classical antiquity among the department's students. The consistently high scores on student evaluations (included in the self-assessment report) and the overwhelmingly positive comments from the students who participated in the meeting with the PRG provide very strong evidence for the high quality of teaching in the department.

Its extremely thorough and efficient examination process, which has been consistently highly commended by External Examiners over many years.

The variety of its service to the profession and wider community via reviewing and editorial duties, external examining and conference organisation. It is also to be commended for its engagement with 2nd level education through relevant teaching societies and the NCCA regarding curricular reform.

Beginning the process of programme and curricular reform as a response to the falling student numbers and the reduced staff complement.

The cross-listing of modules with History, Law, and Philosophy as part of response to the recruitment issues and ongoing willingness to explore opportunities to offer modules of interest to the wider student community.

Its plans to maintain the Maynooth Classics Seminar as a hybrid event, which serves to promote the national and international reputation of the Department and the University. The use of online seminars to broaden the audience and engage with academics and researchers from outside the department and University deserves to be applauded.

The organisation of the Careers for Classicists event. This is an important initiative in raising student awareness of the broad employability of graduates of Ancient Classics.

The opportunities for development of service and leadership offered to temporary and contract members of staff. This was fulsomely praised by former holders of such posts.

6.3   Recommendations for Improvement

Institutional/Strategic Recommendations

Number	Recommendation	Additional PRG Comments
S.1	Return to live Open Days and Orientation Week talks as soon as public health regulations permit to give members of the department an opportunity to engage with students face-to-face and emphasise the broad-base and critical skills provided by a Classics education before they register for their subject choices.	There is clear evidence from students and staff in other disciplines as well as from Classics itself that these face-to-face opportunities are vital to the recruitment of First Year students.
S.2	Consider whether the planned 1.5 5-year posts offer a realistic level of support to enable the developments needed.	We are concerned that the 0.5 tutoring post in Classical languages would not be sufficiently attractive to outstanding applicants who would bring the additional skills, competences, energy, and enthusiasm needed. While it would almost certainly be easy to fill the post with someone who could do the job, what is really needed is a much deeper injection of activity across the board. We would therefore strongly recommend that the post be advertised as a lecturer post in the field of classical language and literature/culture. The postholder would then be able to contribute in all areas of teaching and curriculum reform, research, and wider outreach and recruitment. Ideally, in terms of the contribution that the postholder could make to the Department, it would be preferable if the post could be made full-time for the five years, but we understand that resources might not permit this.

S.3	To ensure that prominence is given to non-school subjects in communications with students at Open Days but especially during Registration and Orientation to try increase attendance at Introductory Talks and to help deliver on the ethos of MU's Omnibus Arts degree.	
S.4	Give clear guidance, during the ongoing pandemic, on supporting students with online learning materials for those who are unable to attend campus for health reasons without causing undue increases in staff workload.	Using an audio recording system, such as Lecture Capture, might be worth considering.
S.5	Improve the provision of IT equipment and support for academic staff.	
S.6	Take a strategic decision at University level that provides a framework to encourage larger departments with high FTEs to explore cross-listing opportunities with smaller departments.	
S.7	Liaise with the department on how to give them effective marketing support to assist in promoting their undergraduate offering internally to incoming students and externally to prospective students in schools.	
S.8	Make resources available to allow the Department to create a small number of professional standard videos that can be used on the website and for wider marketing purposes.	

S.9	Develop, in consultation with the Department, a plan and broad, qualitative targets for the long-term sustainability of the Department.	In the first instance, these should be targets for the maintenance of Department of 4.5 academic staff.
S.10	Make available resources to employ a Senior Classicist to act as a facilitator to act as a critical friend to the Department as it reviews its full spectrum of activities.	

Recommendations to the Department

The Recommendations to the Department can be grouped into four intersecting areas, as follows:

U.1-U.6   Curriculum and Teaching

U.7-U.11   Outreach and Other Student-Related Issues

U.12-U15   Staff Training and Research

U16-U.18   Governance and Management

Number	Recommendation	Additional PRG Comments
U.1	Review all module content, titles, course outlines, learning outcomes to ensure that the curriculum is presented to prospective and continuing students in a way that is most attractive and that the transferrable skills that students acquire, via the study of Ancient Classics, are sufficiently apparent that they can articulate them to others.	This should include greater explicit articulation of the many transferable skills and dispositions acquired through a Classics degree, both linguistic and non-linguistic.

U.2	Review (and rename) first year modules to ensure greater coherence in the modules and support wider recruitment to the department.	Where new modules are created from the combination of two or more previously existing modules or where modules are team-taught, work closely to ensure that all transitions are smooth and the content is delivered in a way that is most accessible and engaging for students.
U.3	Explore the possibility of offering one or more elective modules specifically designed to attract students from across the University.	Ancient Myth is found to be a popular option in many universities. A Classics module in this area might be paired with a module on Celtic mythology offered by Old Irish to create an attractive and exciting elective stream. A unit with Philosophy on the history of Western thought would be another possibility. This may also develop opportunities for micro-credentials with a 10-credit weighting.
U.4	Expand and develop existing efforts to engage with other compatible departments on cross-listing of modules.	This approach has already been a success for the Department. It might be worth exploring a 'Latin for Law' module, although it would be important to undertake some market research to see whether it would be likely to get a significant uptake.
U.5	Explore linguists' versions of literature courses for a more efficient use of teaching resources, i.e. teach literature modules to both non-language and language students together, with a special reading group/seminar for the language students.	

U.6	Consider building upon the successful Rome trip by making it an elective module available to Second and Final Year students, on an alternate year cycle, so that all Ancient Classics students will have the opportunity to participate in it during their programme.	
U.7	Work on building communities within the student body (within and across year groups and involving UG and PG students) to help make students feel more connected to each other and the Department.	This may help improve retention into Second Year and help postgraduates to avoid any sense of isolation.
U.8	Begin to collect data on the gender breakdown of the student cohort by year and in terms of examination results.	
U.9	Ensure accessibility of all documentation for all students e.g. handouts, Powerpoints.	Undertake further training and liaise with the MAP office for further supports and guidance.
U.10	Maintain and build upon the Careers for Classicists event to stress the employability of Classics graduates to existing and prospective students.	This ties back to Recommendation U.1 above.
U.11	Consider engaging in more outreach activities to local schools to raise a general awareness of the subject and its place as part of the Omnibus Arts degree.	
U.12	Upskill in digital education and pedagogies, in particular to make more effective use of Moodle.	This would improve accessibility for all students, including the neurodivergent. It would also help in the delivery of Recommendation U.9 above

U.13	Deepen relationships with other disciplines within and beyond the Faculty, to identify opportunities for collaborative research projects and to contribute to interdisciplinary Masters degrees.	
U.14	Build on the contacts established via the seminar programme and previous interactions with the Arts and Humanities Institute and Research and Development Office to explore possibilities for collaborative research and funding opportunities.	It may be possible to avail of the Visiting Fellowship scheme to build external research partnerships. Newly appointed staff may be able to apply for funding for early career researchers.
U.15	Develop the Department's web and social media presence.	The Departmental Administrator's marketing expertise can be used to help develop this area, which will complement the Department's outreach activities, v. Recommendation U.11
U.16	Ensure that there is a regular rotation of the Headship to ensure that one member of staff is not overburdened with administrative responsibilities for a prolonged period.	This is essential to prevent a detrimental effect on the research profile of the Head of Department.
U.17	Develop a framework for teaching allocation that takes account of engagement in research and service and the diverse interests and priorities of staff.	
U.18	Use Teams/Sharepoint more effectively for electronic storage to share information among the department team, and to archive materials. Develop formal procedures for handover and for induction of new staff.	Informal engagement between colleagues and accessibility of senior staff is very important, but the department needs to supplement this with the use of online storage in order to make information readily accessible.

APPENDIX 1: ANCIENT CLASSICS DEPARTMENT: PEER REVIEW GROUP ONLINE VISIT TIMETABLE

DAY 1 Monday 29th November 2021		
Time	**Description**	**Attending**
14.00-14.30	Convening of the Peer Review Group • Briefing by Dr Teresa Lee, Director of Quality • PRG agrees a Chair, and discusses the review • Identification of any aspects requiring clarification or additional information	Peer Review Group Dr Teresa Lee, Director of Quality
14.30-15.00	Peer Review Group meet to prepare for afternoon sessions	Peer Review Group
15.00-15.15	Break	
15.15-16.15	**Meet with Faculty Dean & VP Academic/Registrar** Professor Colin Graham, Faculty Dean Professor Aidan Mulkeen, VP Academic & Registrar	Peer Review Group Professor Colin Graham Professor Aidan Mulkeen
16.15-16.30	Break	
16.30-17.30	**Head of Department** Dr William Desmond	Peer Review Group Dr William Desmond
17.30-18.00	PRG debrief	Peer Review Group

DAY 2 Tuesday 30th November 2021		
Time	**Description**	**Attending**
8:30- 9.00	Peer Review Group meet to prepare for morning sessions	Peer Review Group
9.00-10.00	**Group meeting with all Department staff** (Head of Department recused)	Peer Review Group All Departmental Staff
10.00-10.15	Break	
10.15-11.15	**Academic Staff Group 1** Dr Cosetta Cadeau Dr Jonathan Davies	Peer Review Group Dr Cosetta Cadeau Dr Jonathan Davies
11.15-11.30	Break	
11.30-12.30	**Academic Staff Group 2** Dr Kieran McGroarty Dr Maeve O'Brien	Peer Review Group Dr Kieran McGroarty Dr Maeve O'Brien

External Reviewers: Dr Edward Herring, NUIG, Professor Alison Sharrock, University of Manchester

Internal Reviewers: Dr Oliver Mason, Mathematics & Statistics Department, Professor Aislinn O'Donnell, Education Department

Time	Description	Attending
12.30-12.35	Break	
12.35 -13:05	**Administrative Staff** Ms Megan Browne	Peer Review Group Ms Megan Browne
13.05-13.30	PRG debrief	Peer Review Group

DAY 3 Wednesday 1st December 2021

Time	Description	Attending
8.30-9.00	Peer Review Group meet and prepare for morning sessions	Peer Review Group
9.00-10.00	**Academic Staff 3/Tutors** Mr Derek McCann Ms Niamh Hopkins	Peer Review Group Mr Derek McCann Ms Niamh Hopkins
10.00-10.15	Break	
10.15-11.00	**Undergraduate Students**	Peer Review Group 8 Confirmed
11.00-11.15	Break	
11.15-12.00	**Postgraduate Students**	Peer Review Group 2 Confirmed
12.00-12.15	Break	
12.15-13.15	**Meet with University Executive Members/Other MU Staff** Dr Alison Hood, Dean Teaching & Learning Ms Rosaleen McCarthy, HR Director Professor Fionntán de Brún, Head of School of Celtic Studies Professor Brian Donnellan, VP for Research	Peer Review Group Dr Alison Hood Ms Rosaleen McCarthy Professor Fionntán de Brún Professor Brian Donnellan
13.15-13.45	PRG Debrief	

DAY 4 Thursday 2nd December 2021

Time	Description	Attending
8.30-9.00	Peer Review Group meet and prepare for morning sessions	Peer Review Group
9.00-9.45	**Meet with other MU Staff** Professor Tom O'Connor, Director Arts & Humanities Institute	Peer Review Group Professor Tom O'Connor

External Reviewers: Dr Edward Herring, NUIG, Professor Alison Sharrock, University of Manchester

Internal Reviewers: Dr Oliver Mason, Mathematics & Statistics Department, Professor Aislinn O'Donnell, Education Department

	Professor Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses, History Department Dr John McGinnity, Director of Admissions/Assistant Registrar	Professor Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses Dr John McGinnity
9.45-10.00	Break	
10.00-10.15	**External Stakeholder 1** Dr Alexandra Madela, former temporary lecturer	Peer Review Group Dr Alexandra Madela
10.15.-10.20	Break	
10.20-10.35	**External Stakeholder 2** Dr Olaf Almqvist, former occasional lecturer	Peer Review Group Dr Olaf Almqvist
10.35-10.45	Break	
10.45-11.15	**Meet with other MU Staff** Professor Philipp Rosemann, Head of Philosophy Department	Peer Review Group Professor Philipp Rosemann
11.15-13.00	PRG begin preliminary drafting of commendations and key recommendations	Peer Review Group Dr Teresa Lee

DAY 5 Friday 3rd December 2021

Time	Description	Attending
8.30-9:00	Peer Review Group Meet	Peer Review Group
9.00-9.30	**Head of Department for any final clarifications (if required)**	Peer Review Group Dr William Desmond
9.30-10.00	Meet with Faculty Dean	Peer Review Group Professor Colin Graham
10.00-12.30	PRG finalise draft of commendations and recommendations	Peer Review Group
12.30-1.30	**PRG presentation to all Departmental staff** Close off and thanks to PRG: Director of Quality & Faculty Dean	Peer Review Group All Departmental Staff Dr Teresa Lee Professor Colin Graham

External Reviewers: Dr Edward Herring, NUIG, Professor Alison Sharrock, University of Manchester

Internal Reviewers: Dr Oliver Mason, Mathematics & Statistics Department, Professor Aislinn O'Donnell, Education Department