Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

Maynooth University

QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND ASSURANCE

PEER REVIEW GROUP REPORT

MEDIA STUDIES DEPARTMENT

ACADEMIC YEAR 2021/22

Date January 2022

Contents

1.   Introduction

This review was carried out over one week from Monday 1st to Friday 5th November 2021. The review was carried out on-line on Teams. During the review the review team met with the Head of Department, staff both full-time and occasional, a small number of students and the wider university leadership teams.

The Media Studies Department has a staff of nine academics. Dr Anne O'Brien is the Head of Department. The self-assessment report (SAR) was detailed and provided the team with ample information to carry out the review.

2.   Peer Review Group Members

Name	Affiliation	Role
Professor Christian Christensen	Stockholm University, Sweden	External Reviewer
Associate Professor Soren Pold	Aarhus University, Denmark	External Reviewer
Associate Professor Majella Dempsey	Maynooth University	Internal Reviewer
Professor Christine Griffin	Maynooth University	Internal Reviewer

3.   Timetable of the site visit

The timetable for meetings was intensive for the team with all meetings on Teams. There was sufficient time allocated to meetings and the participants engaged with enthusiasm. See Appendix 1 for a detailed timeline.

4.   Peer Review Methodology

4.1   Site Visit

We did not carry out a site visit due to COVID-19 restrictions. The inability of the peer review group to visit the department due to COVID was clearly unfortunate (in the sense that especially the external members of the PRG missed the opportunities for experiencing the physical campus and physical meetings), but unavoidable. While the group felt that the methodology for the evaluation was adequate, one issue should be noted for future reviews: the low number of students available for interviews. For the evaluation, just two students from the undergraduate program, and two students from the MA program were available

for meetings. A full and complete evaluation of a university department requires speaking to more than just two students from each degree group, and it is the feeling of the review group that the student perspective could have been enhanced.

4.2   Preparation of the Peer Review Group Report

An initial draft was prepared collectively by the PRG during the site visit, as part of the preparation for the exit presentation to the department at the end of the visit. The final report was developed in a collaborative way using Teams to co-write and discuss final edits.

5. Overall Assessment

5.1   Summary Assessment of the Department

It is the overall assessment of the peer review group that the Media Studies Department at Maynooth University is marked by a number of clear strengths, in addition to a smaller number of weaknesses.

In terms of strengths, the department is marked by a high degree of internal cohesion and collegiality, in addition to a clear and marked respect for departmental management. A rather steady flow of curricular changes made within the department in recent years have been met with professionalism and a desire to see the department thrive. Students made note of a quality education, and of the high standard of teaching. There was mutual respect between administrative and non-administrative staff. Finally, for a small department, faculty in Media Studies have produced an impressive volume of research in high-quality national and international publications.

While staff were flexible and professional in the face of changes, the same period marked by multiple curricular changes also led to what appeared to be a level of burnout on the part of staff, and a desire to see a period of continuity. A challenge, therefore, is to identify the intellectual/pedagogical core of the department and to work from, and develop, that core. This, in turn, is related to perhaps the central issue addressed in the review: the relationship between Media Studies and Kairos, and the need for a re-worked and clearer agreement between the two parties for the coming years.

5.2   Self-Assessment Report

The PRG would like to thank the Media Studies Department for the thoroughness and clarity of the Self-Assessment Report, which was accurate and engaged impressively with the spirit of the process of Quality Review. The SAR was largely complete and gave a useful overview of the Department's activities. More information on how courses/ modules are evaluated would be good. The SAR appears to have been compiled following extensive engagement with the Quality Review process by the entire department, and with broad participation and contributions.

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

6.1 Overview

In this section, we will outline the main Commendations (see Section 6.2) and Recommendations (see Tables) to the Department of Media Studies. For a summary see Section 5.1.

6.2 Commendations

1. The department and its teaching, research and flexibility are widely regarded as excellent (with students, faculty and university management). Staff are seen as flexible and adaptable to changing needs within the university.
2. There is considerable respect both within and outside of the department for the work of the Head of Department, in addition to a common respect for work by department administration.
3. The department was marked by a positive, collegial atmosphere and a high level of mutual respect. The overall impression was of a department willing to work together and offer each other assistance.
4. Academic staff are engaged in all areas of departmental work, teaching, research and administration. We did not get a sense of an unfair division of Labouré at the department level, even if there is a heavy workload and some sense of burnout (especially post-COVID). Staff did talk about the additional pastoral care and support students need post-COVID. The supporting documentation demonstrates the clear division of course coordinator duties. In all meetings with groups there was no sense of unfairness with the issue of workload.
5. The research record for the department is impressive both in terms of funding and publications. All members of the department are research active and contributing to scholarship nationally and internationally. There is a real sense that this department is a living organism of intellectual inquiry. This is to be highly commended.
6. The general level of internal and external engagement is high. This department is well represented at university level: 24 plus different committees mentioned in the report (p.56). This is demanding on people, but the workload is shared so appears manageable. People are also involved in external engagement in a number of different ways.
7. It is a key feature of the department that it manages to combine theory and practice and it should be kept as an important dimension also for future developments. The department seems to bridge between critical and creative dimensions and media studies and digital media in general in a fruitful way.
8. The department has a broad disciplinary range and flexibility that allows students to go in many directions within the broad field of media studies within both practice and theory (e.g., from film to social media).
9. Curriculum development - there has been a lot of agility in adapting to change and innovating over a number of years, and there is now a need to consolidate on this. As an example of such a consolidation, the storytelling and narrative thread is relevant, including the process for developing this across modules. There is clearly a great innovative spirit in the department.
10. Excellent undergraduate and postgraduate experience (based on limited student feedback). Modules were described as relevant and engaging, including the three pillars of the education, the production, the media theory and the extra-curricular. At the MA-level, despite the rather low number of students, they had gelled very

well as a group and felt supported and that faculty members were very approachable for them.

11. The Kairos staff members who teach on MU Media Studies programmers are very comfortable in their relationship with those members of the Department with whom they work and feel very supported by the HoD. This relationship is fundamental to the success of the current partnership.

12. There is good moderation across assignments in the capstone projects of the undergraduate programme and a general openness from faculty towards personalised feedback when asked for it.

13. In the PhD programme the Annual Progress Review is exemplary. The process is very student centered. The submission of a piece of the student's work and the detailed feedback from 2-3 faculty members was seen as a very supportive process for students.

6.3   Recommendations for Improvement

Recommendations for improvement, at the Institutional and Departmental levels, are offered on the tables below.

Institutional/Strategic Recommendations

Number	Recommendation	Additional PRG Comments
S.1	**PRODUCTION** Engage with relevant departments/faculties to arrive at a solution to updating and supporting the MacLab internally.	*It is imperative to look at how MU can provide a Mac lab with software to enable teaching of courses. The "grace and favour" arrangement with Computer Science is not sustainable. This is a University issue and will need a lot of collaboration and innovative thinking to solve. It appears that other departments are also using the existing Mac lab. The investment may be shared among departments, or centrally. It appears that other departments are also using the existing Mac lab, and it was argued that a Mac lab is important for humanistic IT subjects.*
S.2	**RESEARCH & RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT** Internal university communication needs to be enhanced regarding e.g., research support, funding, applications, etc.	*It seems that some support functions are not well-known, and that information is missing in relevant places, e.g., at a web portal, info meetings, etc.*
S.3	**ADMINISTRATION** There is a need for increased technical support for staff and students beyond the current arrangement with Computer Science.	*The extent of technical support required will be in part dependent on the resolution of the MacLab issue (point S1 above) but extends beyond the requirement to maintain these facilities.*
S.4	**ADMINISTRATION** There is a requirement for increased support to staff administering larger research projects. There is also a need for better communication from the University and via HOD regarding any such administrative support available to staff.	*See S2 above*

S.5	**PHYSICAL LOCATIONS FOR STAFF/STUDENTS** At an institutional level, there is an urgent need for more spaces for students to socialise on campus.	*A great study environment requires besides lecture rooms places to socialise, get inspired, meet, work in groups and feeling part of the larger interdisciplinary university.*

Recommendations to the Department

Number	Recommendation	Additional PRG Comments
U.1	**OVERALL** There is a need for a clearer articulation of the core strengths(s) of the department for the purposes of student recruitment and departmental identity, and to maintain and cultivate those strengths. In an effort to do this, the department approach to curriculum planning could be more developmental rather than reactive.	*Especially important given that regular changes in technologies and/or industry focus can lead to time-consuming curricular changes that only have short-term benefits.*
U.2	**STUDENT NUMBERS & RECRUITMENT** There is a need for better communicating the high level of research in the department externally, including to use this as a potential tool for recruitment. Also, the department could preferably develop a strategy for further integration of research into teaching and make research visible in courses and the programme.	*It is important to keep up the synergy of practice and theory and perhaps even furthering this, including further integrating theory into practice and vice versa. Also, the combination between digital and traditional media seems important for the department and education and will constantly need to be renegotiated and highlighted with regards to research strengths.*
U.3	**STUDENT NUMBERS & RECRUITMENT** The department needs to update the recruitment of students at both the BA and MA levels based on improved contact with graduates and data on their post-graduation employment. This includes survey of not only recent graduates, but also those going back e.g. 3, 5 or 7 years.	*This longer-term review will allow for students who have been in the workforce for several years to reflect upon the benefits of their education beyond simple technical skills.*
U.4	**STUDENT NUMBERS & RECRUITMENT**	

	In order to streamline intake targets, budgeting and workload estimations, the department needs to make a readjustment of student number expectations so as to correlate with actual intake.	
U.5	**PRODUCTION** Outline a plan for the renewal of the Kairos contract which does not transfer more leverage to Kairos in terms of facilities and teaching.	*There is an urgent need for the contract with Kairos to be reviewed. This dependence on an external agency appears to be holding back future planning in the department. It is our recommendation that the next version of this arrangement has to give more leverage to MU around facilities and module delivery. The theory-practice divide is not alleviated or helped by having two distinct identities working at the same time in the department.*
U.6	**PRODUCTION** Continue engagement between Kairos and University teaching staff established during the teaching fellowship to enhance cohesion between the two "sides" and to facilitate theory to inform the teaching of practice.	*We would recommend that departmental staff and Kairos staff work together on programme design and delivery.*
U.7	**RESEARCH & RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT** Research events (seminars, colloquia, etc.) should be furthered in order to make research more visible at the department level. And, to further collaboration, research clusters that include other departments should be reconsidered in order to create a better sense of community and involvement of research students.	*Necessary funding for this work should be made available to a higher degree. Technical support and supported labs for both research and teaching are necessary to a higher degree in order to support the practice and the integration of theory and practice.*
U.8	**ADMINISTRATION** A formal meeting between administrative staff and HOD on a regular basis, with an agreed agenda, would be a useful addition to the current ad hoc arrangements to ensure efficient communication and management of the department. At an institutional level, the University needs	*There is a need for duties and responsibilities of administrative staff to be clarified, and this may be facilitated by more explicit administration structure at departmental level.*

	to provide better opportunities for promotion and career advancement for administrative staff, as well as giving due consideration to the effects of changing policies and procedures on the workload and of departmental administrators.	
U.9	**ADMINISTRATION** We recommend developing a more professional departmental website and regular updating of this and other social media. This could be aimed at attracting undergraduate and postgraduate students and overcoming the perception of Media Studies as "one of Maynooth University's best kept secrets".	
U.10	**WORKLOAD AND TEACHING** In order to clarify workloads, the department needs to investigate and introduce a more comprehensive workload model to be used in staffing decisions. In the absence of a broader university model, this could be done at department level.	
U.11	**STUDENT FEEDBACK** Ensure student evaluation participation by making the evaluation a component of every class (perhaps literally setting aside time in a lecture to do it), e.g. as a combination of oral discussion in class and written questionnaire. Ensure a format for taking student evaluations into account and directed toward creating a better learning space.	
U.12	**PHYSICAL LOCATIONS FOR STAFF/STUDENTS** There is a distinct need for dedicated desk space, offices and social space for PhDs students, both to facilitate their research and teaching roles and to contribute to the development of a research community within the Department.	*It is unclear to the PRG if this is a Departmental or Institutional issue.*

Appendix 1: MEDIA STUDIES DEPARTMENT: PEER REVIEW GROUP ONLINE VISIT TIMETABLE

DAY 1 Monday 1st 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	Head of Department Dr Anne O'Brien	Peer Review Group Dr Anne O'Brien
16.15-16.30	Break	
16.30-17.30	Group meeting with all Department staff (Head of Department recused)	Peer Review Group All Departmental Staff
17.30-18.00	PRG debrief	Peer Review Group

DAY 2 Tuesday 2nd 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	Meet with VP Academic/Registrar & Faculty Dean Professor Aidan Mulkeen, VP Academic & Registrar Professor Colin Graham, Faculty Dean	Peer Review Group Professor Aidan Mulkeen Professor Colin Graham
10.00-10.15	Break	
10.15-11.00	Academic Staff Group 1 Dr Gavan Titley Dr Sarah Arnold Dr Kylie Jarrett Dr Javad Khajavi	Peer Review Group
11.00-11.15	Break	

11.15-12.00	Administrative Staff Ms Tracy O'Flaherty Ms Anne Byrne	Peer Review Group
12.00-12.15	Break	
12.15 -13:00	Academic Staff Group 2 Dr Denis Condon Dr Jeneen Naji Professor Maria Pramaggiore Dr Stephanie Rains	Peer Review Group
13.00-13.30	PRG debrief	Peer Review Group

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Time	Description	Attending
8.30-9.00	Peer Review Group meet and prepare for morning sessions	Peer Review Group
9.00-9.30	Academic Staff Group 3/Kairos Ms Yvonne McDonald Ms Naomi Seale	Peer Review Group
9.30-10.15	Meet with other MU Staff Dr John McGinnity, Admissions Officer Dr Joe Timoney, HOD Computer Science Professor Valerie Heffernan, HOS, School of Modern Languages, Literatures & Cultures	Peer Review Group Professor Valerie Heffernan Dr John McGinnity Dr Joe Timoney
10.15-10.30	Break	
10.30-11.15	Academic Staff Group 4/Occasional Staff Ms Tugce Bidav Mr John Kirwan	Peer Review Group
11.15-11.30	Break	
11.30-12.15	Undergraduate Students	Peer Review Group 2 students, one first year and one third year
12.15-12.30	Break	
12.30-13.15	Postgraduate Students	Peer Review Group 2 Confirmed
13.15-13.30	PRG Debrief	

DAY 4 Thursday 4th November 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 University Executive Members Professor Brian Donnellan, VP Research, Dr Alison Hood, Dean Teaching & Learning	Peer Review Group Professor Brian Donnellan Dr Alison Hood
9.45-10.00	Break	
10.00-10.15	External Stakeholder 1 Ms Kasandra O'Connell Head of IFI Irish Film Archive	Peer Review Group
10.15-11.00	Break	
11.00-13.00	PRG begin preliminary drafting of commendations and key recommendations	Peer Review Group Dr Teresa Lee

DAY 5 Friday 5th November 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) Dr Anne O'Brien	Peer Review Group Dr Anne O'Brien
9.30-12.30	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