



**QUALITY REVIEW  
OF THE DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY  
ONLINE 18<sup>TH</sup>-22<sup>ND</sup> OCTOBER 2021**

**PEER REVIEW REPORT**

EXTERNAL REVIEWERS:

JOHN STEWART GORDON, PROFESSOR, VYTAUTAS MAGNAS UNIVERSITY

PAUL O'GRADY, PROFESSOR, TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

INTERNAL REVIEWERS:

DELMA BYRNE, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, SOCIOLOGY

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Date: December 2021

## 1. Community

We thank the academic community at Maynooth Philosophy Department for their thorough preparation, authentic engagement and constructive approach to the review team. While we anticipated engaging with the Department on topics such as research, curriculum, teaching and learning, it turned out that the topic of community emerged as fundamental to everything that followed. In open, constructive and frank discussion, it became clear that there is a pressing need to find new ways of interacting and cooperating with each other, a view articulated by all staff interviewed. There was unanimous agreement that the advent of Prof Philipp Rosemann was a significant positive development in the recent history of the Department, but that nevertheless further steps can and should be taken to facilitate better interactions between staff members. Because of the unanimity in expressing a desire for a better mode of interacting by everyone involved, and the belief that the Department does not have the resources on its own to facilitate this, we recommend that the Head of Dept engage with the Vice President for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, as soon as possible, to explore possible interventions which would support the staff in working together better. All our subsequent recommendations are predicated on good rapport and mutual inclusion between staff members, which is why we are placing this aspect of the review first.

## 2. Curriculum

The Department has significant strengths in specific areas of philosophy. It has strengths and very good coverage in history of philosophy (especially Medieval and Renaissance) and all the main historical periods are covered in undergraduate teaching. It also has significant strengths in phenomenology and contemporary European philosophy. However, we identified gaps in important areas in the provision of modules. There is a general lack of thematic or systematic modules and a tendency to structure modules around figures rather than topics. We recommend a rebalancing of this, that is, there should be more modules focussed on topics and greater clarity on topical connections between historical figures in modules structured around figures. The lack of specific modules in metaphysics and philosophy of science is unfortunate and we queried leaving epistemology and logic as options. We understand the

pressures on a small department, but recommend that staff teach more broadly to reflect a more comprehensive curriculum. Perhaps modules could include shorter sub-components that would allow students to engage with different topics (e.g. modules with components on Metaphysics/Philosophy of Language or Epistemology/Philosophy of Science). We also suggest restructuring the provision of Ethics. An introduction to ethics should - besides a brief overview of meta-ethical positions - cover at least the main ethical theories such as virtues ethics, deontology, utilitarianism, and contract theory in order to equip the students with a solid foundation for their future studies. In addition, given the utmost importance of applied topics in ethics in recent decades, it seems of great relevance to teach some of the hotly debated issues in the seminar as well.

At a more strategic level we recommend a corporate rethink of the undergraduate curriculum. It looks as if the current curriculum has built up over years, largely based on individual lecturers' interests, rather than as the result of a reflective process where the department decides what a student needs to cover. As noted above, this engagement on curriculum presupposes a level of collaboration and mutual agreement which needs urgent attention. In particular we would like the department to reflect on the kind of skills and abilities they would like to impart to students and to think about how their modules facilitate this. For example, how is the reading of historical texts fostered, how do students learn to engage with different contexts, genres and styles (as noted by the External Examiner, SAR p. 101)? How are students taught how to construct arguments, how to analyze, how to debate? How are students encouraged to apply their philosophical reflection to their own lives and society? What kinds of modules would support this? We note and applaud innovations in the curriculum such as "Women in Philosophy" and "Philosophy in a Digital Age". It would be good to build on these creative responses to contemporary issues and think how the curriculum as a whole deals with this. This is not to say that all modules have to explicitly show a contemporary relevance, but rather to think about how the skills acquired by doing a specific module fit into a shared conception of what a philosophy student in Maynooth should be able to know and do having completed the programme.

### 3. Teaching and Learning

#### *Reputation*

The Department of Philosophy has a good reputation within the university both among students and among staff in other departments. The feedback received from undergraduate students both during the peer review meetings and in the meeting of the Head of Department with the student representatives (as recorded in the minutes) is very positive. The Department is committed to their students and wishes to bring the subject of Philosophy to a new generation of students. The Department has very experienced teachers who have the knowledge and the enthusiasm to engage the students about the topics that they are teaching. Several members of staff are implementing new forms of continuous assessment. In the last few years, the number of students taking Philosophy in the first year of their study for the B.A. degree has increased, and the retention into 2<sup>nd</sup> year and 3<sup>rd</sup> year is good. Discussions of the Peer Review Group with the postgraduate students reveals that the students in general are very satisfied with the supervision they receive from their supervisors. Since 2011 seven students have graduated with a Ph.D. in Philosophy and have taken up a variety of different careers. The various M.A. programmes of the Department have attracted a total of four to ten students per year.

#### *Infrastructure*

In order to stimulate the effective engagement of students with materials posted on Moodle (the on-line learning platform used at Maynooth University), it is important to strike a balance. The materials posted should comprehensively cover the course, to help the students wishing to review material. Posting hardly any materials provides insufficient help to the students, while excessive posting of materials discourages active engagement by the students. The academic member of staff who is responsible for the course should collect the reading materials in electronic form and post these on Moodle. At times the readings have had to be sourced by the tutor, or by students themselves. This is undesirable, because it is at times difficult to find texts that are less well known. This is particularly important for students who are working from home and are unable to access electronic resources via the MU Library.

### *Teaching Assistant Support*

The current number of students in first year approaches 160, which is too many for the module lecturer to establish a meaningful pedagogical relationship with individual students. This task consequently falls to tutors, who do a lot of essential work in delivering the tutorials and marking the essays. The tutorials are given in groups not exceeding about fifteen students. In second and third year student numbers are much lower, varying from 8 to 45 students, allowing for better engagement and more diverse pedagogical methods. The tutors are drawn from the doctoral students and, more rarely, the masters students, for whom tutoring is an important opportunity to gain teaching experience. There should be a better liaison on course specifics between the academic members of staff and the tutors. One of the tutors commented that for some courses the tutors have to do a lot of the groundwork. The Peer Review Group recommend that academic staff facilitate the tutors as much as possible, in particular in the providing the materials that the tutors need to effectively do their work, and having brief discussions with the tutors regarding the use of the materials and the link with the lectures.

### *Continuous assessment*

For most modules, a take-home essay is a typical mode of assessment, and the required level of depth and the length increase with the year in the undergraduate degree. The essay enables the students to consult lecture notes along with primary and secondary literature, whereas an examination relies on memory of the material, and so different skills are imparted in this way.

Traditionally, tutorials were associated with the core modules, but most tutorials ended up being taught in a lecture format with little interaction. Attendance of these tutorials was mandatory, but the tutorials did not contribute to the continuous assessment mark. Some members of academic staff have done away with the tutorials and have introduced obligatory 'reaction papers'. These reaction papers are done several times per semester, and require students to compose short reflections (typically of a few hundred words) on the subject matter of particular classes. The marks given for the reaction papers contribute to the continuous assessment mark.

During Covid, some colleagues have offered non-mandatory on-line tutorials to accompany core modules. These have been successful, in part because the instructor is dealing exclusively with students who want to participate in these. After the return to on-campus instruction, the Department is intending to continue these tutorials with certain modules.

The large number of students the first-year classes makes it difficult for lecturers to pay individual attention to each student. Nevertheless several students considered the tutorials an important part of their education. The fact that tutorials are typically not taught by the class lecturers was viewed as an opportunity to see a subject from a different angle, which can aid comprehension.

The introduction of reaction papers in several of the second and third year modules has been well received by the students. The reaction papers are seen as an excellent way to encourage class participation, and as a very suitable means of encouraging reflection and feedback, though some staff had reservations about them. We would encourage discussion about this.

Students emphasized the value of presentations. A couple of student representatives explained how much they profited from the in-depth engagement with an author or text, which the preparation of a presentation requires. The presentations seemed to be key components of their educational experience (presentations are only mentioned on p. 106 in the SAR).

The undergraduate students have expressed concern about low attendance in Philosophy classes.

Academic members of the Department frequently deliberate on pedagogical matters, such as the pros and cons of tutorials or the right balance between examinations and continuous assessment, advantages and disadvantages of examinations vs. continuous assessment, modes of continuous assessment (essays, reaction papers, and literature reviews). While it is up to each individual lecturer to decide how to arrange the continuous assessment, we recommend that the staff continue to discuss their different teaching practises and to find new ways of engaging the students. In view of the differences of opinion amongst members

of academic staff as to how to best do things, we recommend that the Department takes a pragmatic approach to these discussions, by doing away with informal meetings during which no minutes are taken, and by formally scheduling all meetings, circulating an agenda, and taking minutes. We suggest that the academic staff in the Department engage with the Centre for Teaching and Learning, which may lead to a further expansion of the pedagogical methods used in the various lecture courses. Engagement with the Centre for Teaching and Learning could also focus on student voice, and how to better engage students.

### *Student Experience*

Overall the feedback received from both the undergraduate students and the postgraduate students is very positive. Lecture courses are stimulating and interesting, and academic staff are very approachable. The post-graduate students are generally satisfied with the courses they are following. The small size of the Department, compared to other Philosophy departments internationally, facilitates staff-student contacts, and the Department is very welcoming towards students arriving from outside Maynooth.

We highlight the significant role of the departmental administrator, Ann Gleeson, who in addition to the large number of administrative tasks she performs, is the first point of contact for students, staff, faculty, and other departments and administrative units within the university. She handles queries in person and by email from students and many different persons, and makes a significant contribution to the student experience in the Department. Whereas the number of female students in the undergraduate degrees is reasonable, there is a striking gender imbalance at the postgraduate level. The Self-Assessment Report acknowledges this, and while there may be external reasons for the gender imbalance, we nevertheless strongly encourage the Department to take action attempting to improve this. Currently the Faculty of Arts, Celtic Studies, and Philosophy is working towards applying for an Athena SWAN Bronze award. Within this context we suggest that the Department starts to keep student records that are broken down by gender, and starts thinking about how it can enhance the experience for female students.

Occasionally, difficulties with inter-personal relationships among academic staff in the Department inhibits constructive engagement of post-graduate students with staff other than

their own supervisor in the Department. All members of academic staff should make sure that they respect the viewpoints of their colleagues even if these differ from their own, and also avoid this becoming an issue with regard to the experience of the post-graduate students in the Department. Some of the post-graduate students have commented about the lack of interaction amongst the students. This has undeniably been aggravated by the lockdowns due to Covid. The Department is scheduled to move to a different building in the near future. The Peer Review Group strongly recommends that proper renovation of the building is done before the Department moves in, and that a room with PCs, desk space and some seating area is made available for the post-graduate students. Such a room will promote informal discussions amongst post-graduate students and will be a boost for the research culture in the Department.

### *Skills, Career Preparation*

Various forms of skills training and career preparation exist within the teaching curriculum. Timed on-campus examinations tests the students' ability to acquire knowledge and to convey this knowledge in written form under time constraint. The take-home essays make it possible for the students to consult lecture notes and literature references, allowing a more in-depth engagement with the various sources without a strict time constraint.

The other forms of continuous assessment offers students a more diverse suite of assessments requiring different skill-sets and talents. Reaction papers enable a better feedback between the student and the instructor, but tutorial sessions in small groups may facilitate more in-depth discussion of the material covered in the lectures.

Discussion of this topic revealed that students—especially first-year students—feel they receive insufficient guidance on some of the basic skills which the study of philosophy requires. Tutorials would be a good opportunity to discuss strategies of note-taking. Essay-writing, too, is not a skill that can simply be taken for granted, especially in relation to topics like the use of sources or the distinctive features of a philosophical argument.

The Peer Review Group found little information in the Self-Assessment Report on skills imparted in a wider context, and recommends that the Department thinks more proactively about what skills are essential and how they can be best imparted to the students within the



curriculum. That is, while students were positive about their learning at the Department, students were less clear about their career trajectory as a Philosophy graduate. We recommend that the Department work together to communicate the career possibilities for students at MU Department of Philosophy and to communicate more clearly the skills acquired during undergraduate study.

To enhance the research culture within the department we recommend that PG students are requested to give a departmental seminar about their work once or twice during their study. Since 2011 seven students have graduated with a Ph.D. in Philosophy and have taken up a variety of different careers. No data on B.A., M.A. and MLitt students is available, and we recommend that the Department attempts to get a perspective of the career paths of these cohorts of students.

#### 4. Research Culture and Engagement

The members of the Philosophy Department are, without doubt, quite active and productive with respect to their (a.) publication output and (b.) numerous talks given at various academic events. This is a very positive finding.

However, the members of the review panel would like to urge the members of the Philosophy Department to generally publish in journals whose international reputations and standings (Q1 and Q2 journals) are more visible. By increasing the visibility of the research output, it becomes more easy to successfully apply for external funding at the (highly) competitive national and international levels.

Furthermore, publications at higher ranked international journals are – among other things (e.g., public outreach, academic offices etc.) – a solid starting point for one’s own promotion in the academic setting. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to publish at more visible and higher ranked journals.

A comprehensive change of the current research culture at the Philosophy Department is necessary in order to more successfully collaborate with experts outside the department and

with excellent international scholars beyond Maynooth University. This cultural change will eventually become the foundation for a more successful environment for external funding bids. This does not mean, however, that the suggested measures will guarantee the success of external funding applications, but it will certainly be a good starting point to become more and more confident to, at least, apply for research funds. This can be either done with colleagues from within the department or together with colleagues from outside the department. Most importantly is that one tries to apply for external funds on a more regular basis.

Reflecting the good reputation the Department has with other Departments at the University, the review team found that there is a willingness among staff in other Departments and staff in other Faculties to engage in inter-disciplinary collaboration on research proposals that focus on contemporary issues/problems for society.

In order to support this general change in the research culture, the members of the review panel believe that it would be good to introduce (a.) a more visible visiting program for international researchers with the same or a somewhat different philosophical background which helps the Philosophy Department to broaden the scope of their own research and teaching. In addition, it would be beneficial to introduce (b.) a regular bi-weekly colloquium where the members of the Philosophy Department and invited colleagues could present their work in progress to enrich the research culture of the department.

The members of the review panel assess the existence of the *Maynooth Philosophical Papers* which is published by members of the Philosophy Department as a very positive element, especially with respect to its ongoing professionalization introduced by the current head of department Professor Dr. Philipp Rosemann. Its production is now organised by the well-known Philosophy Documentation Center in the US, the journal has become indexed, and it is electronically available (see, SAR: 47-48).

The journal *Maynooth Philosophical Papers* is still a local journal with the potential to become a more internationally visible venue in philosophy in future. Its success, however, is based on the joint efforts of the members of the Philosophy Department and hence it seems

reasonable to establish a more formal way to organise the handling of the journal in the department. Colleagues need to work together in order to accomplish this. The department has the opportunity to market itself as the home of a successful and reputable future journal.

The Peer Review Group found little information in the Self-Assessment Report on the wider engagement activities of the staff in the Department. This is surprising given that civic and community engagement/engaged and partnership research is a key criterion for promotion. The review team recommends that the Department makes visible the value to the University and to society more broadly, of the outcomes of engagement.

## 5. Communication

The Philosophy Department holds regular departmental meetings (four in 2020-2021), in which all academic staff and the departmental administrator participate and during which minutes are taken. In addition, three informal meetings were held in 2020-2021. The departmental Progression Committee evaluates the progress of M.Litt. and Ph.D. students. There is also an annual meeting of all staff with the external examiner, and Prof. Philipp Rosemann meets annually with student representatives from 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year. In this meeting a representative from the Maynooth Students' Union is also present. Within the university, the Philosophy Department has a very good reputation and the staff relate very well with colleagues in other academic and administrative departments.

In meetings with the Review Panel some staff members expressed the desire that communications amongst staff in relation to departmental operations but also involving university matters be improved. This is also indicated in the Self-Assessment Report. We recommend that, rather than at times relying on personal communications, the transparency of decision-making within the department is improved by adhering to clear protocols and structures.

We recommend that the number of departmental meetings per academic year is increased, and that minutes are taken at all meetings. We suggest that some of the departmental

meetings could be fully dedicated to discussions of the academic curriculum, teaching methods, and the involvement of tutors in the delivery of the tutorials. Other departmental meetings could then focus on other departmental business and on university matters.

Regarding the Meeting with Student Representatives, we recommend that members of academic staff who are year coordinators and members of staff responsible for the post-graduate programmes also participate in this meeting. We also recommend that the department appoints one or two post-graduate representatives who also participate in this meeting. It is important that students present at these meetings are ensured that their comments are confidential and are taken serious if issues are raised, and also that there is a clear mechanism through which these comments feed back into the operations of the department if this is needed.

Currently, the Faculty of Arts, Celtic Studies, and Philosophy is working towards applying for an Athena SWAN Bronze award. Within this context, the Philosophy Department has already taken the excellent initiative to increase the coverage of women philosophers in the curriculum. We recommend that the Philosophy Department increases the number of female speakers in its seminars, and attempts to take other initiatives to attract more women into philosophy.

We also recommend that the Philosophy Department liaises with the MU Vice President for Equality & Diversity to see what processes could be initiated within the department to increase the number of female students and to boost the atmosphere in the department for both students and staff. It is important that academic staff are aware of the policies that Maynooth University has put in place to ensure that an equitable and collegial work environment for staff and students is being maintained.

By its nature philosophy is a subject/discipline in which issues with moral and ethical dimensions are being investigated. Differences of perspective or opinion may naturally arise as a result of this, but at all times academic staff should ensure that they respect the viewpoints of colleagues even if these differ from their own.

**APPENDIX 1: PHILOSOPHY DEPARTMENT: PEER REVIEW GROUP ONLINE VISIT TIMETABLE**

<b>DAY 1 Monday 18<sup>TH</sup> October 2021</b>		
<b>Time</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Attending</b>
14.00-14.30	Convening of the Peer Review Group <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Briefing by Dr Teresa Lee, Director of Quality</li> <li>• PRG agrees a Chair, and discusses the review</li> <li>• Identification of any aspects requiring clarification or additional information</li> </ul>	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	
15.15-15.45	<b>Faculty Dean</b> Professor Colin Graham	Peer Review Group Professor Colin Graham
15.45-16.00	Break	
16.00-17.00	<b>Meeting with Head of Department</b> Professor Philipp Rosemann	Peer Review Group Professor Philipp Rosemann
17.00-18.00	PRG debrief	Peer Review Group
<b>DAY 2 Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> October 2021</b>		
<b>Time</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Attending</b>
8:30- 9.00	Peer Review Group meet to prepare for morning sessions	Peer Review Group
9.00-10.00	<b>Registrar/Vice President Academic and Faculty Dean</b> 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	
10.15-11.15	<b>All Departmental Staff Meeting</b> (Head of Department recused)	Peer Review Group

11.15-11.30	Break	
11.30-12.15	<b>Academic Staff Meeting 1</b>	Peer Review Group Dr Amos Edelheit Dr Mette Lebech Dr Cyril McDonnell
12.15-12.30	Break	
12.30-13:00	<b>Administrative Staff</b> Ms Ann Gleeson	Peer Review Group Ms Ann Gleeson
13.00-13.30	PRG debrief	Peer Review Group
<b>DAY 3 Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> October 2021</b>		
Time	Description	Attending
8.30-9.00	Peer Review Group meet and prepare for morning sessions	Peer Review Group
9.00-9.45	<b>Academic Staff Group 2</b>	Peer Review Group Professor Michael Dunne Dr Susan Gottloeber
9.45-10.00	Break	
10.00-10.30	<b>Academic Staff Group 3/Occasional</b>	Peer Review Group Dr Simon Nolan Dr Gregory Jackson
10.30-11.00	<b>Academic Staff Group 4/Tutors</b>	Peer Review Group Ms Catherine Barry Mr Daire Boyle Mr David O'Brien
11.00-11.15	<b>Break</b>	
11.15-12.00	<b>Undergraduate Students</b>	5 Confirmed
12.00-12.15	Break	
12.15-13.00	<b>Postgraduate Students</b>	3 Confirmed
13.00-13.30	PRG Debrief	

<b>DAY 4 Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> October 2021</b>		
<b>Time</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Attending</b>
8.30-9.00	Peer Review Group meet and prepare for morning sessions	Peer Review Group
9.00-9.45	<b>Meet with University Executive Members</b> Professor Brian Donnellan, VP for Research Dr Alison Hood, Dean of Teaching & Learning Ms Rosaleen McCarthy, Director of HR Dr John Cullen, Dean of Graduate Studies	Peer Review Group Professor Brian Donnellan Dr Alison Hood Ms Rosaleen McCarthy Dr John Cullen
9.45-10.00	Break	
10.00-10.40	<b>Meet with other MU Staff</b> Dr John McGinnity, Admissions Officer Dr William Desmond Jr., Ancient Classics Dept Professor Rowena Pecchenino, Economics Dept Professor Fionntán de Brún, School of Celtic Studies Dr Elizabeth Boyle, Early Irish Department	Peer Review Group Dr John McGinnity Dr William Desmond Jr Professor Rowena Pecchenino Professor Fionntán de Brún Dr Elizabeth Boyle
10.40-10.45	Break	
10.45-11.00	<b>External Stakeholder 1</b> Philosophy Dept/SPCM Rev Dr Michael Shortall Dr Gaven Kerr	Peer Review Group Rev Dr Michael Shortall Dr Gaven Kerr
11.00-11.05	Break	
11.05-11.30	<b>External Stakeholder 2</b> Professor William Desmond/Thomas A.F. Kelly Visiting Chair	Peer Review Group Professor William Desmond
11.30-11.45	Break	
11.45-13.30	PRG begin preliminary drafting of commendations and key recommendations	Peer Review Group
<b>DAY 5 Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2021</b>		
<b>Time</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Attending</b>
8.30-9:00	Peer Review Group Meet	Peer Review Group

9.00-9.30	<b>Head of Department for any final clarifications (if required)</b>	Peer Review Group Professor Philipp Rosemann
9.30-10.00	Dr Gemma Irvine, Vice President for Equality and Diversity	Peer Review Group Dr Gemma Irvine
10.00-12.30	PRG finalise draft of commendations and recommendations	Peer Review Group
12.30-1.30	<b>PRG presentation to all Departmental staff</b> Close off and thanks to PRG: Director of Quality & Faculty Dean	Peer Review Group All Departmental Staff Dr Teresa Lee Professor Colin Graham