



## QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND ASSURANCE

### PEER REVIEW GROUP REPORT

*ENGLISH DEPARTMENT*

ACADEMIC YEAR 2021/22

Date: December 2021

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## 1 Introduction

This report has been prepared following a Quality Assurance and Enhancement review of the English Department of Maynooth University, by the Peer Group (PRG). The process, carried out under the University's Academic Council procedures and in line with the Quality Assurance and Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, Ireland 2012, involved the Department engaging in a process of self-assessment, the submission of a self-assessment report (SAR) to peer review, and due to COVID 19 restrictions, an online review via Teams by the PRG. The PRG comprised two external national and international specialists and two members drawn internally from staff of the University.

## 2 Peer review group members

Name	Affiliation	Role
Professor Peter Boxall	University of Sussex	External Reviewer
Professor Marie Louise Coolahan	NUI Galway	External Reviewer
Dr Bridget McNally	Maynooth University	Internal Reviewer
Dr Jon-Ivar Skullerud	Maynooth University	Internal Reviewer

## 3 Timetable of the site visit

The PRG carried out its review during the week commencing 8<sup>th</sup> November 2021. The group made an exit presentation to all members of the Department on Friday 12<sup>th</sup> November, the last day of the virtual site visit.

DAY 1 Monday 8 <sup>th</sup> November 2021	
Time	Description
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>
14.30-15.00	Peer Review Group meet to prepare for afternoon sessions
15.00-15.15	Break
15.15-16.15	VP Academic & Registrar and Faculty Dean Professor Aidan Mulkeen, VP Academic & Registrar Professor Colin Graham, Faculty Dean
16.15-16.30	Break
16.30-17.30	Head of Department: Professor Lauren Arrington
17.30-18.00	PRG debrief

<b>DAY 2 Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> November 2021</b>	
<b>Time</b>	<b>Description</b>
8:30- 9.00	Peer Review Group meet to prepare for morning sessions
9.00-10.00	Group meeting with all Department staff (Head of Department recused)
10.00-10.15	Break
10.15-11.15	Academic Staff Group 1
11.15-11.30	Break
11.30-11.45	Individual meeting 1
11.45-12.00	Individual meeting 2
12.00-12.15	Break
12.15 -13:00	Administrative Staff: Ms Amanda Bent, Tracy O'Flaherty
13.00-13.30	PRG debrief
<b>DAY 3 Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> November 2021</b>	
<b>Time</b>	<b>Description</b>
8.30-9.15	Peer Review Group meet and prepare for morning sessions
9.15-9.30	Individual meeting 3
9.30-9.45	Individual meeting 4
9.45-10.00	Break
10.00-10.45	Academic Staff Group 2: Tutors
10.45-11.00	Break
11.00-11.30	Meet Postdoctoral Scholars (2 research staff)
11.30-11.35	Break
11.35-12.15	Postgraduate Students (3 students)
12.15-12.20	Break
12.20-13.00	Undergraduate Students (2 students)
13.00-13.30	PRG Debrief
<b>DAY 4 Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> November 2021</b>	
<b>Time</b>	<b>Description</b>
8.30-9.15	Peer Review Group meet and prepare for morning sessions
9.00-9.15	Individual meeting 5
9.15-9.30	Individual meeting 6
9.30-9.45	Individual meeting 7
9.45-10.00	Break
10.00-10.30	Meet with Other University Staff Members: Dr John McGinnity, Director of Admissions
10.30-10.45	Individual meeting 8
10.45-11.00	Break
11.00-11.30	Meet with other Faculty Members Professor Valerie Heffernan, Head of School, Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures Dr Anne O'Brien, Head of Media Studies Department
11.30-11.45	Individual meeting 9
11.45-11.50	Break
11.50-12.05	External Stakeholder: Ms Lucina Russell, Kildare County Council Arts Officer
12.10-12.40	Meet with Faculty Dean
12.40-13.30	PRG begin preliminary drafting of commendations and key recommendations

<b>DAY 5 Friday 12<sup>th</sup> November 2021</b>	
8.30-9.00	Peer Review Group Meet and prepare for morning sessions
9.00-9.30	Head of Department: Professor Lauren Arrington
9.30-12.30	PRG finalise draft of commendations and recommendations
12.30-1.30	PRG presentation to all Departmental staff
	Close off and thanks to PRG: Director of Quality and Faculty Dean

## **4 Peer review methodology**

### **4.1 Site visit**

The site visit took place virtually in light of the challenges posed by COVID 19. The PRG met with Department members both in groups and collectively. The PRG also met with representatives from a number of stakeholder groups including student representatives. In total, 24 such meetings took place, virtually, via Teams (see timetable above). We are in particular grateful to the Quality Office and staff members for facilitating additional meetings at short notice.

### **4.2 Preparation of the Peer Review Group Report**

The Peer Review Group Report was drafted over the week of the site visit and compiled and finalised in the 18 days following completion of the site visit. All panel members agreed on the final version by communicating via e-mail. The PRG has not separated recommendations into institutional and departmental, as we believe these are closely interconnected.

## **5 Overall assessment and findings of the Peer Review Group: Commendations and recommendations**

### **5.1 Overview**

The PRG commends the Department on the work carried out over an extended period of time on the drafting and finalising of the SAR and the candour and willingness with which its members engaged in the peer review process. The Department has undergone significant change in recent years in both its research profile and its offerings at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. This is discussed in more detail in 5.2 and 5.3 below. These changes have, however, come at a cost, especially in combination with the effects of the pandemic. The PRG is minded to agree that the Department should consolidate these changes, seeking to embed them while continuing to monitor their effectiveness. There is a clear tension in the balance between historical strengths and building on impressive emerging fields of excellence. As discussed in 5.3 below, the PRG believes that the diversity in research interests should not only be respected but embraced as the Department moves forward. We see that there is brilliance throughout the Department, as well as deep commitment to teaching, learning, and research. We urge the Department to acknowledge and celebrate its achievements as it moves forward.

The omnibus BA has put English into competition with a much larger number of other disciplines. The PRG notes the decline between 2019/20 and 2020/21 (350 to 299); however, this appears to have stabilised and improved (to 325) in 2021/22. It is also noted that the subject grouping for English is quite advantageous as the only subjects that cannot be combined with English are Mathematics and International Development.

## 5.2 Commendations

The administrative staff are a tremendous asset to the Department; professional, dedicated, proficient in university and Department needs, and loyal.

It is clear that there is a profound commitment to students within the Department. It performs an important role for the university and regionally in meeting the needs of its demographic: a majority of first-generation students, and recruiting from urban, working-class and ethnically diverse communities. The Department's pastoral and pedagogical support of its students is impressive and dedicated. It is clear that the first year module EN101, in particular, is a great success in this regard.

The MA Literatures of Engagement has been effective in capturing the range of research interests in the Department. It should be an effective tool in articulating a key feature of the Department's identification with politically engaged research. Students report high levels of satisfaction, and it is also clearly functioning well as a pipeline for postgraduate research.

A huge amount of work has gone into diversifying both the curriculum and research portfolio in recent years, while retaining the Department's strong historical profile in Irish Studies. The Department is to be collectively praised for this volume of work, which has been successful overall.

The Department is to be commended for recent moves toward developing transparent workload models that re-calibrate teaching, marking and academic administration loads. This must continue and parity of workload should be monitored on an ongoing basis.

The Department's processes around assessments, moderation of marking, PhD progress review, structured PhD training, staff-student liaison committee are apposite and functioning well.

The PRG supports the Draft Improvement Plan to relaunch the Peer Tutoring scheme.

The PRG commends the Department's collaboration with Kildare County Council on the Writer-in-Residence initiative and is of the view that this should be continued and developed further where possible.

## 5.3 Recommendations for improvement

While the PRG acknowledges the sense of exhaustion in the Department and commends recent re-organisations of undergraduate and postgraduate curricula, we recommend that a process of ongoing monitoring and review be formally established.

### 5.3.1 Teaching and recruitment

#### 5.3.1.1 Undergraduate student recruitment

- The Department should take a step back to look at its offering in the first 4 weeks, when students are deciding; how to frontload the excitement of studying English?
- There is potential for developing new subject streams, e.g. Creative Writing as independent first year subject (15 ECTS); Film and Media Studies — or other collaborations. It is noted, however, that current FTE allocation models may impede such collaborations

#### 5.3.1.2 Undergraduate curriculum

- Monitor the effectiveness of the current progression structure from second to third year and ensure diversity of content.
- Ensure that permanent staff are responsible as module convenors — or at least allocated to take over when a fixed-term or occasional staff member has concluded the contract.

- Review allocations of core teaching so that all permanent staff contribute over time (not necessarily each year); see also Recommendation on Sabbatical research leave below.
- Where there is tutorial support for 2nd and 3rd year elective optional modules, but not for core modules, we recommend that the Department consider re-distributing that tutorial support, so that some tutorials are available for both core and elective modules. This may, of course, result in a reduction of the tutorial support currently allocated to elective modules, but would allow all modules to benefit over a period.
- It is standard good practice for each module to be evaluated; the Department must put such student evaluation procedures in place.

### **5.3.1.3 Postgraduate recruitment**

- The MA programmes (Literatures of Engagement and Cultures of Migration) should be aggressively marketed, with help from the Graduate Studies Office and University Communications Office.
- The PRG notes the clear reluctance on the part of some staff to recruit research students on the basis of ethical concerns in relation to the current academic career pipeline. However, those students who are in the Department require a vibrant research community of peers; PhD researchers bring fresh energies and ideas to any academic department; the Department relies on PhD students to teach first-year tutorials and assist with high marking burdens; and PhD supervision is usually deemed crucial to career progression for permanent staff. The PRG endorses current structures for enhancing employability of Postgraduate Research students and urges the Department to develop and enhance the ideas articulated in the draft quality improvement plan. The University Research Office should resume anonymous peer reviewing for IRC applications.

## **5.3.2 Research**

### **5.3.2.1 Research identity**

We commend the Department's diversification of its research portfolio while retaining existing strengths in Irish Studies. It is clear, however, that there is still some tension between those who identify themselves according to different research clusters. It is equally clear to the PRG that there should not be an either/or perception of the Department; rather, an embracing of the range of research strengths (for example, gender and sexuality, non-Western literatures, Irish literature, early modern). The two new MA programmes (Literatures of Engagement and Cultures of Migration) clearly identify two unifying research strands: politically engaged criticism and literatures of migration. This can be the bedrock of an inclusive articulation of the Department's research identity. There is no need to oppose work informed by postcolonial ideas on non-Western and Irish literatures; each is part of the same intellectual paradigm.

### **5.3.2.2 Sabbatical research leave**

There is no doubt that clear periods of research leave are absolutely essential for Humanities researchers, for whom the sole-authored monograph remains the gold standard of research impact and achievement. Maynooth's current system (whereby staff must take a pay cut, which pays for replacement teaching) is anomalous in the sector and inequitable, breaching standard EDI principles. The standard is a semester's leave after three years or, less typically, a year's leave after six years. However, it is not usual in the sector that the teaching of a staff member on sabbatical leave is fulfilled by a paid replacement; this latter model occurs when external funding has been awarded. It is crucial that

a better system be devised to support substantial periods of research leave that support specific research projects. This will enhance and improve research outputs across the board. We recommend the Department find ways to devise an equitable research leave system: e.g. build core teaching around permanent staff, so that they can swap in and out, covering for each other (this will also underpin the sustainability of those core modules) and allow for elective modules to be dropped when convenor is on sabbatical; frontload/condense teaching into one semester in order to clear up another; rotate modules so that they can be taught by multiple staff members.

### **5.3.2.3 Research funding**

- We understand that support is available from the University Research Office around making funding applications and this should be availed of more proactively.
- There should be greater awareness and uptake of the annual research travel grant available to staff: <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/bursar/payments-office/academic-travel-grant>.

### **5.3.2.4 Research outputs**

The data provided suggest that there has been a drop-off in research output. The Department should devise a strategy that supports long-term research projects and production of monographs and peer-reviewed journals.

- Strategies might include: a new system to sustain sabbatical research leave; better strategising of publications by pitching monograph chapters at journals as the monograph is drafted; internationalisation of target presses and journals; internationalisation of research networks; pitching of journal special issues. We note that many, though not all, journals publish accepted versions of articles online, which can radically reduce the time lag between acceptance and publication, and that this is increasing across the sector.
- Ensure comprehensive research data are entered to RIS by individual staff.

## **5.3.3 Governance**

### **5.3.3.1 Support structures for Head of Department (HoD)**

Support structures for the HoD should be revisited

- We recommend that a Deputy HoD be appointed on a rotating basis.
- Systematic and effective institutional support and training should be provided to all HoDs.

### **5.3.3.2 Mentoring**

There are insufficient mentoring systems in place, for the HoD as well as individual members of staff. A good mentoring scheme would support staff in making strategic decisions about their work over the course of the academic year, as well as over 3–5 years. This is about more than workload; it encompasses inclusion, the belief that one is centrally contributing to the Department's work and belonging. The Faculty and University should initiate such a scheme, in which mentors should be based in other parts of the University.



### **5.3.3.3 Internal department structures and clarity of decision making**

- The terms of reference for existing Working Groups should be revisited to ensure clarity of decision-making and communication.
- Systems should be designed to ensure that the decisions informed by the Working Group are agreed on by the entire Department.

### **5.3.3.4 Communication and cohesion**

Ongoing attempts to produce shared strategic goals in the Department need to be developed further.

### **5.3.3.5 Succession planning**

We recommend that succession planning be explicitly addressed as part of the new Department strategic plan.