



**Maynooth
University**
National University
of Ireland Maynooth

Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

Maynooth University

QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND ASSURANCE

PEER REVIEW GROUP REPORT

HISTORY DEPARTMENT

ACADEMIC YEAR 2020/21

Date: 12th October 2021

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1. Introduction

This review took place over five days, from April 19th to 23rd, 2021. Owing to the restrictions imposed by Covid – 19 all of these meetings were virtual, and the PRG regrets the loss of the opportunity to visit the campus, tour the library, see the teaching rooms and research facilities, and meet informally as well as formally with Department members. However, we found the virtual meetings extremely productive, and the necessary restrictions imposed by online engagement meant that the focus for each meeting was sharp. The PRG met with a wide variety of academic and professional staff, with undergraduates and postgraduates, Library and Special Collections staff, and members of the Faculty and University Executive. These extensive meetings provided us with a broad and multi-layered insight into the workings of the Department, and a good sense of where the stresses and strengths lie. The PRG is very grateful for the full and open engagement with the review process on the part of all those we spoke with: we were struck by the willingness of staff and students to thoughtfully consider our questions, and their responses confirmed the sense of a collegiate and supportive Department. It is a Department that is also however acutely aware of the problems as well as strengths in teaching, research, and administration, and the PRG appreciate the staff's presentation of their individual as well as collective opinions on how the Department may best protect its excellent reputation while also protecting members from excessive workloads.

2. Peer Review Group Members

Name	Affiliation	Role
Professor Niall Barr	Kings College London	External Reviewer
Professor Robert Gerwarth	UCD	External Reviewer
Professor Oonagh Walsh	Glasgow Caledonian University	External Reviewer
Dr Pauline Garvey	Maynooth University	Internal Reviewer
Professor Bernard Mahon	Maynooth University	Internal Reviewer

3. Timetable of the site visit

- See Appendix 1.
- The timetable was appropriate and well structured. It proved a very full schedule of constant meetings, which were tiring and stimulating in equal measure. The order in which we met the different groups worked very well, insofar as we felt that we steadily deepened our understanding of the Department as the days advanced, and at no point did we feel the need to return to any previous group or meeting to clarify issues. In general, the time allotted to each group was appropriate, although the two large meetings involving Department academic staff would have benefited from an additional half-hour to ensure that all had a chance to offer their opinions.

- Although the PRG appreciates the need to hold reviews during the teaching term, in order to ensure that staff and students are on campus and available for meetings, we would suggest that future reviews avoid the end of the term. Two PRG members had ongoing teaching commitments as well as this review, a significant additional responsibility.

4. Peer Review Methodology

4.1 Site Visit

The visit took place virtually via a series of Microsoft Teams meetings, owing to Covid-19.

4.2 Preparation of the Peer Review Group Report

Each team member took extensive notes during the sessions, and each afternoon during the PRG debrief the key points that had emerged that day were discussed. The five members then individually provided a summary via email to the team that same evening: these notes and summaries provided the basis for the draft report. In addition, the team agreed specific responsibilities for each member in terms of the oral feedback to the Department on April 23rd. These were Teaching and Learning; Governance; Research, Departmental Strategic Plan, and Staff Development, and included points of commendation in each area as well as recommendations from the team. This feedback, along with the information contained in the SAR, and the discussions and summaries, formed the basis for the draft report which was circulated to the PRG by the group Chair for comment and amendment.

5. Overall Assessment

5.1 Summary Assessment of the Department

The panel responses to the SAR as our starting point were very positive, and the PRG had a clear sense of a Department that ‘punches above its weight’. The impression given by the SAR was confirmed in our subsequent meetings, and we found staff to be dedicated and professional, despite the present difficult working conditions. This was underlined by our meetings with undergraduate and postgraduate students, and with the external stakeholders.

The Department has many strengths, and it should take great pride in its substantive achievements. These include an impressive range of research outputs for a unit of this size; excellent staff-student relationships; an impressive range of undergraduate teaching modules, and a supportive and collegiate staff body.

5.2 Self-Assessment Report

Prior to the review, the team received the Department’s Self-Assessment Report (SAR), along with the undergraduate and postgraduate handbooks, allowing a good sense of how the Department not only functions but how it regards itself in relation to the Faculty of Arts and the University more generally. The SAR provided an honest and (as became clear as our virtual visit progressed) accurate picture of the Department, and proved an invaluable means for the PRG to identify areas we wished to explore in our meetings with staff and students. All of the issues identified in the SAR were discussed during the week’s visit, and

the 'Draft Quality Improvement Plan' (pp. 97-115) was very helpful in providing a succinct picture of the Department's strengths and challenges.

Although the SAR did suggest some areas of disagreement between the Department and Faculty – the comment on the loss of office space in Rhetoric House annex, for example (p. 39), it did not fully articulate the more substantive issue of the new Chair in the Department. We found a great depth of feeling in the Department with regard to what it regards as most important to sustain the current teaching and research strengths: this approach is not necessarily shared by Faculty. We also felt that although the SAR noted that there was a difference between Departmental and Faculty calculations of FTEs from the Defence Forces teaching, which impacts negatively upon Departmental resources, this was not explored fully. On our visit, we found this an important element in the present and future development of the Department. We further felt that the SAR did not reflect sufficiently on administrative burdens in the Department, and how they are allocated or rotated. Vital but time-consuming tasks such as pastoral care, UG and PG programme leadership, and allied academic administration, were largely invisible in the SAR, yet are crucial additional responsibilities for staff that ought to be made visible.

Apart from these points, we found the SAR to be a complete and accurate reflection of the Department, and a comprehensive assessment of its strengths and deficiencies. The methodology employed was appropriate and robust. We also felt strongly that it encompassed the views of the whole Department, as few new issues were raised on our visit. We believe it is, as suggested, a collaborative and team effort.

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

6.1 Overview

The SAR had provided a good overview of Department governance systems, and our meetings considerably deepened our understanding of their operation and utility. Overall, the team found evidence of good governance and organisation that was confirmed in our meetings with staff at all academic levels, from the professional administrators to undergraduate and postgraduate students. Indeed, the Department should be rightly proud of the manner in which it conducts itself, and its collegiality, efficiency, and high levels of student satisfaction were praised by other University units as well as external stakeholders. In addition to the formal structures there appears to be an important informal system of peer-support, with administrative and academic staff working well together to deliver efficient governance. This is the legacy of many years of work from many people, and an ethos which has been transmitted to more recent appointments.

The SAR also provided a good overview of research activity, including outputs, seminars, invited speakers, and conference attendance, it could however have been clearer and more definite on the future direction of the profile of the Department. Given that several senior staff members have recently retired or are about to retire, an indication of the future direction and ideal shape of the Department, articulated by staff at all levels, should have been more explicit.

There are many areas of strength in the Department, but the panel would like to commend in particular the staff involved in the Centre of Military History, and those in the Centre for the Study of Historic Irish Houses and Estates for their dedication in developing and

maintaining these unique dimensions. Both are innovative initiatives that demonstrate real world impact and provide a distinctive profile to the History department at Maynooth.

There is a great deal to commend in relation to teaching, learning, and the overall student experience in the History Department at both UG and PG levels. The SAR's detailed summary of degree structures, assessment methods, and the broader teaching culture was very helpful in guiding the team towards specific themes during our visit, and the positive sense of high standards in teaching and supervision was fully endorsed by the student groups we met. The panel were struck by the warm and enthusiastic feedback from both groups, and in particular the many accounts of staff who offer a high degree of intellectually challenging, but very supportive, teaching. The fact that so many Maynooth history graduates choose to stay on for postgraduate study speaks volumes for the quality of the Department's teaching provision. The paperwork supplied for this review confirms a robust system of assessment, evaluation, and feedback, and our meetings confirmed a scrupulous system of module and programme evaluation, and a closing of the feedback loop. The Department came in for particular praise in relation to their response to Covid conditions, and were confirmed as early and enthusiastic adopters of technology to support online learning. We did however note that a concern identified in the last Departmental external review was raised again: many of the modules provided as part of the structured PhD are not History-specific, but Faculty wide. Students reported that they felt some were 'box-ticking' exercises which they undertook to gain credits, rather than training of real utility. We recommend that this provision be reviewed to ensure that it offers relevant 'real-world' training to research students

It is clear that the teaching in the Department is research led, and not only research informed, which is admirable. It is important to note the emphatic confirmation in our meetings that it is the Department's breadth of teaching that attracts students, particularly at PG level: this should be factored into the Department's strategic planning. History at Maynooth also has a unique offering in its military history provision, which sets it apart from other History Departments in Ireland: it would be wise to explore the possibilities inherent in this specialism.

6.2 Commendations

We commend the increasing role of departmental standing committees, especially the Teaching & Learning Committee. These standing committees have an important role in spreading administrative knowledge and burden in department, easing the HoD's workload, and providing early career staff with experience that can be important for their development. The T&L committee demonstrated an important role in setting the debate about the curriculum content. Its value was also evident in the department's response to the Covid19 pandemic, in its response to student needs, the switch to online learning and in recommending improvements to the broader Faculty and University response. Good work from other committees were also noted, in particular the Research Committee, which has a key role to play in supporting Department research development.

The department is superbly supported by professional administrators, who have built up a knowledge base and expertise without which the department would not run. Interviews with the academic staff, undergraduates and postgrads revealed a breadth and depth to the essential support provided: in the words of one student, 'the Office is the Department.' This

was in part recognised by previous staff awards to the team and a current nomination for a President's award. This support was highly commended.

In research terms, the PRG was very impressed with the high level of impactful publications produced by staff members of the Department over the past years, and with its success in winning competitive fellowships and supports for graduate students and postdocs, especially from the IRC: the stagnation in grant income for the Department reflects a sector-wide situation in which funding for the Humanities in Ireland has declined. Stakeholders have been very impressed with the research professionalism of staff and their strong national and international reputation.

6.3 Recommendations for Improvement

The tables below categorise recommendations as being institutional/strategic or department level, in line with the guidance notes accompanying this template.

Institutional/Strategic Recommendations

Number	Recommendation	Additional PRG Comments
S.1	The timetabling of History modules against equally popular subjects including Business and Criminology has been confirmed as having a negative impact on the retention of History students at level 2. The panel accepts that it presents challenges to central timetabling, but recommends that there be an examination of the broader impact of timetabling on student choice (through student surveys), and on whether alternative timetabling might be possible.	
S.2	<p>The approach to sabbaticals and research leave in the Department and the University as a whole is not supportive of one of the core duties of academics. It is an unusual and onerous approach to require staff to fund their own research leave. The panel recommends that a University-funded sabbatical system should be available to support research-active staff.</p> <p>We further recommend that the Department consider how the benefits of online learning technology can be used in a structured way to support research activity, through releasing staff from wholly campus based, face-to-face teaching. Student responses to the panel confirm an appetite for ongoing blended learning, that can be creatively used to reduce individual teaching loads while maintaining the quality of the student experience.</p>	<p>The group recognises that grants for funded leave are far more plentiful in STEM subjects than in the Humanities & Social Sciences, leaving H&SS staff struggling to secure research time free of teaching and administrative duties. The University should consider the introduction of competitive, centrally funded Research Fellowships for Arts & Social Science scholars that would allow recipients to go on leave with full pay if their application has been successful. While such a scheme would not fully address the issue it would be of benefit to some.</p> <p>Centrally organized research support for Humanities scholars are currently limited. More supports for grant-writing and fellowship applications would strengthen the Department's ability to compete for such grants both nationally and internationally. The Humanities Research Institute could have a role here in supporting the department.</p>

<p>S.3</p>	<p>The History Department is exceptionally well supported by its professional administrators. However, the opportunities for promotion of professional staff is limited, and available for practical purposes to those who apply for posts at a more senior grade in other Departments. This ensures the loss of invaluable departmental knowledge, as well as the burden for that staff member in adapting to a completely different department structure. Promotional opportunities to higher grades must be available to staff without having to leave their Department.</p>	<p>Promotion/ Career Progression s of administrative staff: The current system which obliges administrative staff to leave their department position and move to a new department in order to apply for promotion should be addressed at University level. Substantive Departmental knowledge and experience is lost when support staff are obliged to move in order to secure promotion, to say nothing of those individuals having to leave departments they are happy in, and where they have built up strong working relationships.</p>
<p>S.4</p>	<p>Decision making in general and succession planning in particular appear to be very slow at University level, and this is a situation that pre-dates the Covid pandemic. There are significant benefits in selecting future Heads of Department more swiftly and allowing an adequate period of induction and training for an incoming Head of Department to appreciate the systems and processes which they will require. HoD training should precede appointment rather than lag months or years after they assume the role.</p>	
<p>S.5</p>	<p>The University's HR Department, supported by the history Department must improve its induction for new staff. Current processes are perceived as imparting a bewildering array of rules that central administration requires. As the University diversifies incoming staff may have little general knowledge of processes in Ireland, and in addition to navigating a new job, they have to acquire knowledge of Irish tax, social security, health insurance, accommodation, childcare, and school systems among other issues. These problems may be</p>	<p>Current induction was perceived as "compliance based ", and as imparting a bewildering array of rules set by central administration. New staff reported that much was irrelevant or tangential to their needs, especially in cases where staff were new to Ireland as well as to Maynooth. They requested that this process needs to become user oriented.</p>

	<p>especially acute for staff on short term contracts. A simple contact point and handbook from HR might make the early experience less stressful. This need not be onerous but should be an engaged and serious commitment from HR, and more than a collection of weblinks.</p>	
S.6	<p>Routine decisions regarding extra-Departmental matters need to be communicated to department and individuals more quickly by central administration and/or the University executive as appropriate. Staff reported frustration at the occasional lapse in time between decision-making at a higher level, and staff being informed of those decisions.</p>	
S.7	<p>Promotions and Senior Staff: The decline in numbers of staff at the highest professorial level is of concern to the department but calls for promotion at this level are infrequent (the most recent being in 2015). This infrequency is out of step with national and international universities, as is the lack of clarity as to when the next call will be. University management should address this issue and regularise it.</p>	<p>The appointment of a new Chair in the Department has significant implications for its future direction and strategic plans. There are differences in the University and Department perspectives on the ideal profile for this post, with the University emphasising the importance of appointing an individual with a successful track record of external grant capture, and the Department seeking an individual who will underpin its existing teaching and research strengths. The team suggest that the two aims are not mutually exclusive, and stress that the Department must be at the centre of any University-level discussions of this appointment.</p>
S.8	<p>This unique offering by the Centre for Military History requires a much greater degree of support from the University. The contractual aspects of the relationship require immediate attention, as do the internal accounting issues with regard to agreed student numbers, staffing levels, and appropriate funding levels for the department delivering the programmes. At</p>	

	<p>present, the Centre staff have reached a point where the levels of teaching, assessment and administration are unsustainable. The panel recommends that the University considers the future of this valuable and unique relationship, and the resources which would be required to run it at a sustainable level, as a matter of urgency.</p>	
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Recommendations to the Department

Number	Recommendation	Additional PRG Comments
U.1	<p>The Review Group recommends very strongly that the Department should articulate a strategic vision document (a '5-year plan'), in which it articulates how the Department intends to position itself in a rapidly evolving national and global context. Will the Department build on its past/existing research strengths or will it move into new directions?</p> <p>Such a discussion should precede any potential senior appointment, if such an appointment is what the university / Faculty / Department feel is the best way forward to give the department more coherence / fresh ideas / a better chance at grant capture at the national and international level. If such an appointment is being made, it should be informed by the Department's strategic vision.</p>	
U.2	<p>The Department Research Committee could consider broadening its remit to lead interactions with the University Research Development Office to ensure that funding opportunities are efficiently communicated to History staff. It could also play an increased role in staff development through peer-to-peer critique of grant applications and research publications.</p>	

U.3	While the Department enjoys excellent administrative support, it lacks an actual concise 'handbook' that new HoDs and new staff can access, meaning there is a heavy dependence upon individual Departmental knowledge: if a key staff member leaves or retires, it leaves a significant knowledge gap. The team recommends that a handbook be created, to ensure that incoming HoDs have a continually updated resource to pass to their successor.	
U.4	To encourage retention, student peers at years 2 and 3 should present to first years on their experiences of levels 2 and 3 modules, before they make their year 2 choices.	
U.5	It was clear from our meetings that a productive and generous mentoring system operates at various levels of the Department. This is however an informal arrangement, which needs to be formalised, and geared to mentoring staff in their career progression. HR should be involved in creating a structured series of supports that advance individual career and publishing plans, and help staff to prepare for promotion. Such a scheme will support the Department, and the University, in their Athena Swan applications.	
U.6	A pressing concern for staff at all levels is the absence of a fair and transparent Workload Allocation Model. At present, workloads are organised through one-to-one conversations between the HoD and staff, and based substantially on units of teaching hours rather than class size, marking burden, and other important factors. We recommend that the Department devises a light-touch model that maps research, teaching and administrative responsibilities over time, and that colleagues understand how tasks are allocated across the Department. It is important that all staff are involved in	Advice should be sought from HR in terms of task-weighting.

	discussions as to how allocations within the model are weighted, and the process should be transparent.	
U.7	The panel recognises the unique and valuable work done by the Centre in its promotion of research into historic Irish houses. The relationship between the Centre, Maynooth University Library and the OPW-Maynooth Archive and Research Centre (OMARC) at Castletown is highly beneficial. The panel would like to recommend that the History department explores the possibilities of developing work-place internships in co-operation with OMARC. This may enable some History students to gain practical experience of the types of work and career that they can pursue on the completion of their degree.	

Appendix 1: HISTORY DEPARTMENT: PEER REVIEW GROUP ONLINE VISIT TIMETABLE

DAY 1 Monday 19 th April 2021		
Time	Description	Attending
14.00-14.30	Convening of the Peer Review Group <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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	VP Academic & Registrar and Faculty Dean Professor Aidan Mulkeen, VP Academic & Registrar Professor Colin Graham, Faculty Dean	Peer Review Group Professor Aidan Mulkeen Professor Colin Graham
16.15-16.30	Break	
16.30-17.30	Head of Department Professor Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses	Peer Review Group Professor Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses
17.30-18.00	PRG debrief	Peer Review Group
DAY 2 Tuesday 20 th April 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	
10.15-11.00	Academic Staff Group (1)	Peer Review Group Dr Michael Potterton Dr Sarah Roddy Dr David Murphy Dr David Lederer Professor Marian Lyons
11.00-11.15	Break	

11.15-12.00	Administrative/Support Staff Ms Dorena Bishop Ms Catherine Heslin	Peer Review Group Ms Dorena Bishop Ms Catherine Heslin
12.00-12.15	Break	
12.15 -13:00	Meet with other MU Staff Dr John McGinnity, Admissions Officer Ms Roxanne Paul, Graduate Studies Office	Peer Review Group Dr John McGinnity Ms Roxanne Paul
13.00-13.30	PRG debrief	Peer Review Group
DAY 3 Wednesday 21st April 2021		
Time	Description	Attending
8.30-9.00	Peer Review Group meet and prepare for morning sessions	Peer Review Group
9.00-9.45	Academic Staff Group (2)	Peer Review Group Dr Ian Speller Dr Jonathan Wright Professor Terry Dooley Dr Alison Fitzgerald Dr Jennifer Redmond Dr John Paul Newman
9.45-10.00	Break	
10.00-10.20	Academic Staff, Military Dr David Murphy	Peer Review Group Dr David Murphy
10.20-10.25	Break	
10.25-10.45	Academic Staff, Military Dr Ian Speller	Peer Review Group Dr Ian Speller
10.45-11.00	Break	
11.00-11.45	Undergraduate Students	Peer Review Group 7 students confirmed
11.45-12.00	Break	
12.00-12.45	Postgraduate Students	Peer Review Group 7 students confirmed
12.45-12.50	Break	
12.50-13.10	Academic Staff Part time/contract	Peer Review Group

	Dr Beatrice Scutaru Dr Rory Finegan	Dr Beatrice Scutaru Dr Rory Finegan
13.10-13.40	PRG Debrief	
DAY 4 Thursday 22nd April 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 UE Members & Other MU Staff: Professor Ray O'Neill, VP for Research & Dean of Graduate Studies Dr Alison Hood, Dean of Teaching & Learning Mr Cathal McCauley, University Librarian	Peer Review Group Professor Ray O'Neill Dr Alison Hood Mr Cathal McCauley
9.45-10.00	Break	
10.00-10.15	External Stakeholder 1: Lieutenant Colonel David Fitzpatrick, Defence Forces Registrar	Peer Review Group Lieutenant Colonel David Fitzpatrick
10.15-10.20	Break	
10.20-10.35	External Stakeholder 2: Mr Martin Fanning, Four Courts Press, Publisher	Peer Review Group Mr Martin Fanning
10.35-10.40	Break	
10.40-10.55	External Stakeholder 3: Ms Mary Heffernan, Office of Public Works, Centre for the Study of Historic Irish Houses & Estates (CSHIHE)	Peer Review Group Ms Mary Heffernan
10.55-11.00	Break	
11.00-11.15	Individual Meeting Dr Dympna McLoughlin	Peer Review Group Dr Dympna McLoughlin
11.15-11.20	Break	
11.20-11.40	Academic Staff/Contract Dr Hussam Ahmed	Peer Review Group Dr Hussam Ahmed
11.40-12.00	Break	

12.00-13.30	PRG begin preliminary drafting of commendations and key recommendations	
DAY 5 Friday 23rd April 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 Professor Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses	Peer Review Group Professor Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses
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 Professor Colin Graham