MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY

PHILOSOPHY DEPARTMENT

Quality Improvement Plan

2022

<u>Preface</u>

The department wishes to express its gratitude to the members of the Peer Review Group for their careful work, reflected in a detailed report with many useful suggestions and recommendations. The Peer Review Report highlights both strengths in the department's work and areas which the peer review team believe need improvement. The department's response to the report in the present Quality Improvement Plan is guided by a desire to respond constructively to criticisms without, however, compromising the goods and accomplishments that have already been achieved.

The department regards the following recommendations from the Peer Review Report as being central:

<u>Community</u>

1. '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' (p. 1).

> The university has given an undertaking to act, in support of the department, by objectively assessing the working environment in the Department of Philosophy.

<u>Teaching and Learning</u>

2. 'At a more strategic level we recommend a corporate rethink of the undergraduate curriculum.' This requires considering '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' (p. 2).

> The department is going to generate a mission statement, which it will display prominently on its website and in its handbooks. Discussion of such a mission statement will help the department think in a principled way about its identity and ways in which it may be able to build on and broaden existing strengths. Once the mission statement is in place, it can serve as a basis to determine what learning outcomes are appropriate after three years of undergraduate study in the Maynooth Philosophy Department, i.e., what knowledge and skills our 'ideal student' should have acquired. Individual modules can then—if necessary—be rethought and rearticulated in the light of these learning outcomes. Likewise, the department will be in a better position to consider offering more topical modules (appropriate areas might be metaphysics and bioethics, for example).

While bearing in mind that undergraduate students are only beginning to learn philosophy, the department is going to solicit input on the students' perception of the strengths and weaknesses of the current curriculum. Timeline: 12 months. Initiative to be led by Prof. Philipp Rosemann.

3. 'The academic member of staff who is responsible for the course should collect the reading materials in electronic form and post these on Moodle' (p. 3).

The department will ensure this is done consistently by all colleagues, whose attention has already been drawn to this matter.

4. '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' (p. 4).

'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' (p. 7).

The department will rethink its current practices in providing tutorials, with the goal of defining a more consistent approach. First-year tutors already receive extensive guidance, but we will review this in order to ensure all students learn about essential skills such as note-taking and the steps involved in researching and composing academic essays. There may have to be a requirement for tutors to attend the lectures on which they are tutoring, so that they are thoroughly familiar with the content. The department will prepare a policy document on the question of tutorials. Timeline: 12 months. Initiative to be led by Dr Cyril McDonnell.

5. '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 formally scheduling each meeting, circulating an agenda, and taking minutes' (p. 6).

This recommendation reflects the department's long-standing practice. No action is needed.

6. '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' (p. 6).

> The department will schedule a meeting to conduct a review of current teaching practices. Following this meeting, it will engage with the Centre for Teaching and Learning for further discussion. Timeline: 12 months. Initiative to be led by Dr Susan Gottlöber.

7. 'Within this context [i.e., Athena SWAN] 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' (p. 6).

> The department has received an Excel sheet which breaks down its students by gender over several years (2016/17–2020/21). On the face of it, it is the postgraduate level which is most affected by gender imbalance. The department is going to discuss ways of attracting more female students to its postgraduate programmes. Timeline: 12 months. Initiative to be led by Dr Mette Lebech.

8. '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' (p. 7).

> This recommendation will be brought to the attention of the university administration.

9. '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. [...] 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' (p. 8).

> As explained in point 2 above, the department is going to produce a document on the skills (or learning outcomes) which should be the fruit of three years of undergraduate study. The student handbooks and the website should be expanded to include advice on career possibilities. Alumni profiles could serve a useful purpose in this context. Likewise, the department will work with the university administration to arrive at a more complete understanding of the career paths of its students, at both the

undergraduate and the graduate levels. Timeline: 12 months. Initiative to be led by Dr Mette Lebech.

10. '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' (p. 8).

> Beginning in the Autumn of 2022, the department will start reserving places in its invited speakers series for its own postgraduate students, thus ensuring that each semester, the series will feature a mix of internal and external speakers.

<u>Research Culture and Engagement</u>

11. '[...] 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' (p. 9).

> The Department welcomes the Peer Review Report's praise for the quality of research undertaken in the Department and particularly notes the positive comments on *Maynooth Philosophical Papers*. The Department will undertake to explore opportunities to continue to enhance the quality and profile of the journal internationally. In the same way the Department will examine how its collective profile and the individual profiles of its scholars can be enhanced by publishing in all appropriate outlets, especially in targeting our excellent research outputs at international and highly ranked journals.

12. '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' (p. 10).

> The department had an initial conversation on the future of the journal at its meeting in February 2022. The discussion remained inconclusive. Since the offices of (general) editor and head of department have traditionally gone together, a new head of department could give the journal a different direction. But this may still make the journal too dependent on one individual. The department will discuss this matter

further, with the establishment of an editorial board as a possibility. Timeline: 12 months. Initiative to be led by Prof. Philipp Rosemann.

5. Communication

13. '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' (p. 11).

> Future meetings of the department will, as a standing item, include reports from colleagues who are serving on various committees. This arrangement will ensure a better flow of information regarding matters of departmental interest.

14. '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' (p. 11).

> Much of this paragraph reflects what is already current practice. For the question of tutors and tutorials, see point 4 above. Also see point 13. There will be an explicit call for agenda items before meetings.

15. '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' (p. 11).

> See point 7 above for the question of gender imbalance at the postgraduate level. The department has recently seen to it that more female colleagues get to be invited to its lecture series.

16. '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[ly] 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' (p. 11).

> The department has recently reactivated its staff-student committee as the vehicle to conduct meetings with student representatives. Staff on this committee include the coordinators for each of the three years of undergraduate study. It is the department's view that there should be a different feedback mechanism for postgraduate students. There will be reflection on how best to create the latter. Timeline: 12 months. Initiative to be led by Dr Amos Edelheit.

17. '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' (pp. 11–12).

> Also see point 1 above. The university administration has decided to address questions of work environment through the dean and the HR Department. Liaising with the Vice-President for Equality & Diversity could be useful in relation to the question of gender balance (compare point 7 above).