



**PROVOST'S REPORT TO COUNCIL ON
THE REVIEW OF THE
SCHOOL OF IRISH AND CELTIC LANGUAGES**

1. INTRODUCTION

This report presents the outcome of a departmental review exercise undertaken by Trinity College Dublin in relation to its School of Irish and Celtic Languages. An external peer reviewer visitation was conducted on the 2nd and 3rd April, 2002 by Professor Kim McCone, NUI Maynooth, and Professor William Gillies, University of Edinburgh. During the site visit the reviewers met with all the staff of the School, representatives of undergraduate and postgraduate students in the School, and senior officers of the College.

The report is based on (i) feedback from the external reviewers received on the 7th October, 2002, (ii) comments from the Dean of Arts (Letters) received on 14th October, 2002 and (iii) a submission from the School of Irish and Celtic Languages received on the 14th October, 2002.

The main purpose of the departmental review exercise is (a) to provide a structured opportunity for the Department to reflect on its activities and plans for development, while benefiting from a constructive commentary by senior colleagues external to College; and (b) to ensure that quality and standards in teaching, research and administration are being maintained and enhanced, and that any areas of concern in this regard are identified and addressed within an eighteen month timescale, having regard to the resources available. This review process ensures that each academic department in College is reviewed systematically once every five years.

2. OVERVIEW OF THE SCHOOL

2.1 Aims and Objectives of the School

The aims and objectives of the School are to train students in the fields of Early and Modern Irish language and literature (including introductions to comparative Celtic linguistics, Scottish Gaelic and Medieval Welsh) and to promote and encourage research at the highest level in the areas of expertise of members of staff in the school.

2.2 Programmes to which the School provides teaching:

Key programmes:

Undergraduate

Modern Irish combined with another subject in a Two Subject Moderatorship (TSM)

Early Irish combined with another subject in TSM

Early and Modern Irish together in a Single Honors course (EMI)

The Modern Irish option in the Computer Science, Linguistics and a Language (CSLL) course

Postgraduate

Diploma in Old Irish (began in 1998-9 and runs every second year)

M.Phil. in Early Irish (began in 1999-2000 and runs every second year)

In addition the School provides an elementary one-year course in Irish Language and Literature for visiting students registered in College.

2.3. Research

The School of Irish and Celtic Languages enjoys a high profile in the field of Irish studies, both in Ireland and internationally and their publications over the years have won very favourable peer-review. There is cutting-edge research in the School in Early Irish law and linguistics, in bardic verse, autobiography and in literary critical theory applied to Modern Irish. The School is engaged in collaborative research in the field of Irish Scottish studies in partnership with the TCD Schools of English and History and with the Universities of Aberdeen, Strathclyde, and Queen's University, Belfast. Programme research in Irish Scottish Studies is funded through the HEA Programme for Research in Third-level Institutions (PRTL).

2.4 Summary Statistical Profile of the School for the Academic Year 2000-01

Full-time staff FTE	Part-time Staff FTE	Undergraduate FTE	Postgraduate Taught FTE	Postgraduate Research FTEs	Department Staff:Student Ratio	Faculty Staff:Student Ratio
6	0.69	77.97	4	10	14	15

Figures approved by Council at its meeting on 9th January, 2002

The full-time staff of six comprises two professors, one associate professor and three lecturers.

2.5 Accommodation and Facilities (Physical Resources)

The School of Irish & Celtic Languages is located on campus in the Arts Building. It holds microfilm copies of the Irish Folklore Commission's Collection of Irish Folklore Manuscripts. The College's important collection of Irish manuscripts (College Library) is accessible to research students, while the National Library of Ireland and the Royal Irish Academy, both housing extensive collections of manuscripts, are a short walk away.

3. EXTERNAL PEER REVIEW VISITATION

SUMMARY REPORT

TEACHING

The reviewers opened their report by stating that the "*in order to flourish in the 'major league' in its subject, the School must provide both Early/Medieval and Early Modern/Modern curricula*", and that "*[g]iven the traditions of the subject and the College's teaching of it, the curricula must be anchored in a firmly philological/linguistic mode*". Despite the [lower] "*attainments of students joining the School nowadays*" the reviewers affirmed that "*the School is clearly – and impressively – fulfilling the primary criteria*".

In their assessment of the teaching quality, the reviewers felt that "*[e]ach of the School's courses is rigorous and searching in ways which we regard as consonant with the best traditions and aspiration of the College... they ... impart depth and variety, and have established an ethos that is distinctive and admired. The standards attained by the best students are equal with the best anywhere, and [the staff] can hold their heads high when putting in for IRCHSS [Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences] postgraduate scholarships*". They complimented the School on the "*level of awareness and constructive thinking*" evident in its pedagogical approach, observing that it has "*has moved smartly away from a pretty traditional baseline (not untypical of the subject), responding imaginatively to current trends towards continuous assessment and greater stress on variety of learning experience while avoiding the easy option of dumbing down...*".

The reviewers stressed the differences between the School of Irish and Celtic Languages in TCD and those in other Irish universities. "*TCD has a single School of Irish rather than separate Old/Middle and Modern Irish departments*" as in other Irish universities. Consequently, the "*disjunction between Early Irish (EI) and Modern teaching...constitutes a major division within the School*". While the reviewers were satisfied that the teaching load was distributed among staff as equitably as possible, they believed that "*the School is under-powered to cover the prescribed area in Modern Irish*". In addition, the "*EI staff are becoming drawn into increasingly labour-intensive teaching to preserve standards and help students survive the course*". The teaching load was deemed excessive and it was strongly felt that the situation could not "*be allowed to continue*" as it also compromised the "*staff's research talent and potential*". Staffing levels in the School were deemed to have "*slipped below the base-line needed to deliver core commitments over an extended period*", and it was felt that "*the current proportion of teaching delivered by 'casual' staff should [not] be allowed to continue*".

Concern was expressed about the lack of opportunity for staff to avail themselves of sabbatical leave because of teaching schedules, and the School and appropriate College Officers were strongly urged to establish a mechanism to provide sabbatical opportunities for staff.

The Reviewers endorsed the recommendation in the School's self assessment literature that there is great need for a language specialist and argued that, in addition, the School should make "*a specific additional appointment*" to alleviate "*general difficulty*" and to make "*exciting developments in the curriculum feasible*".

The low demand for Early Irish at third-level among school leavers has resulted in the "*admission of students with relatively low points to a course centering upon a language of notorious difficulty, particularly as regards its extraordinarily complicated verbal system*". The problem is compounded by the "*ever-diminishing levels of*

awareness in matters grammatical among incoming students". These deficiencies are seen as contributing to the poor completion rates among students on the courses. The reviewers endorsed the School's strategy to arrest attrition rates on the Early Irish course by *"introducing a number of more general courses on literature and society alongside those concerned with Old or Middle Irish grammar, Comparative Celtic linguistics and the reading of texts in the original language"*.

While interest among school leavers may be low, the reviewers supported the School's view that an advertising strategy should be developed to attract more mature students to the courses in the School. The reviewers commented that there were few opportunities for student exchanges because of *"the low incidence of Irish teaching outside Ireland"*, with the exception of Irish-Scottish exchanges.

While they did not feel that they were sufficiently knowledgeable to compare the School's two methods of student feedback - a Faculty-run student feedback scheme and informal written questionnaires - the reviewers were satisfied that students *"had ample opportunity to make representations to staff"* on issues relating to their courses.

RESEARCH

The reviewers stated that the *"School's contribution in Early Irish linguistics and law, in bardic verse, autobiography and revival literature are of the highest quality and have to be taken into account by anyone working in these fields"*. They considered that the research profiles of staff were what *"one would expect from productive scholars at their respective career stages"*. In addition, *"staff publications over the past five years have included important and substantial articles in most of the Irish/Celtic refereed journals"*. While the School has been successful in attracting HEA Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTLTI) funding for the bardic poetry database project, the reviewers pointed to the potential *"danger that it may become a victim of its own success as the additional burdens of running such projects are palpable...."* They expressed concern that senior scholars who are already committed to large-scale research work are also carrying a heavy teaching load and administrative responsibilities.

With regard to research students, the reviewers observe that *"the School has a good crop of postgraduates"* and judged the number of research postgraduates to be *"credible overall"*. However, they point to *"a concentration in the field of Old Irish"*, and expressed the view that there was *"scope for expanded postgraduate recruitment, provided the current staffing problems could be resolved"*. The reviewers noted that the School promoted the involvement of postgraduates in research project work, encouraged teaching and made good use of the possibilities offered by the IRCHSS schemes for both postgraduates and postdoctoral research. The quality of research output on the part of postgraduate students was considered to be *"impressive"*, and the record of completion rates of those pursuing M.Litt. and Ph.D. degrees in Old Irish to be very satisfactory.

The reviewers fully endorsed the positive outcome of the review conducted by Professor Marie Herbert, UCC, in her capacity as external reviewer of the Diploma in Old Irish and M.Phil. in Early Irish courses. They added that the introduction of these courses *"is an imaginative and constructive response to the small numbers of high-class undergraduates entrants into Early and Modern Irish"*. They further felt that, *"provided that the staffing base was strengthened"*, the School could build on the success of this mode of entry to the School to attract high calibre students from an international constituency.

Staff were seen to have *"an admirably balanced view of their research activities..."*; however, there is *"a fundamental opposition between, on one hand, personal research and, on the other, everything else... The reason for this is the chronic degree of under-staffing, which leads to high teaching loads, precludes sabbaticals and will in time sap morale and research productivity"*. Despite these difficulties, the reviewers concluded that the School *"punches above its weight in research terms, and justly enjoys international esteem and respect"*.

The reviewers noted the success of the School in attracting PRTLTI funding for the bardic poetry database project, remarking that *"thought should be given to the provision of a support framework to enable them to be undertaken without detriment to other activities"*.

RESOURCES

The Celtic studies holding in Trinity's library was considered to be *"excellent"*. The Arts Building in general was seen as providing an *"adequate environment for undergraduate teaching"*. However, it was noted that the rooms were not always ideal for the student numbers and the sorts of teaching that take place. IT provision could be improved and the reviewers suggested that TCD lagged behind UK universities in this respect.

The provision of space and facilities for postgraduate researchers was deemed to be *"meagre by the best standards"*.

MANAGEMENT AND ORGANISATION

The School was identified as being "*managed in a generally harmonious and efficient but unfussy way*" and respected "*more widely too for the collegial qualities of efficiency, reliability and readiness to oblige*". The School's contribution to College activities appeared "*relatively modest*" by comparison with earlier times, but this was attributed to staff workloads and considered to be "*obvious and understandable*". The course in Irish Literature and Language for one-year visiting students was seen to represent a significant contribution to the College as a whole, as well as the School's involvement in external academic-related activities, especially those relating to the Irish language. The Report also notes that three of the School's staff members are College tutors.

The reviewer observed that "*the School has a warm and friendly atmosphere*" and that the "*informal liaison mechanisms .. were viewed favourably by staff and students at all levels*".

The Report also noted that postgraduate students expressed "*a high level of satisfaction with the supervision they were receiving*" and were "*happy with the level of access, attention and guidance they receive from staff*".

The School was considered "*fortunate to possess an extremely capable, highly committed, Irish-speaking Executive Officer*".

RECOMMENDATIONS

The reviewers stated that "*the School of Irish at TCD has always had a special place and function, both in its own eyes and as externally perceived. It has responded to this challenge in different ways over the years, finding different ways at different times to make its distinctive contribution to national life and to Irish scholarship*".

The reviewers' recommendations are as follows:

Early Irish

- (i) *We would encourage the School to continue investigating innovative, labour-saving teaching modes, media and curricular patterns, while recognising that Old Irish is not easy, and its teaching cannot be 'dumbed down'. The School's currently high reputation is something to be valued and protected at all costs, so that it can continue to flourish.*

Modern Irish

- (ii) *The strategy should be to offer a distinctive curriculum containing a core (as at present) plus a distinctive range of options chosen to reflect existing staff interests and strengths and to exemplify the aspirations of the College in terms of aesthetic content, range and intellectual challenge... .*
- (iii) *There is a need for creative, innovative thinking and experiment in regard to the teaching and learning of Irish at University level, where Irish pedagogical materials lag far behind the European Languages. This could be associated with the development of IT solutions (e.g. CALL) and/or the building up of ab initio Irish teaching (as currently available for Scottish Gaelic and Welsh in Scottish and Welsh universities respectively). There might be link-ups with the work of the TCD Languages Centre, and/or with the schools-based research of Institiúid Teangeolaíochta na hÉireann.*
- (iv) *There is much to be done in developing appropriate critical frameworks for the studying of Irish literature. Despite the pioneering work of one member of the department and some other scholars, this whole area is seriously understudied, but potentially rewarding, and would lead to teaching and learning much in keeping with the College's aspirations. Such an emphasis could make the study of Irish literature more rewarding, and establish new points of contact with English Literature and the other Modern Language Departments.*
- (v) *One could look to increase postgraduate recruitment, including students from outside the Republic of Ireland, to build on the already present sense of a research community. It would be appropriate to stress the superb Library resources available in TCD and in Dublin generally. Taught postgraduate options might be devised, involving the chance to learn Irish or build on a modest initial level of competence in the language. Opportunities for cross-disciplinary research, which may not be so easily achieved in the other Irish universities, could be built up and advertised. Success in this direction would be financially rewarding to the College; for the School, it could boost the supply of motivated and able students (as is already beginning to happen in EI). It could provide a reservoir of persons able to help in research projects and act as tutors when permanent staff take sabbatical leave.*
- (vi) *Once current staffing problems have been resolved, one could look afresh at links and exchanges (for staff as well as for students?), in order to broaden perspectives and learning/teaching/research experience. The existing and clearly much appreciated links with Scotland would provide an obvious direction [in which] to look. Wales and Northern Ireland would also bear scrutiny.*

- (vii) *Nearer home, it might be that teaching/supervisory/research links could be forged with other centres in and around Dublin along the lines already established informally between the Early Irish teachers at TCD and those at Maynooth..., with the same underlying objective of providing a stimulating and variegated ethos for students and teachers of Irish. The UK experience has been that developments of this sort are pleasing (for a variety of reasons) to Government, and are encouraged.*

4. RESPONSES FROM THE SCHOOL AND THE DEAN OF ARTS (LETTERS)

The Dean of Arts (Letters) and the School both welcomed "*the reviewers' highly positive assessment of the School's achievements in teaching and research*", and of its potential for further achievements. They took pride in the "*very positive approval and endorsement of the contribution the School makes to the study of Early and Modern Irish*".

The Dean endorsed the comments from the School of Irish and Celtic Studies on the reviewers Report, emphasising the "*severe difficulties in Modern Irish, where the losses of the 1980s have not been made up*".

The School was satisfied that the Report indicated that the reviewers were "*in complete agreement*" with the School in its assessment of its own "*successes and disappointments*" and in the School's own "*recommendations and areas of priority*".

The staffing in Modern Irish is a major concern for the School, and the dependence on casual teaching needs to be addressed urgently. However, the School pointed out that the reviewers did not give comparative figures for Modern Irish and noted that TCD has three full-time staff in Modern Irish compared with an average of seven full-time staff in similar departments in other Irish Universities. The School felt that the staffing level of Modern Irish was totally inadequate, putting an enormous burden of teaching especially on younger members of the team who are working "*extremely hard to establish their scholarly credentials*". The School reinforced the need for a language (teaching) specialist and saw this as a minimum requirement.

The School stressed that while the availability of funding for sabbatical leave was welcomed, staff could not avail themselves of this opportunity unless the current staffing problem was addressed. The School was pleased that the reviewers saw the Early Irish course in TCD "*as unique in Ireland and therefore internationally*". They endorsed the reviewers' comments on the need for extra space and computer facilities for postgraduate students both on taught and full-time research programmes, and were hopeful that this problem would be alleviated somewhat with additional space becoming available on the new floor to accommodate Irish Scottish projects.

While the School was in general agreement with the reviewers' views on recruiting mature students to the courses in the School, they had reservations about the view "*that mature students would be more likely to choose Early Irish because it is taught through English*". It is the experience of the School to date "*that there is no great discrepancy between Early Irish and Modern Irish in this regard*".

In response to the reviewers' comment that the study of Modern Irish literature "*is seriously understudied*", the School understands this to be a "*general statement without reference to the TCD School of Irish*". The suggestion that an *ab initio* course in Irish had the potential for attracting international and mature students was considered by the School on several grounds to lack a "*sound pedagogic or economic basis*". The School also emphasised that the reviewers' suggestions regarding recruitment of additional postgraduate students and the review of links and exchanges were made "*in the context of the current staffing problems having been resolved*". The School further attests "*its willingness to participate in exchanges and in collaborative research with other universities*" and to engage in cross-faculty courses such as the Moderatorship in Computer Science Linguistics and a Language. The School's also points out that, with appropriate staffing, it would be in a position to participate fully in other projects '*such as in the new linguistics course being planned by the CLCS and the Modern Languages departments*'. Concern was also expressed by the School that the requirement that a single joint report be submitted by the reviewers who had approached Early Irish and Modern Irish as "discrete entities" might give rise to the perception of "*a somewhat misleading and (clearly unintentional) imbalance in the assessment of performance in the two courses*". This imbalance was felt to be evident in relation to the Modern Irish course, and the School pointed out in its response that many of the difficulties cited in relation to Early Irish were equally applicable to the Modern Irish course.

In conclusion, both the Dean and the School welcomed the reviewers' positive Report and their attention to the School's own recommendations and stated areas of priority.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS TO COUNCIL

In addition to the School of Irish and Celtic Languages addressing the recommendations outlined in the review report, the following recommendations are made to Council in light of the review report and the response of the School and the Dean of Arts (Letters):

(a) that the School should

1. Continue to maintain its high standards in teaching and research.
2. Articulate its vision for the future of the School in the light of the forthcoming Faculty strategic planning process.
3. Develop its strategy of extending the range of courses in the School and continue to explore innovative methods of course delivery.
4. Develop a student recruitment strategy and actively explore ways of attracting different categories of students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.
5. Work with the Faculty and College in relation to developing plans for funding for the recommended new post in Modern Irish.
6. Extend the existing strong reputation of the School by exploring new links in teaching and research both nationally and abroad.

(b) that the Faculty should

1. Facilitate and support the members of the School in securing sabbatical leave.
2. Examine and address the needs of postgraduate students in relation to space and IT provision.
3. Respond to the reviewers' suggestion in relation to extending collaboration with English literature and other languages.

(c) that College should

1. In collaboration with the School explore the funding prospects in relation to establishing a further post in Modern Irish.
2. Examine inadequacies in current teaching and research space for departments / schools located in the Arts Building.
3. Support and advise the School in its student recruitment strategy.
4. Encourage the School's contribution to cross-faculty initiatives such as, for example, the possible development of a course in *Irish Studies*.

John Hegarty,
Provost.
