

## TRINITY COLLEGE



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### PROVOST'S REPORT TO COUNCIL ON THE REVIEW OF THE SCHOOL OF ENGLISH

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

This report presents the outcome of a review of the School of English. An external peer review visitation was undertaken on the 21<sup>st</sup> & 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2008 by Professor Patricia Waugh (University of Durham), Professor Norman Vance (University of Sussex) and Professor Cairns Craig (University of Aberdeen). The internal member of the review team was Professor Moray McGowan, School of Languages, Literatures and Cultural Studies, Trinity College Dublin.

The report is based on (i) feedback from the external Reviewers received on the 19<sup>th</sup> May 2008, (ii) a submission from the School of English received on the 18<sup>th</sup> July 2008 and (iii) a submission from the Dean of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences received on the 13<sup>th</sup> June 2008.

The main purpose of the School review is (a) to provide a structured opportunity for the School to reflect on its activities and plans for development, while benefiting from a constructive commentary by senior colleagues external to College; (b) to ensure that quality and standards in teaching, research and administration are being maintained and enhanced; and (c) to ensure that areas of concern in this regard are identified and addressed within an eighteen month timescale. This review process ensures that each School in College is reviewed systematically once every seven years. The School of English was last reviewed on the 21<sup>st</sup> & 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1998.

#### 2. OVERVIEW OF THE SCHOOL

##### 2.1 Aims and Objectives of the School

The School of English is committed to leadership in the development of English Studies as a vigorous, multidisciplinary subject. It aims to build on its existing strengths: a School with an enhanced international research profile, which continues to attract undergraduates and postgraduates of the highest quality, which maintains and builds on its already vibrant culture of excellence in teaching and research, which continues to foster innovation in teaching and assessment, and which has at its core a firmly-held belief that research and teaching are intimately connected and mutually stimulating. The School is committed to appropriate expansion in numbers of teaching and postdoctoral staff, of postgraduate researchers and of taught postgraduate courses to ensure flexibility and innovation in the development of its subject. It aims to foster the principle of individual research, while also maintaining and developing links with collaborative research projects both within and outside the institution. It is committed to providing an intellectual and scholarly community for all those involved with the School, and seeking to ensure that the intellectual environment is matched with appropriate spaces and facilities. It aims to provide a climate that fosters the academic development of all members of the School and is committed to recognising and developing the role of the University in its relationship to the city, the nation and the international community.

## 2.2 Programmes to which the School provides teaching

### **Undergraduate**

- Moderatorship in English studies (single honor);
- Moderatorship in English literature (Two subject moderatorship).

### **Postgraduate**

- M. Phil in Popular Literature;
- M. Phil in Anglo-Irish Literature;
- M. Phil in Creative Writing;
- M. Phil in Literatures of the Americas.

## 2.3 Research

Research in the School contributes significantly to the research strands and themes identified in College's Strategic Plan, notably *Culture and Creative Arts, Ireland; Texts and Contexts* and *Constructions of Europe*. The School has an international research profile in its areas of research activity which include medieval and renaissance literature, eighteenth-century literature, and creative writing. Members of the School are actively involved with important national and international associations, including the Royal Irish Academy, Irish and European Associations of American Studies, Irish Association for the Study of Anglo-Irish Literature, the National Association of English Studies and the Irish Association for the Study of Popular Literature.

## 2.4 Summary Statistical Profile of the School for the Academic Year 2006/07<sup>1</sup>

Full-time Staff FTE	Undergraduate FTE	Postgraduate FTE	School Staff: Student Ratio	Faculty Staff: Student Ratio
21	334	97	20	16

*Figures from Senior Lecturer's Annual Report approved by Council at its meeting on 5<sup>th</sup> December 2007.*

## 2.5 Accommodation and Facilities (Physical Resources)

School academic and administrative staff are mostly centred in the Arts Building, which is where the majority of the teaching is delivered. Almost all full-time academic staff are provided with individual office space. However, because of space pressure in the Arts Building, the School Administrator is temporarily housed in Front Square, and an increasing amount of the School's teaching is timetabled outside the Arts Building, especially in D'Olier Street, Áras an Phiarsaigh, Goldsmiths Hall, College Green and the Lloyd Institute. Two Executive officers currently occupy room 4013/4015 which also houses the staff letterboxes, student files, the shredder, the photocopier, the scanner and the watercooler. The School has exclusive use of rooms 4011 and 4019 in the Arts Building. Room 4019 is also the School Library and because of pressures on space elsewhere, 4011 is used to house important file, stationery and equipment used in teaching. The School has plans to upgrade 4011, involving floor-to-ceiling partitions to screen files and equipment, and new tables and chairs so that the room can accommodate small-group meetings. Room 4027 is used as a kitchen by the School. The School has access to room 4017 which is used frequently for receptions.

The Oscar Wilde Centre is located at Westland Row and is used for teaching and work space for the M.Phils in Creative Writing and Anglo-Irish Literature. Teaching Assistants have space allocated in the former bank building in Foster Place, and this area comprises a large room containing five computers, a kitchen and a small seminar room. Postgraduates have access to the 1937 Reading Room, in which there are computers available, and space designated only for postgraduates in the Humanities. Postgraduate research students may apply for a carrel in the library, which allows them to have a designated space and permits them to store books and other materials.

<sup>1</sup> The staff FTEs include all Professors, Associate Professors, Senior Lecturers and Lecturers funded from the core HEA grant, or from self-financing courses, and all part-time and occasional staff and demonstrators, converted to an FTE, who are funded from core grant or from self-financing courses.

### 3. EXTERNAL PEER REVIEW REPORT

#### SUMMARY OF REPORT

The Reviewers state that *“the School of English at Trinity University has achieved and sustained an international reputation far above its resources, both in financial and in staffing terms.”* They report that the School *“is a well-run and very successful academic unit, delivering good courses through excellent teaching and in the context of a very distinguished research profile.”* The School runs *“an impressive and extensive list of undergraduate courses, has developed a strong and very attractive set of M.Phil programmes, and has had significant success in developing its PhD students into prominent scholars.”* The School’s students are enthusiastic about the instruction they receive and staff are *“highly motivated, and despite heavy teaching loads, maintain impressive levels of research output.”*

Notwithstanding the success of English in achieving School status, the Reviewers feel that *“the prolonged transition from Departments to School, and the slow implementation of the new resource allocation model, together with the forthcoming semesterisation, has led to something of a planning blight, in which it has been difficult for the School to give consideration to innovations in its curriculum, its teaching methods or its overall organization.”* The Reviewers feel that *“few Schools of English have the potential for further development than this one has”* and outline a number of issues that they feel should be considered in order for the School to *“continue to develop and sustain its outstanding record of achievement.”*

#### 3.1 TEACHING

The School’s students *“evinced enthusiasm for the instruction they receive and are particularly grateful for the School’s continuing commitment to small group teaching.”* The Reviewers feel that *“a very high level of teaching quality is maintained across all areas of the School and, as a consequence, the School produces very well qualified students.”* They report that Junior Freshman students feel they have a well-structured pattern of learning with excellent support and that Sophister students are happy with the range of courses from which they can choose. Students express *“a strong sense of identification with the School and are appreciative of the support provided not only by academics but also by a very committed and approachable administrative staff.”*

The Reviewers believe that *“the curriculum introduced after an internal review in the 1990s still works well for English Studies, may, however, not be as effective for TSM students who find themselves sometimes inadequately prepared for courses later in their careers.”* They believe that the School *“clearly delivers very good, indeed often inspiring, teaching,”* but feel that *“given the many calls on staff time, that this is a very intensive mode of delivering the curriculum, and thought should be given to alternative modes of delivery which emphasize the importance of learning rather than the importance of teaching.”* The directors of teaching and learning should be encouraged to explore recent developments in learning strategies which allow courses to be delivered with fewer teaching hours and with more active student involvement outside of the classroom.

From a student point of view, the Reviewers feel that the least effective courses are the core courses in Junior Sophister, as they have no student-centred component and are delivered solely through lectures. The Reviewers query whether *“it is necessary to run all the Sophister options in every year”* and they recommend either having fewer options, only running them in alternate years or redesigning those options which attract very low numbers of students. To avoid penalising those teaching and taking courses in early periods of literature, they suggest that student numbers should be spread across the whole curriculum by requiring all students *“to do at least one course from each of the major historical periods...”*

The Reviewers feel that the School should give *“an earlier indication of acceptance to visiting students”* and *“detailed reading lists to visiting students in advance of their arrival.”* They suggest that the School should also consider *“the earlier provision of both class, and especially, exam timetables”* for all students and monitor the student numbers in tutorials more closely. The lack of availability of key books in the Library at busy periods during the year is also highlighted by the Reviewers as an issue for concern.

The Reviewers state that M.Phil students *“had a clear sense that they were engaging with the very forefront of research in the discipline.”* They report, however, that there is some concern amongst students on the newer M.Phils at the lack of a dedicated space for their programmes similar to that enjoyed by the students on the well established M.Phils in Creative Writing and Anglo-Irish Literature, and recommend that this issue be addressed.

The Reviewers believe that the standard of teaching provided by Teaching Assistants (TAs) in the School must be good, as student satisfaction with the general level of teaching is high and TAs contribute substantially to this. They feel, however, that the issue of *“a more comprehensive induction for and continuous monitoring of TAs”* which was raised in the last review, has not yet been adequately addressed.

### **3.2 RESEARCH**

The Reviewers report that Ph.D students in the School *“felt academically well supported by supervisors who were conscientiously available for consultation.”* They report concern and confusion, however, amongst research students regarding the process of transferring to full PhD status and suggest *“a shorter window for progression and more effective communication of the guidelines to all postgraduates.”* Ph.D students felt *“less well supported in terms of general career development”* and would welcome *“greater clarity about support for attendance at conferences.”* The Reviewers feel that *“annual sessions on how best to prepare for an academic (or scholarly) career”* would be useful.

They believe that the School has great potential to develop its graduate provision. The new Ph.D on ‘Texts, Contexts and Cultures’ and the introduction of the new M.Phil on children’s literature will strengthen graduate numbers. The popularity of the existing M.Phil programmes also gives ample scope for expansion through diversification or running multiples of seminars. There is also potential to increase the numbers of research students but, the Reviewers stress, that this can only be achieved if the issues of space, staff, and workload are addressed and rectified.

### **3.3 RESOURCES AND MANAGEMENT**

The Reviewers state that it is remarkable that such a small School *“manages to maintain excellence in both research and in teaching,”* but add that *“if the University wishes English to maintain its position of international eminence, it needs to give urgent attention to increasing the total number of permanent staff.”* They note that equivalent units in British universities with this student profile *“would expect to have a staffing base of between 28 and 32.”* They believe that the *“new administrative structures created at a College level do not map easily on to a single-subject School,”* but they *“applaud the way in which the School has maintained its School meeting as the decision-making body and made its ‘executive’ committee a managerial clearing house for submitting issues for decision at the School meeting.”*

While the Reviewers applaud the School’s commitment to facilitate a sabbatical term every four years for academic staff, they express concern that the introduction of semesterisation will make the arrangement even more difficult to maintain than it already is.

The Reviewers feel that *“staff effort is very ‘dispersed’ as a result of individuals contributing a small number of lectures over a wide range of courses,”* and suggest that *“thought should be given to how this can be avoided and staff time focused on a smaller number of areas of teaching.”* Equally, they believe that *“teaching loads cannot be harmonised because of the uneven distribution of Ph.D and M.Phil supervision, not formally factored into teaching loads.”* The Reviewers strongly recommend *“that some more effective model of staff workload be created if the M.Phil and Ph.D programmes are going to continue to expand.”* They recommend that the School consider either using the model suggested in the last review (one hour per week per postgraduate supervised across the academic year) or an alternative model.

With regard to staff development, they recommend that the School develop *“more effective in-house mentoring”* additional to that provided through the College Performance Management System in order to give junior staff a clear indication of what is required of them to advance their career within College.

The Reviewers commend the Head of School for his *“efforts to maintain a continuity of purpose in the course of rapid change,”* and they recommend that if the role of Head is to remain a three-year appointment then it would

be advisable to appoint a deputy-head as this would *“not only allow for rapid response to any unavailability of the Head of School but would provide a clear planning horizon for the School and the College.”*

The Reviewers commend the contribution of the administrative team to the School and students, noting that the team *“is highly motivated and very committed. Students feel that they can approach them at any time and their concerns will be taken seriously.”* The Reviewers believe that *“the School has been fortunate in the good health of the administrative team”* and express concern about the fragmentation of this team due to lack of adequate physical space. This fragmentation will have consequences for the management of the School if individual administrative staff are absent from work.

The Reviewers report that space was the single issue which dominated all of the interviews that they held and that *“the major concern of every constituency within the School was the way in which lack of space is impeding its delivery of its teaching and constricting its potential development.”* They believe that *“the immediate physical environment in which the School has to work is utilitarian at best. Teaching rooms without windows, administrative offices with only skylights are not testimony to the foresight of those who designed the building.”* They suggest that *“the lack of room provision for office hours and essay consultations means not only that some students cannot be given the same attention as others, but also that some students may not receive appropriate feedback at all.”*

The Reviewers believe that *“effective communication within the School, with administrative staff, and between the School and its prospective students, is patchy at best.”* They recommend that communication methods within the School and between the School and its students be reviewed, and that the School embrace *“more effective use of the web and of electronic forms of communication”* in order to improve efficiency. They suggest that consideration should be given to electronic submission of essays and alternative forms of examination, and that the website should be upgraded with a view to providing links to full information for different groups of students.

The Reviewers feel that School planning seems to be driven by the needs of the curriculum rather than by the needs of research, and comment that *“planning needs to take more account of the needs of research if the School is to continue to maintain its international status as being at the very forefront of the discipline in its areas of focus.”* Addressing increases in School activity, the Reviewers believe *“there is considerable scope for the School to expand its graduate provision and thereby to increase the numbers of its PhD students”* but they feel that *“it is unclear if the full implementation of the Resource Allocation Model would provide adequate returns on such increases.”*

### **3.4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Reviewers conclude their report by stating that the School’s research *“matches the best in the UK”* and that its students *“have the highest regard for their teachers.”* The School in turn is *“deeply committed to its discipline and to its students”* and the Reviewers commend the way in which it has managed to negotiate a rapidly changing environment without losing its disciplinary focus. The School has already addressed some of the concerns that arose in the last review – dependence on short-term contract staff has been addressed, a system of sabbaticals has been formalized and the development of the new M.Phil courses has been successful.

The Reviewers recommend that the concerns which arose in the last review and which have not been resolved should now be addressed. The School should:

- a. sufficiently reduce the administrative load on academics;
- b. implement proper induction and mentoring for Teaching Assistants;
- c. address the imbalance with regard to the physical resources for the M.Phil programmes across the School.

Arising from the 2008 review, the Reviewers make the following recommendations:

#### **3.4.1 Teaching**

- i. *The School should introduce a discipline specific induction course for new Teaching Assistants (TAs) and implement a mentoring program;*

- ii. *The School should pay TAs for office hours so that students can have the same access to TAs as to core staff members and provide TAs with suitable office space;*
- iii. *The School should organise meetings of all tutors on a course at the start and end of the course to outline aims and objectives of the course and to allow for feedback from tutors to the course organizers;*
- iv. *The School should review the teaching methods used to deliver the third year core courses;*
- v. *The School should provide an earlier indication of acceptance to visiting students and of provision of detailed reading lists to visiting students in advance of their arrival;*
- vi. *The School should facilitate earlier provision of class and exam timetables to students;*
- vii. *The School should monitor the numbers in tutorial groups more closely;*
- viii. *The Directors of Teaching and Learning should be encouraged to explore recent developments in learning strategies which allow courses to be delivered with fewer teaching hours and with more active student involvement outside of the classroom;*
- ix. *Thought should be given as to whether it is necessary to run all of the Sophister options in every year.*

#### **3.4.2 Research**

- x. *The School should arrange for PhD students to be given more training in preparation for an academic or other career;*
- xi. *The School should communicate the guidelines for the transition to full PhD status more clearly to research students and that there should be a shorter window for progression;*
- xii. *The School should provide greater clarity to research students about supports available for attendance at conferences;*
- xiii. *The significant unevenness of workload resulting from amounts of supervision both at PhD and M.Phil. levels should be reduced;*
- xiv. *Consideration should be given by the School to the suggestion that the potential to increase the number of research students can only be achieved if there is a reduction in the overall teaching commitment to the undergraduate programme;*
- xv. *If the proposal suggested by the last review panel (one hour per week per postgraduate supervised across the academic year) is not to be adopted, exactly how supervision is factored into workloads has to be addressed by the whole School as a matter of urgency;*
- xvi. *Planning needs to take more account of the needs of research, if the School is to continue to maintain its international status as being at the forefront of the discipline in its areas of focus.*

#### **3.4.3 Resources**

- xvii. *The School should improve its communication structures and, in particular, make more use of web-based communication;*
- xviii. *The College must address as a matter of priority the provision of adequate space for the School, its teaching assistants, administrative staff, and graduate students;*
- xix. *The availability of key books in the Library, especially at writing essay and exam periods, should be reviewed;*
- xx. *The College should give urgent attention to increasing the total number of permanent staff.*
- xxi. *Administrative functions and academic roles need to be more clearly specified and, throughout the administration of the school, continuity planning improved;*
- xxii. *Administrative staff need to be made aware of School procedures for coverage and continuity in the event of absence or illness;*
- xxiii. *A fortnightly planning meeting with all or most of the administrative staff and support team might be a useful innovation;*
- xxiv. *The School needs to develop more effective in-house mentoring for new staff and junior staff should be aware of what is required in order to advance their career within the institution;*
- xxv. *The School should appoint a deputy head who would be expected to become Head of School in due course.*

#### 4. RESPONSES FROM THE SCHOOL & THE DEAN OF ARTS, HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES

The School of English and the Dean of the Faculty welcome the comments and recommendations in the Review Report and the Dean encourages the School to address the concerns not addressed since the previous review. The School and Dean welcome the Reviewers' confirmation of the standing of the School and its general contribution both within and outside Trinity.

The Head of School agrees that "*closer monitoring of numbers in tutorial groups*" is advisable, and the School will consider ways of eradicating the culture of casual transfers. The School feels that the students' point regarding "*lack of availability of key texts in the Library*" arises from a misperception of the library's function, which is not to supply copies of all texts for all students but to provide a research base. The School encourages students to purchase their own copies of primary course texts. The School and the Dean welcome the Reviewers' suggestion that a "*full-scale discipline-specific induction course for new teaching assistants*" should be introduced. The School has worked over the last number of years on formalizing supports available to Teaching Assistants, and on formalizing the duties involved.

In response to the comment that Teaching Assistants should receive "*payment for office hours*," the School points out that the fee for correcting essays includes an amount for time spent consulting with students. The School agrees that "*earlier indication of acceptance to visiting students*" would be useful, but notes that this is outside the power of the School. The School does not agree with the suggestion of "*not running less popular Sophister options in every year*", since they have a principled commitment to teaching across the range of English Studies. However the School will consider looking at the way options are allocated to students and see if some improvements could be made in this regard. The School strongly resists the proposal to introduce "*electronic submission of essays*," as this will lead to difficulties of compatibility, increase administration and reduce interaction between students and members of the School. The School agrees to explore "*alternative modes of delivery of programmes*" though given the limited resources in College this would be difficult in the short-term.

The Dean of the Faculty recognises the space constraints under which the School is operating, and notes that these constraints affect all Schools in the area. The School fully supports the Reviewers' observations that the poor quality of the physical environment is impacting adversely on administrative and academic staff, and students. At the time of the site visit a plan was under way to ameliorate this situation with regard to the administrative staff and phase one of this has now been completed with moves to more suitable office space for three of the team. The suggestion of an "*in-house mentoring*" system is welcomed by the School, and the School undertakes to revive the staff handbook, the earlier one having become redundant through changes to College structures and policies.

The Head of School and School administrative staff have agreed to hold regular planning meetings in response to a recommendation from the Reviewers. The School undertakes to review staff teaching commitments and workloads in the light of the Reviewers' comments, and action has already been taken on the 3<sup>rd</sup> year compulsory courses. This recommendation is also supported by the Dean of the Faculty who encourages the School to do what it can to rationalise its course offerings and ensure fair treatment of staff via equitable workloads. The School is resistant, however, to the "*pruning of options*", since 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year specialized options are a key component of the School's ethos and form a crucial interaction point between teaching and research. Because the Head of School is an elected position, the School feels that it is difficult to accede to the recommendation that they should appoint a "*Deputy to the Head of School*" with a view to them becoming "*the Head of School in due course*". The Dean of the Faculty supports the need for robust planning of sabbatical leave.

Addressing the concern about the transition to full PhD status, the School comments that the transfer procedures had been revised around the time of the site visit and this probably contributed to the lack of clarity in this regard. The School agrees that communication with postgraduate students could be improved and undertakes to provide a postgraduate student handbook similar to the one available to undergraduates. The Dean of the Faculty welcomes this emphasis on postgraduate training and the School acknowledges the need to support career development opportunities for postgraduate students.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS TO COUNCIL AND BOARD

In light of the review report and the responses from the School of English and the Faculty Dean it is recommended that:

1. The School of English working closely with the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Science, and other relevant Academic Officers, should consider the detailed recommendations of the Review Report and draw up an implementation plan<sup>2</sup> for Council approval;
2. College should ensure adequate support and structures for:
  - a. staff induction and development,
  - b. postgraduate career development, and
  - c. review its current system of student evaluation of course modules, and consider introducing evaluation of programmes.

**Provost**  
**12 November 2008**

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<sup>2</sup> See *Procedures and Protocol for Quality Review of Schools 2008/09* at <http://www.tcd.ie/vp-cao/qu/qopdf/adrpack2.pdf>