



PROVOST'S REPORT TO COUNCIL ON THE REVIEW OF THE DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

1. INTRODUCTION

This report presents the outcome of a departmental review exercise undertaken by Trinity College Dublin in relation to its Department of Psychology. An external peer review visitation was conducted on the 30th and 31st of October, 2003 by Professor S.D. Iversen, University of Oxford, and Professor P.K. Smith, University of London, Goldsmiths' College. During the site visit, the reviewers met with all staff of the Department, staff of cognate departments, representatives of undergraduate and postgraduate students and research fellows in the Department, and senior officers of the College. A Pro-Senior Lecturer and Pro-Dean of Arts (Humanities) were appointed for the purposes of this review.

The report is based on (i) feedback from the external reviewers, received on the 12th March 2004, (ii) a submission from the Pro-Dean of Arts (Humanities), received on the 6th May 2004 and (iii) a submission from the Department of Psychology received on the 5th May 2004.

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 DEPARTMENT

2.1 Aims and Objectives of the Department

1. Research-led excellence in teaching and achievement in internationally competitive research.
2. Basic research complemented by practice-led research contributing to education, health, industry, government and social policy.
3. Interdisciplinarity in research.

2.2 Programmes to which the Department provides teaching

Key programmes (undergraduate)

Single Honor Course in Psychology

Two-Subject Moderatorship in Psychology

The Department offers an elective course in Critical Thinking in the context of the College's Broad Curriculum, and contributes teaching to the Moderatorships in Social Studies, in Sociology and Social Policy, in Neuroscience, in Economic and Social Studies, in Occupational Therapy and the B.A.I. Engineering.

Postgraduate (taught):

M.Sc. in Counselling Psychology

Doctoral programme in Clinical Psychology (D.Clin. Psy.)

In addition, staff members contribute teaching to the M.Sc. in Molecular Medicine, the M.Sc. in Molecular Pathology, the Diploma in Addiction Studies, the M.Sc. in Educational Guidance and Counselling, and the Diploma in Physical Planning.

2.3 Research

The Department's research activity is co-ordinated through three research streams: neuroscience and cognition; culture, systems and development; and health, clinical and counselling psychology. Collaboration is extensive, and a number of cross-stream research groupings have developed, for example around autism, and neuropsychology and brain rehabilitation. The Department is also committed to interdisciplinary research as evidenced by its central role in two major interdisciplinary research centres in Trinity - the Children's Research Centre and the Institute of Neuroscience. The latter has recently been successful in attracting substantial funding through the Higher Education Authority's Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions. Many staff have international reputations, as indexed by publications and citations in leading journals, well-reviewed books and invitations for major presentations at international conferences, success in attracting research funding, and involvement in national and/or international policy-making or advisory committees. The ethics of research committee established in 1999 functions as a central element of both ethical and quality control of all research conducted by the staff and students in the Department.

2.4 Summary Statistical Profile of the Department for the Academic Year 2002-2003¹

Full-time staff FTE	Part-time Staff FTE	Undergraduate FTE	Postgraduate FTE	Department Staff:Student Ratio	Faculty Staff:Student Ratio
17	3.07	184.52	100.16	14	24

¹ Figures approved by Council at its meeting on 3rd December 2003.

The full-time staff of seventeen includes 1 Professor, 3 Associate Professors, 5 Senior Lecturers, and 8 Lecturers.

2.5 Accommodation and Facilities (Physical Resources)

The Department is located on campus in a modern building that has been extensively renovated and extended within the last ten years. Departmental accommodation includes staff offices, five lecture/seminar rooms of various sizes, several project-testing cubicles/rooms, a small reading room and computer laboratories. Many undergraduate lectures take place in shared lecture theatres in the Arts and Social Sciences Building. The Children's' Research Centre has its base in a building adjacent to the College campus.

3. EXTERNAL PEER REVIEW REPORT

SUMMARY OF REPORT

TEACHING

The reviewers' assessment of the quality of teaching in the Department, though very positive, is couched in general terms. They remark on "*the research and teaching excellence we saw evidence of in the Department*", and are satisfied that "*the quality of the undergraduate and taught postgraduate courses is high*". In their meeting with senior academic staff the reviewers discern "*real drive and determination to aspire to the highest levels of teaching and research*". In an account of their meeting with undergraduate students, the reviewers relate, "*many positive views were expressed about the Department. The most widespread concern was about tutorial arrangements. These have been rather fluid over the last few years, and the reasons have not always been understood. Staff tutorials are generally preferred to postgraduate tutorials, as the latter are seen as less experienced. It was felt that some standardization of the tutorial system was needed, and also that more feedback on essay work would be useful*". Students who had not experienced staff-led tutorials felt that there was a lack of contact between staff and students, and some students felt "*they did not get enough exposure to the 'clinical' side of psychology (eg. for laboratory work) even though there was a doctor's course in this area*". On this point, the reviewers also report: "*many of the students saw themselves as preparing for 'caring' professions rather than the 'scientific' arena and felt that the course failed to recognise this interest in the student body*". The undergraduates also indicated that they would welcome more advice on course options particularly for the TSM students, and revision sessions in the Trinity term. The reviewers report that these matters were subsequently discussed in their meeting with the undergraduate curriculum committee and, as noted in the departmental response to the reviewers' report, most have since been acted upon.

With regard to teaching at the postgraduate level, the reviewers do not elaborate on the general statements made as to the high quality of teaching, as cited above. They do however recommend that the Department plan to introduce new postgraduate taught programmes, and, suggest that some growth could be accommodated through the development of shared modules at the undergraduate as well as postgraduate levels - *"modularisation of postgraduate courses - across disciplines as well as within departments, including Psychology - could result in staff time savings"*.

RESEARCH

The reviewers find much to praise in the achievements and research culture of the Department. In terms of the RAE rating system for UK university departments, their assessment is that *"the overall research rating of the Department would be 4/5 borderline with some pockets of 5* (clear international) activity"*. The new Institute of Neuroscience in particular is described as *"an exciting new development"* viewed externally as *"a huge achievement for Trinity"*. The Report also commends other areas of excellence already well established within the department including *"cognitive development, health psychology, and social psychology"*. Following their visit to the Children's Research Centre, the reviewers comment on their *"impression of a well-run, vibrant research community. The quality and range of the research and the research staff were impressive.....the Centre is an important part of the broad Psychology environment within the College"*. The reviewers are similarly laudatory following their tour of research laboratories and meetings with post-doctoral staff and doctoral students. *"The Review Team formed the impression of a very dynamic research environment involving highly committed psychologists at an early stage of their careers. The quality of the projects in areas familiar to the members of the Review Team was judged to be high. It was clear that senior academics provide a supportive intellectual environment for these younger scientists."*

At the same time, the reviewers identify various challenges for the Department. In relation to the Institute of Neuroscience, they perceived some anxiety that the *"new research axis might weaken the status of other kinds of research in the Department"*. Returning to this issue at a later point in the Report, the reviewers comment, *"The greatest risk to the Department would be the rapid and isolated ascendancy of the Neuroscience Centre. To capitalise on the value of the Neuroscience Centre, it needs to develop strong empirical ties with other areas of research within the Department..... if well-managed, the symbiosis of the Centre with other areas of Psychology within the existing Department could herald a very fruitful period of research collaboration"*. The geographical separateness of elements of the Department is also commented on in relation to the Children's Research Centre, and, while they believe the building in which it is housed to be *"well suited to the research endeavour"*, nevertheless the reviewers recommend that efforts be made to achieve greater integration of the research activity taking place in the various locations in terms of the intellectual life of the Department.

The reviewers welcomed the opportunity to meet with staff of cognate departments, and in their Report note the potential for future collaboration particularly in the area of training in educational psychology. They record that *"the area of child studies is well represented in psychology, education, and in the Children's Research Centre"*, but suggest that *"some planned focus such as a series of seminars on child-related issues, would be worth exploring"* with a view to stepping up regular communication between the departments. From their meeting with staff of cognate departments, the reviewers recount *"a general feeling in the discussions was that cross-disciplinary work was not adequately facilitated in the College. When a joint research application was made, funds could only be officially assigned to one department."*

The research students who met the external reviewers highlighted the *"many positive features"* of the Department, including the quality of supervision and the representation of student groups at staff meetings. The reviewers suggest that *"co-supervision of postgraduate students might be adopted more widely to provide additional backup and guidance to students"*, but also note that *"College structures for joint supervision of post-doctoral work were cumbersome"*. The Report also proposes the production in hard copy of a consolidated version of available guidance for staff and students on supervisory and examination processes. The students were keen to have more opportunities for academic and social contact with other postgraduate students in the Department, particularly with those on the clinical and counselling courses (groups which were not represented at the meeting with reviewers). Working space was a concern, and the reviewers' comments on this are recorded below in the section on Resources. The students acknowledged that some support was available to enable them to attend academic conferences, but felt that the procedures for getting such support were *"unnecessarily cumbersome"*.

RESOURCES

The reviewers recount that meetings with junior and senior academic staff and with the Head of Department and Chair of the Curriculum Review Committee were dominated by concerns regarding the relatively high proportion of academic staff holding non-tenured posts in the Department, and this is reflected throughout the Report. The reviewers note that the rapid expansion since 1999 from nine to seventeen academic posts had been possible through contract appointments, both fixed-term and of indefinite duration. These posts included those associated with the taught master's and doctoral programmes and funded through course fee income, a Broad Curriculum post, and a replacement for a member of staff serving as a College officer. The reviewers relate that there was a perception in the Department

that non-tenured staff were at a disadvantage in terms of pension arrangements, applying for research grants, promotion and supervision of postgraduate research students. The Report notes "*While some of these non-permanent contracts are inevitable, their cumulative effect was felt as strongly detrimental. ...Such uncertainty cannot be expected to continue to deliver the research and teaching excellence we saw evidence of in the Department*". Concern was expressed that significant responsibility for delivering core teaching lay with non-tenured staff. In the account of their meeting with the Head of Department and Chair of Curriculum Review Committee, the reviewers return to this issue, "*the view of the Review Team is that the Department is facing a real crisis....The cumulative effect of so many non-permanent posts is severe, and perceived as such throughout the academic staff. To maintain the status quo in a secure way this situation needs to be remedied as a matter of urgency*". In terms of the student/staff ratio however, the reviewers observe that at 14:1 the ratio for Psychology "is not particularly high" within the Faculty of Arts (Humanities)" but wonder if it is "*much less favourable than that of empirical subjects in other schools, particularly classical experimental sciences?*"

With regard to non-academic staff, the reviewers note that morale is high. The technical staff is considered to be under-resourced in terms of space and personnel, and the impact on the role of technical staff of the new Institute of Neuroscience remained to be clarified. With regard to the Executive Officer staff, the reviewers note "*their cheerful manner and efficient work appears to be very widely appreciated by students as well as staff. Again, staffing is at a minimum*". The reviewers advise that, "*in the context of a Department with maintained staffing and student numbers*", a future additional half-time post would be warranted.

The reviewers reported that junior staff had commented, "*while traditional library resources were good, electronic delivery was not and generally, IT support at the College level could be improved*".

Physical resources in the Department are also noted. The shared accommodation for post-doctoral staff and doctoral was described as providing "*less than optimal experimental conditions*" which have the potential to lead to "*difficulty and confusion and may even raise safety issues*". Commenting on the resources available to the doctoral course in Clinical Psychology, the reviewers note that its needs "*have not been resolved in a satisfactory way*", and consider that it "*would be appropriate to develop an integrated teaching business plan for the next five years to protect the brand name and deliver its mission in postgraduate professional training*." It was acknowledged however, that the opening of the Institute of Neuroscience might alleviate some of the accommodation problems.

In the context of discussions with the Head of Department and Chair of the Curriculum Review Committee concerning the resourcing of the Department, the reviewers suggest that the Department "*may need to re-examine (1) the scope of its core activities;(2) the efficiency of teaching delivery (eg. use of shared modules at undergraduate and postgraduate level); (3) the number of new postgraduate taught courses to be introduced;(4) the size of the postgraduate student body; and (5) the risks of increasing undergraduate numbers.*"

MANAGEMENT AND ORGANISATION

As noted above under Research, and in relation to the Institute of Neuroscience, the reviewers advise that its "*integrationinto the life of the Department as a whole will need to be managed carefully*". They recommend "*that the technical staff are speedily involved in these discussions*". Similarly, in connection with the Children's Research Centre, the reviewers urge "*.. all possible attempts should be made to integrate the research workers and their research output into the intellectual life of the Department and, in turn, that the research activities of the Department should be accessible to the Centre*".

Although the postgraduate research students interviewed were happy with their representation at staff meetings, undergraduate students felt that there was "*a lack of contact between staff and students*".

RECOMMENDATIONS

Teaching:

- (i) Carefully plan the growth of postgraduate taught courses in the light of available resources and a financial cost/benefit analysis.
- (ii) Monitor quality control and 'customer' satisfaction with postgraduate research training.
- (iii) Consider introducing modularisation of postgraduate courses across disciplines as well as within departments.
- (iv) Consider how the professional postgraduate courses in Clinical Psychology (Doctoral) and Counselling Psychology (M.Sc.) may contribute more within the Department, for example by the postgraduates mixing with the research postgraduates, or the course contributing in some way to the undergraduate curriculum.
- (v) Consider introducing revision lectures or other course material in the third term of the first year and possibly in other years.
- (vi) Give an orienting lecture at the start of each year, making clear tutorial arrangements, choice implications for TSM students, etc.

Research

- (vii) Consolidate plans for the move into the Institute of Neuroscience.
- (viii) Identify research focus or theme for the remainder of the Department.
- (ix) There should be more incentives for cross-disciplinary work and innovative practice.
- (x) Make it easier for postgraduate students to apply for funding to attend conferences.

Resources/facilities

- (xi) Aim, in a planned, stepwise manner, to consolidate permanent staff at 12 (present 9 + 3 fixed-term). This assumes College officers will also return to the Department and that the Broad Curriculum initiative will be dealt with by the College as a separate issue depending on the judged value of this initiative. Identify a date by which this increase of permanent staff can be achieved. This is essential for the Department to plan the size and shape of its teaching activity, eg. introduction of new taught graduate courses.
- (xii) Review employment conditions of contract staff.

Management/organisation

- (xiii) Ensure that technical staff are consulted on the anticipated arrangements for technical support in the Institute [of Neuroscience], and ensure that other areas or streams of Psychology are valued, and perceived to be valued, in terms of status and allocation of remaining resources.
- (xiv) Consider producing a hard copy consolidated handbook or code of practice for matters regarding postgraduate training and progress (either at College or Departmental level).
- (xv) Re-introduce support teaching for undergraduates by senior postgraduate students. This would free time for staff members to pay more attention to "pastoral care" of undergraduates weaving their way through a complex set of course options.

4. RESPONSES FROM THE DEPARTMENT AND THE PRO-DEAN OF THE FACULTY

The Pro-Dean of the Faculty of Arts (Humanities) notes, "*The Report is complimentary about the Department My impression from the personal comments of the reviewers during their visit is that they found much to admire and commend in the Department*". He observes, however, that the Report "*addresses the issues brought to its attention by the Department*", but the effect of its particular structure, which is based around accounts of various meetings with the authors' recommendations divided between the main body of the Report and a supplementary memorandum, is such that "*it is not always clear whether the reviewers endorse or are simply repeating what they have been told by the various stakeholders in the Department*". In its response to the Report, the Department too "*believes that the reviewers had a very positive evaluation of the Department*".

The Pro-Dean observes that the reviewers' main conclusions - the requirement for additional staffing and space, and the high quality of courses and research output - echo the recommendations in most external reviews of College departments undertaken in the last five years. With regard to their evident concerns about the number of contract staff, the Pro-Dean remarks that the reviewers do not "*comment on the reasons why, and how, this situation of under-staffing has come about, nor about the reasons why many of the 'core' activities of the Department have been allocated to non-tenured staff. In fact, it appears to have been the result of two factors: a) past actions taken by the Department in full knowledge of the consequences, and b) the provision of contract posts rather than permanent posts associated with the appointment of a new Head.*" The Pro-Dean notes that those aspects of the undergraduate course about which the reviewers made recommendations either have been or are currently being addressed by the Department. The Pro-Dean concludes "*It is clear that much excellent work is being done in the Department. Its courses are in high demand. Its staff is research active and continues to gain promotions against extremely stiff competition. The Institute is a huge positive step forward. The work of the Children's Research Centre is a growing and vibrant inter-disciplinary centre of new thinking on a topic of major social concern.*"

The Department was "*disappointed that no reference was made to the extensive documentation prepared for the review*" and the timing of the review was also felt to be problematical; "*the reviewers were faced with a department in transition....they were preoccupied with a highly anomalous situation regarding contract staff on the one hand, and an impending major move to the Institute of Neuroscience on the other*". The Department's response highlights a number of areas that it contends were overlooked or misrepresented by the reviewers. "*The reviewers ...failed to give an assessment of the undergraduate programme. This programme has consistently been praised by external examiners for the high quality and level of the undergraduates*". The Department cites the very high ratio of eligible applicants to places on all its courses, both undergraduate and postgraduate, and, in relation to its student/staff ratio, emphasises that it has "*one of the highest proportions of postgraduate to undergraduate in College*". Similarly "*Psychology (with the Institute of Neuroscience) is the fifth highest generator of research income of departments in College. This is not reflected in the reviewers' report.*"

Responding to specific recommendations, the Department reports on progress made since the review visit in October 2003, and offers clarification on certain aspects of research in the Department. Regarding the Institute of Neuroscience, it is noted that *"staff linked to the Institute will retain their office base in the Department and that only their laboratory facilities will be re-located. Their postgraduates and postdoctoral fellows will continue to have a presence in the Department of Psychology."* The Department also takes issue with the reviewers' recommendation that it should identify a research focus or theme for the remainder of the department: *"The department has a clear set of research themes other than neuroscience and children's research - for instance in organisational psychology."* It further asserts, *"it is clearly imperative that the very real strengths of the department outside of neuroscience are highlighted and fostered [...] The two other main streams of the department - Culture, Systems and Development, and Health Clinical and Counselling respectively, have both strong research groups which were well-described in the Review Document. "*

In relation to the Report's comments on postgraduate matters, the Department accepts the recommendation for the growth of postgraduate taught courses, noting, *"we plan to greatly increase the number of such courses, along with a concomitant increase in staff"*. The impact of space constraints is closely linked to the quality control issues raised by the reviewers' in relation to postgraduate research student training. *"A major change in the way postgraduate research training occurs was in course at the time of the review, and this addresses the above issues.... The potential impact of space constraints on research quality and researcher satisfaction will continue to be monitored."* The Department also records that it does produce a handbook of the type suggested by the external reviewers. Other specific recommendations relating to teaching and the organisation and delivery of courses have been or are being addressed within the Department.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS TO COUNCIL

In addition to the Department of Psychology addressing the detailed recommendations outlined in the review report, the following recommendations are made to Council in light of the review report and the responses from the Pro-Dean of Arts (Humanities) and the Department:

- (a) that the Department should
 1. Ensure that the success of the Neuroscience Institute does not detract from focus on the need to maintain and develop the other core activities of the Department.
 2. Widen consultation to include all staff in the Department in consolidating plans for the commissioning and occupation of new premises for the Institute of Neuroscience.
 3. Seek to develop an appropriate level of integration between the research groups and centres linked to the Department and the other research and teaching activities of the Department.
 4. Plan the development of new postgraduate taught programmes with a view to integrating them with existing programmes and integrating the postgraduate courses with the undergraduate activity.
- (b) that the Faculty should
 5. Actively assist the Department in consolidating the number of permanent academic staff, as appropriate.
- (c) that College should
 6. Explore ways of facilitating cross-disciplinary research and innovative practice among and between academic departments and other research groupings.
 7. Consider publishing guidelines in a consolidated format on postgraduate training and supervision matters for staff and postgraduate students, and explore ways in which procedures might be streamlined for postgraduate students applying for grants to attend academic conferences.
 8. Review policy in relation to contract staff.

John Hegarty
Provost
