



**PROVOST'S REPORT TO COUNCIL ON
THE REVIEW OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND PRIMARY CARE
(formerly Community Health and General Practice)**

1. INTRODUCTION

This report presents the outcome of a departmental review exercise undertaken by Trinity College Dublin in relation to its Department of Public Health and Primary Care. The report is based on (i) feedback from an external peer reviewer visitation, conducted on the 30th of April and 1st of May 2003 by Professor Richard Madeley, Department of Public Health, University of Nottingham and Professor Graham Watt, Department of General Practice, University of Glasgow, received on 14th December 2003, (ii) a submission from the Faculty Dean dated 2nd March 2004, and (iii) a submission from the Department dated 17th February, 2004.

As Council is aware, 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 the 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. This review process ensures that each academic department in College will have its undergraduate and postgraduate provision reviewed systematically once every five years.

2. OVERVIEW OF THE DEPARTMENT

2.1 Aims and Objectives of the Department

1. To continue to achieve high standing locally, nationally, and internationally.
2. To position the Department for the future with greater investment in Primary Care and a new name: Department of Public Health and Primary Care.
3. To become more centrally and extensively involved in curriculum reform plans in the Faculty of Health Sciences.
4. To seek funding sources for clinical placements in order to reorient radically clinical teaching towards primary care and community health clinics.
5. To develop closer links with postgraduate general practice, moving the training programme offices and teaching facilities to the Tallaght site to increase good teaching outlets for undergraduates.

2.2 Programmes to which the Department provides teaching

Key Programmes:

Undergraduate

Bachelor in Medicine

5th year Undergraduate:

- a. General Practice
- b. Epidemiology and Public Health Medicine

Postgraduate

MSc in Community Health

2.3 Research

The research profile of the Department of Public Health and Primary Care is multi-disciplinary. The staff are involved in collaborative research with other departments and other institutions in Trinity, in Dublin, in Ireland and in Europe. Currently the main areas of research in the Department are the following: inequities in health, diabetes, men's health, medical education, and addiction. The Department is associated with North/South development of research which includes the SPHERE study to improve secondary prevention in established heart disease on an all-Ireland basis. The department receives research funding from a wide variety of sources, including Office of Tobacco Control (OTC), Health and Safety Authority (HSA), Health Research Board (HRB), European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), Eastern Regional Health Authority (ERHA), Northern Area Health Board (NAHB), and European Union.

2.4 Summary statistical profile of the Department for the academic year 2002-2003¹

Full-time staff FTE	Undergraduate FTE	Postgraduate FTE	Staff: Student Ratio
7.67	33.99	18.70	7

¹ Figures from Senior Lecturer's Annual Report.

2.5 Accommodation and Facilities (Physical Resources)

The Department is accommodated in the Trinity College Centre in the Adelaide and Meath Hospital, incorporating the National Children's Hospital, at Tallaght. Although accommodation is excellent, the Department has already outgrown its accommodation and has negotiated use of a large adjacent computer room. The IT facilities in the Department are excellent.

3. EXTERNAL PEER REVIEW REPORT

TEACHING

The reviewers begin their report by making comparisons of time spent on general practice and public health medicine in the undergraduate medical curriculum at Trinity College and other Irish and UK Universities and conclude by saying, '*students' experience of general practice-based teaching at TCD is rudimentary compared to most medical schools.*' They note that this also applies to undergraduate teaching in Public Health. They consider that '*there is substantial scope for increasing the scale and scope of community-based contributions to the curriculum, including not only clinical teaching but also educational objectives in other core curriculum subjects and disciplines.*' However, they are aware that '*current contributions are constrained by limited numbers of clinical academic staff to plan and co-ordinate clinical teaching, and limited funds with which to engage General Practice tutors.*' They note that in England '*developments in general practice-based teaching have been supported almost entirely on the basis of health service funding, via the Service Increments for Teaching (SIFT)*' scheme, and they conclude '*It seems unlikely that general practice-based teaching at TCD can expand without additional funding of this nature.*' However, they suggest, '*A helpful short-term measure may be to assist the relocation to the Tallaght department of the office which co-ordinates local postgraduate training in general practice – promoting synergy and greater efficiency in the use of postgraduate and*

undergraduate teaching networks.' The reviewers commend the high standard of the course documentation. Although they did not have the opportunity to speak directly to undergraduate students, they understood that general practice-based teaching is evaluated highly by the students.

With regard to postgraduate teaching, the reviewers state that the M.Sc. in Community Health has a good reputation nationally and internationally. However, due to diminished resources the course has recently been restructured. They expressed concern that *'the delivery of this course is very labour intensive.'* As a result, in a small department this means that *'several staff members and outside contributors make substantial contributions which detract from other academic activities, such as research and undergraduate teaching.'* The reviewers noted that the Department lost a senior member of staff who had contributed to the key topic of International Health and noted that *'the withdrawal of the module in International Health may decrease the attraction of the course for foreign students.'* They believe that this would have a negative impact on the course's financial viability and conclude by saying, *'Taken together, these factors raise serious questions about whether or not the opportunity costs of continuing to run the course are still justified.'*

RESEARCH

The reviewers state that the Department formerly enjoyed a stronger international reputation, albeit one not founded on empirical research. They recommend that the Department consider a strategy for developing an international reputation based on research carried out locally but with international relevance. They note that *'the main factor limiting research development is the number of senior academic staff capable of obtaining funding and providing research supervision'*. The reviewers say that the Departmental research plan comprises *'a collation of existing rather disparate activities, reflecting the opportunistic and reactive approach of the small number of senior academic staff, several with major competing teaching and/or service commitments.'* Finally, although the Department describes its research as *'multidisciplinary,'* the reviewers recommend a broader approach to include inputs from social science and health economics which *'could add to the range, quality and volume of research undertaken'*.

The reviewers note that recent completion rates by research students are very satisfactory. They say, *'The postgraduate students we met were generally positive about the quality and amount of research supervision, but felt isolated on the Tallaght site.'* The reviewers discussed ways in which communication could be improved .

RESOURCES

The reviewers note that the department is very small by UK standards, but that it *'punches above its weight', mainly as a result of the high profile activities of several senior staff, but this external impression hides the internal picture of a small department with meagre resources'*. They also recognise the difficulties experienced by the Department following the move to Tallaght, including the amount of time spent travelling to and from meetings at the main TCD campus. They recommend that additional funding should be made available to the Department and make a number of suggestions in this regard.

ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT

The reviewers comment that the small size of the department has meant that it has not been necessary to have formal management structures. However, they note that the current Head of Department has been in position for ten years and state that attention is paid to succession planning. They recommend that to enhance future prospects of the Department, *'it is clear that senior clinical academic leadership is needed to support developments and increases in academic capacity within both general practice and primary care. It is possible that both functions could be strengthened via a transfer of the head of department role and a sharing of these lead functions.'* They also support the desire of the current Head of Department to demit office and transfer responsibility to a senior colleague.

Formal and informal opportunities for staff-student liaison appear to be adequate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The overall view of the reviewers is that although the Department is very small by international standards, it *'has considerable capacity for growth, in keeping with current health service policies and priorities.'* The reviewers note that *'It should be possible to obtain external funding to support increases in capacity and activity in both disciplines, spanning education, research, and service development.'*

The reviewers then set out a number of recommendations

1. *'The Department should re-orientate its activities towards undergraduate teaching and research, which can be published in refereed journals.'*

In support of this change of direction the Department should –

- a) *Produce a Research Plan setting out its priorities.*
 - b) *Discontinue the M.Sc. in Community Health.*
 - c) *Undertake a review of the costs and benefits of carrying out external commissions. They should only be carried out if they fit in with the objectives of the Research Plan and are funded realistically.*
 - d) *Consolidate its resources for undergraduate teaching including, as far as possible, the retention of key staff and securing of local networks of teaching practices.*
2. *The Research Plan should address the issue of the recruitment and retention of young researchers. The creation of postdoctoral fellowships should be regarded as a high priority. The creation of posts in the fields of social science and health economics seems urgent.*
 3. *An increase in the amount of teaching about both Primary Care and Public Health needs to be undertaken in the undergraduate course. There is considerable scope for integrated educational activities. This would necessitate increases in core academic and administrative staff and a budget (similar to the Service Increments for Teaching (SIFT) and the General Practice – Added service Costs of Teaching (GP ACT) in the UK) to meet the service costs of community-based teaching.*
 4. *Although the Department has served as a flagship for new academic activities at the Tallaght site, this move has not yet fully realised the benefits intended and suffers somewhat from the perceived isolation from the main campus. In our view, progress at the Tallaght site would be supported, not only by additional academic capacity, but also simple practical measures to improve links with the main campus, including better library facilities and a modest base at Trinity for campus-based activities.'*

4. RESPONSES FROM THE DEPARTMENT AND DEAN OF FACULTY

The Dean of Health Sciences expressed appreciation to the reviewers for raising important issues in the review. He notes that some recommendations can be addressed within the context of ongoing curricular changes, but others will present significant difficulties due to insufficient funding levels.

In reference to the reviewers' comments about the relative under-funding and under-staffing in the department compared to the UK, the Dean points out that the staffing levels in the Department are similar to other departments in the School of Physic. However, they are below the levels in other Irish Medical Schools. The Dean explains *'Increased staffing can only be addressed with long term solutions based on increased support from Government and external sources'*. In addition, the Dean recommends that *'more detailed consideration must be given to the funding of staffing and income derived from the general practice associated with the Department.'*

Regarding the MSc programme, the Dean states that the reviewers' comments *'do not give sufficient recognition of the staff contributions on what was an innovative and very valuable programme'*. Nevertheless, he notes that issues raised by the reviewers have already been acted upon and the MSc in Community Health has been suspended. A new masters programme in Global Health is being developed and may offer opportunities for this

department to make a contribution from the public health perspective. In addition, the Dean states that it is important to recognise '*the significant influence this Department has had in relation to national health issues*'.

In relation to comments regarding headship of department, the Dean notes that this '*raises the matter of size and viability of smaller departments and needs further consideration in the context of wider reforms*'.

In response to the reviewers' comments regarding general practice-based teaching and the teaching of public health, the Department agrees that the time devoted to these subjects is inadequate and notes that similar criticisms have been made by the Medical Council in its latest review of the School of Physic. In response, the Department is working with the Dean to *redress this imbalance in the medical school curriculum and to expand primary care and public health*. Specific curriculum proposals for each year of the programme are under development, and will require the recruitment of approximately 25 practices that will work with the Department to develop the undergraduate curriculum.

The reviewers recommended a "thematic approach" to research which may be difficult as research funding in primary care and public health is parsimonious when compared to molecular medicine. Moreover, establishing a post-doctoral stream will always be difficult because Ph.D.s can easily find jobs elsewhere.

In relation to its location, the Department notes that the move to Tallaght has created significant challenges and it asserts the importance of the Department continuing to have a modest base on the College Green Campus.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS TO COUNCIL

In addition to the Department addressing the detailed recommendations outlined in the reviewers' report, the following recommendations are made to Council in light of the reviewers' report and the responses from the Department and the Dean:

- (a) that the Department should:
 - 1. Build on its strong research contribution to a range of public health issues by developing an integrated research plan for the whole department.
 - 2. Continue to develop programmes for the further expansion and integration of public health and general practice elements into the medical curriculum.
 - 3. With the suspension of the MSc in Community Health, re-focus its energies on research and seek to expand the number of postgraduate research students and postgraduate research fellows.

- (b) that the Faculty should:
 - 1. Increase the proportion of the curriculum devoted to public health and general practice in line with the recommendations of the reviewers, the Medical Council review, and practice in comparable medical schools elsewhere.
 - 2. In light of comments made by reviewers regarding succession, the Dean should work with the Department to develop a staffing plan.
 - 3. Continue to make the case for a new funding model along the lines of the SIFT scheme in the United Kingdom.
 - 4. Address the issue of small size of departments in the Faculty in the context of current considerations of the need for academic re-structuring in College.

- (c) that the College should:
 - 1. Support the Department and other departments and units in their establishment of a new College base at the Adelaide & Meath Hospital, incorporating the National Children's Hospital.
 - 2. Actively lobby the government for adequate funding for the education of medical students.
 - 3. Support the Faculty's reform of the undergraduate curriculum as it moves from a six to a five year programme.

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