

Quality Assurance / Quality Improvement  
Programme for Academic Units

Peer Review Group Report  
for the

Geography Department

2008

St Patrick's College  
Drumcondra  
Dublin 9

Prof. Des McCafferty, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick (Chair)  
Dr. Margaret Keane, St. Mary's University College, Belfast  
Dr. Jones Irwin, St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra  
Dr. Yvonne Whelan, University of Bristol

# 1. Profile of the Department

## Location of the Unit

The Geography Department no longer has a dedicated base. It was formerly housed in what is known as the 'Geography Room', which is now a space shared with other departments in the College. While the Head of Department's Office is located next to this room, the rest of the staff is based in a number of dispersed offices across the College campus: Block C (1 staff member in a shared office); Block E (3 staff members); Merville (1 staff member). At present, there is no accommodation available for the part-time staff or for graduate students. In addition to the dispersed staff offices, there is an administrative office in the D-Block which handles the submission of student assignments and is shared with three other departments.

## Staff

The staff of the department comprises 6 full-time permanent academic staff, 2 of whom are senior lecturers, two lecturers and two assistant lecturers. In the current year there are 6 part-time staff members who are involved in unit teaching, field work, and the delivery of module-associated tutorials. The department also avails of the technical services offered by the College.

## Product / Processes

The department delivers two undergraduate programmes; a Bachelor of Education (BEd) and a Bachelor of Arts (BA). It also offers research degrees to Masters and Doctoral level. At present there is no taught MA programme in the department, although there is potential to establish an inter-disciplinary taught Masters degree across various subject areas in the Humanities.

The staff offers a broad suite of courses spanning both human and physical geography, with a clear bias towards the former which is largely a product of staffing and resources.

In the 2007/08 academic year there are 274 BEd students taking geography and 160 students taking geography on the BA programme.

# 2. The Self-Assessment Process

## Summary

An internal quality review of the Geography Department at St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, was undertaken from September 2007 to February 2008. The resulting report represents the findings of the Geography Department's self-assessment and is divided into eleven main sections, based on a College-wide template, plus appendices. These sections deal with a full range of department related issues, from an overview of the department's history and operational structure (including academic staff workloads), planning and evaluation issues, an analysis of the BEd and BA programmes offered by the department, quality assessment, teaching and learning, scholarship and research, staffing and accommodation issues (including a SWOT analysis outlined below), an outline department plan and an evaluation of how this plan is integrated into the College's Strategic Plan (2006-10).

## Development

Dr Ruth McManus agreed in September 2007 to act as the departmental co-ordinator with responsibility for collating and compiling information for the Self-Assessment Report. Initially, information was collated from Geography Department staff via circulation of templates covering Staff Profile, Course Details and CV. An Away Day was held on 12-13<sup>th</sup> November 2007, with Professor Muredach Dynan acting as facilitator. There followed a collation of information on departmental structures, policies and practices via individual questionnaires with full and part-time members of the Geography Department. Finally, the draft self-assessment report was circulated to the Quality Promotion Committee, and feedback was incorporated into the final report following a departmental meeting and discussion.

## SWOT Analysis

The departmental self-assessment report looks in detail at the full range of department related issues, as outlined above. In Section 9 of the report, and on the basis of the analysis in the report to this point, the department develops its own SWOT analysis. With regard to Strengths, the department identifies a collegial atmosphere, a positive attitude and relationship amongst students and staff, a gender balance and openness to innovation in teaching, and a significant research contribution relative to the small size of the department.

The SWOT analysis divides Weaknesses into two sub-sets: 'weaknesses that can be rectified within present resources' and 'weaknesses determined by deficient resources'. In the former category, reference is made to the demands on students and expectations of their work, with the attendant issue of the department being perceived as a 'hard department'. It is noted that, amongst some students, there may be the perception of a lack of relevance of the academic course within the BEd programme, while the BA is sometimes seen by Arts students as having an inferior status to the BEd. Within the category of 'weaknesses determined by deficient resources', reference is made to the lack of a taught postgraduate programme, limited numbers of research students and a lack of support structures, e.g. limited secretarial assistance.

Opportunities for the department are identified as the arrival of new staff, synergies between departments within the College, and external research linkages, e.g. Foras Feasa. Possible threats to the department are outlined as the uncertain future of academic subjects within the BEd (as suggested in the Kellaghan Report, 2002) and issues of morale, due to increasing workload and pressures of administration.

## Outline Departmental Plan

In Section 10 of the Report, the department outlines a provisional plan in terms of four key areas – recommendations for programmes and teaching, measures to enhance research, changes to management structure, and improving the departmental profile. With regard to programmes and teaching, reference is made to the need to develop and further enhance fieldwork provision at all levels, the need to evolve new courses and themes, to relate content more directly to primary and secondary teaching and to avoid over-dependence on part-time staff. In order to enhance research, the department will explore the possibility of introducing mentors, seek to introduce a postgraduate programme (if resources allow or are added to) and actively seek increased College support for research leave. In terms of changes to management structures, reference is made to increased communication with part-time staff and the development of a regular schedule of timetabled departmental

meetings. Finally, in terms of improving the departmental profile, reference is made to the possibility of a departmental research seminar.

### **3. The Peer Review Group Process**

#### Site Visit Programme

The Peer Review visit began at 9am on Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> March and concluded on Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> March in the mid-afternoon. After a welcome by the Dean of Research and Humanities and an introduction to members of the department, the Director of Quality Promotion briefed the Group. The four members of the PRG had two lengthy discussion sessions at the beginning and end of the visit, and during the first of these it was agreed that Professor Des McCafferty would act as Chair and that the activities of the visit would be undertaken collectively. In between those meetings the reviewers, as a group, were given a tour of the facilities and carried out all the scheduled meetings. They met with the Head of Department and permanent academic staff, collectively and individually, representatives of students from each year and from both BA and BEd degree pathways (including mature students), former students, employers of BA and BEd geography graduates, and the College Careers Officer. The Group also met the senior College management team: the College President, the Secretary Bursar and, in the absence of the Registrar, the Assistant Registrar. All meetings took place in the Belvedere Dining Room of St Patrick's College. Further details of the programme for the site visit are given in Appendix 1.

Two members of the academic staff conducted the PRG on a tour of the facilities. These included the teaching spaces used for lectures, tutorials and practicals, the A/V facilities, storage facilities, departmental resources and one of the staff offices. They also visited the College library, open-access computer lab, and the reprographic centre. At the request of the PRG an unscheduled visit was made to the Departmental Office. Issues arising were discussed at lunch and coffee breaks. The Director of Quality Promotion hosted a dinner at 6.30pm on Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> March.

#### Overview of the Site Visit

We met with a wide range of groups and individuals during the visit and are satisfied that the information provided, both in the self-assessment report and during our visit, has enabled us to get a well-rounded view of the Department of Geography and its activities within the institutional context of St. Patrick's College. The Peer Review Group would like to thank the Geography Department for the comprehensive and informative self-assessment report which covered all aspects of the Geography Department's programmes and provided a variety of subjects for discussion. Similarly, we wish to acknowledge the organisation that went into ensuring that, over the course of our two-day visit, we had the opportunity to meet all the relevant stakeholder groups and individuals. We would like to record our gratitude to the many people who gave their time to these meetings and responded with unfailing courtesy, openness and generosity to our enquiries. Finally, we thank the College authorities and the staff of the Quality Promotion Unit, in particular Sharon King and Dáire Keogh, for their support throughout our visit, and for being on-hand at all times to deal with our queries and requests.

### Comments on the Site Visit

The liaison provided by the Quality Promotion Office was very helpful both before and during the visit, and the liaison that the Geography Department provided during the review was excellent. The Peer Review Group would have liked more time, both to consider the self-assessment report and accompanying appendices prior to the visit, and to digest and reflect on material provided during the visit, such as the findings of the student survey. The Group did not see the template for our report until the second day of our visit, which meant that our discussions with the individuals and groups that we met were not directed to all of the headings in the report template as closely as they might otherwise have been. This in turn is reflected in this report in the greater attention accorded to certain topics as compared to others. The timetable for the visit was intensive and left little time for discussion and report writing.

### Methodology

The PRG assembled its information from the Self-Assessment Report (SAR), course booklets, and departmental website. Appendices to the SAR included the CVs of all members of academic staff, the departmental Strategic Plan 2002-2006, student surveys, student course evaluations, an analysis of First Destinations of Geography Graduates, and other departmental information. A number of other documents were quickly made available on request. The Group discussed the SAR and agreed that all members of the Group would be present at each meeting, to listen, to ask their own questions, and to keep their own notes. Between meetings, findings were summarized and discussed, and issues to be pursued identified. In preparation for the Exit Presentation, which was made by Professor McCafferty, findings and recommendations were grouped according to the Review Group Report headings.

The tasks involved in the compilation of the Peer Review Group Report were shared between the group members

### Review Group's View of the Self-Assessment Report

The Self-Assessment process was carried out in the months during which the Head of Department was on sick leave and a new permanent member of staff was being inducted. The department is to be commended for taking the initiative in bringing in an external facilitator. The detailed Self-Assessment Report and Appendices which followed the College guidelines provided a thorough account and gave us valuable information in conducting our review of the department. It is clear that the SWOT analysis helped to sharpen the focus on the present and to identify future priorities. We became aware, however, of concerns within the department about the process for compiling the self-assessment report. We would have liked to be able to explore this matter in more detail.

## **4. Findings of the Review Group**

### Overview

Throughout the course of our visit we were impressed by the enthusiasm, dedication and commitment of staff in the Geography Department, each of whom makes a significant contribution to a wide-ranging, interesting, and relevant teaching programme that provides a solid grounding in contemporary geography and clearly enthuses and engages the students. The department maintains very high standards in teaching and assessment, and is to be particularly commended on its innovative pedagogical approaches, including the use of active learning, online resources and information technologies in which it has been somewhat of a pioneer in St. Patrick's

College. Alongside the demanding teaching programme delivered, it is evident that staff are involved in a diverse range of research projects and external collaborations.

Despite the challenges of this wide and varied workload, it was evident from our meetings with the different groups of highly articulate students, both past and present, that the staff of the Geography Department maintains a long tradition of being highly accessible and responsive to students. The students offered very useful insights into the workings of the department, and were clear and cogent in the expression of their views. They were uniformly positive about the approachability of staff and remarked on the stimulating, supportive and welcoming atmosphere in the Department of Geography.

### Organisation and Management of the Department

There is a strong, mutually supportive and collegial atmosphere among staff in the department, and this has allowed it to function well through recent adjustments in personnel, course development and review. All staff members share a profound commitment to the fulfilment of departmental responsibilities, and operate within a tradition of a caring 'open door' style of management. The current Head of Department took up post in 2004 when the previous Head, Dr Michael Dillon, retired after more than forty years service. A system of 'year heads', which was already in place, was bolstered by the addition of assistant year heads for the large numbers in Years 1 and 2, so as to ensure students had continuing close contact with a member of staff. It is to the great credit of this large department that students commend the flow of information through handbooks, notice boards, announcements at tutorials and lectures, email shots, as well as on Moodle.

It is the responsibility of the Head of Department to manage the department. Other staff members report to him within the College line management structure. In turn, the Head implements the decisions taken by the department and reports to College Management, as appropriate. The main administrative support system consists of one administrative assistant who is shared with three other departments, English, Mathematics and Biology. It appears that staff make only limited use of this service – assignments are submitted through it – though the reasons for this are not clear.

While departmental meetings take place on a regular basis, day-to-day running of the department, which is the responsibility of the Head, is dealt with in consultation with relevant staff. Informal communication takes place via email or face-to-face. While there is transparency in teaching workloads, the means by which various administrative roles and responsibilities are allocated may not be entirely clear, and at present there appears to be no formal mechanism in place for assigning or rotating positions of responsibility. The field trip committee, for example, is an *ad hoc* group on which more than half of the staff serves.

As a result of the rapid expansion of the department in recent years, both in terms of student numbers and the staff complement (including part-time staff), the complexity of departmental administration has increased significantly. At the same time, more onerous requirements in the area of record keeping and accountability have added to the administrative burden. In the past, when the department consisted of just three permanent staff members, management and administration operated quite satisfactorily in an informal manner, but the scale and scope of the department's activities is now such that a more formal approach is necessary. This applies both to the delegation of departmental administration, and the co-ordination of activities. The increase in number of staff, both full-time and part-time, has impacted also on the information flow and communications within the department. There are currently

some problems in this regard in respect of top-down, bottom-up and lateral flows of information among staff. Although we did not speak to part-time staff, the feeling was expressed that there is a need to improve communication (in both directions) between them and the full-time staff and, in general, to better integrate them into the staff team. However, it is recognised that the contractual arrangements under which part-time tutors are employed create problems of communication.

### Planning and Evaluation

The department is currently working within the framework of its 2002-2006 Strategic Plan whilst awaiting the outcome of this Review. The Group commends the department on its commitment and success in meeting its objectives, but notes that the College Strategic Plan has been updated to meet new challenges. The department convenes *ad hoc* meetings for longer term planning purposes. Long-term planning is not easy in a context of changing personnel (due to comings and goings of part-time staff) and fluctuation in student numbers. Nevertheless, it would seem timely at this juncture for the department to again give some consideration to strategic issues up to 2010.

It is to the department's credit that in 2006-07 it introduced a system of student evaluation of courses which the Peer Review Group endorses. At the end of each semester, students are asked to complete questionnaires about their experience of the geography programme. Oral feedback is also welcomed. It is clear that the department is open and responsive to the feedback received in this way, as well as through more informal channels. Information derived from the student survey was made available to the PRG.

### Programmes and Courses

The Geography Department offers a broad suite of courses in human and environmental geography, with the main emphasis placed on the former following a policy decision made a number of years ago. The range of topics covered is impressive for a department of its size, and there is a clear emphasis on topicality, and relevance. The geographical issues addressed range from the global to the local, with coverage of both rural and urban environments, and contemporary as well as historical landscapes. In addition to traditional lecture courses there are dedicated fieldwork and methods modules. In general the programme is designed with employability in mind and this is recognised by both current and former students.

There is an option within the programme for final year BA students to undertake a research project module in lieu of a taught module. However, up-take of this option has been relatively low in recent years, and only one student in the current final year class has chosen it. Because of the importance of independent research at undergraduate level as a preparation for postgraduate study, we would like to see the department explore ways of increasing the up-take of the project. In principle, we would also like to see BEd students having the option of taking the methods and fieldwork modules currently available to BA students only.

The department clearly shows excellence in teaching, and makes use of a range of settings, including large group lectures, practical classes and smaller group tutorials and seminars which are staffed by both full-time and part-time staff. Innovative teaching methodologies are employed throughout the programme. Excellent use is made of digital pedagogies, and student engagement through active learning methods, where used, is high. The long tradition of fieldwork and fieldwork methodologies in the department is now being strengthened. The PRG commends

the move to include an assessed fieldwork component in an increased number of modules.

The methods of assessment used by the department are varied and include essays, reports, quizzes, short questions, reflective journals, reports, open book exams, map work, newspaper analysis, and photographic analysis among others. These test a range of generic and transferable skills. While students are provided with feedback on coursework, the view was expressed that more detailed and more timely feedback on a feedback sheet was required. However, it is recognized that improvements in this regard depend very much on availability of staff time.

The Peer Review Group notes that there has been a decline over the last five years in the number of undergraduate students. This is mainly due to a contraction of BEd numbers, though even on the BA side there has been a decline in the up-take rate. While some concern has been expressed about this trend, both in the self-assessment report and orally to the PRG, we are of the view that it should not be a cause for worry to a large department. Rather, the reduction of numbers may give a bit more space to introduce some of the initiatives suggested above and in our recommendations.

From our discussions with students we became aware of issues in regard to both the status and perception of the academic subject within the BEd programme and the status of the BA programme itself vis-à-vis the BEd. These issues are also recognized by the department in its own SWOT analysis, and while they are College-wide rather than geography-specific, nonetheless we feel that geography would need to address its own specific vulnerabilities in this regard into the future.

Finally, with regard to postgraduate taught programmes and postgraduate research students, the department has already acknowledged a certain weakness. Further development in both these regards would be beneficial to the department, although the Peer Review Group accepts that resourcing plays an important role in this area.

### Scholarship and Research

Notwithstanding the demanding teaching work of the department, members of staff are research-active across a wide range of research fields. The Peer Review Group commends the department for its high level of participation in research, and its active contribution to the College's research profile. Staff members have produced a range of research outputs, including books, scholarly monographs, refereed journal articles, book chapters and textbooks. A number of staff members are also active members of various learned societies and geographical bodies, and have established research links within and beyond the university, in national and international arenas. Their work has formed the basis of media coverage on contemporary Ireland.

The department also deserves great credit for recently graduating its first PhD student. It has enrolled two more, one of them full-time. Further development of the postgraduate research degree programme would enhance the research output of the department and, if combined with a system of postgraduate teaching assistantships, would help to ease teaching pressures arising from tutorial and practical provision.

The Peer Review Group recognises that research has largely to be done in the researcher's own time, notwithstanding the effort made by the Head of Department, through judicious timetabling, to facilitate research release for members of the department. While commending this system of 'rolling' research leave, the PRG recognises that it is dependent on the goodwill of all staff, and to be fully effective

requires adequate advance planning. The Group commends the various College supports that are in place to foster research excellence and facilitate conference attendance. One staff member in the department has successfully secured one of the research fellowships that are provided on a College-wide competitive basis. Given that these supports have been introduced relatively recently, there appears to be a case for increasing the number available, at least in the short term.

### Social and Community Services

The Peer Review Group recognises the substantial contribution made by members of the Geography Department to a wide range of social and community services, both within the confines of St. Patrick's College and beyond it. Staff members are actively involved in numerous groups and college-wide committees, thereby making a very valuable contribution to the development of the College. The department has organised a range of social and cultural activities for particular groups of students, including mature students. They also have had a major involvement in the development of geography at national level, and over many years have been leaders in the teaching of the subject. This service to the discipline has been provided through their scholarship and publication activity, as well as through active membership and leadership roles in various national and international organisations and editorial boards. Among other notable contributions to the wider community beyond the College they have organised and contributed to a number of very successful national conferences, as well as public talks and lectures, including nationally broadcast lecture series. It is fair to say that the department's profile has been disproportionate to its size and resource base.

### Staffing, Accommodation and Resources

As noted above, the department has undergone a significant increase in staffing in recent years. However, the staffing level remains quite low by international standards, and the student to staff ratio is a multiple of that which obtains in the UK, for example, and high even in comparison to university-level departments of geography in Ireland. The very high student to staff ratio is a major problem for a subject that must contain a strong practical component. In some respects, the department is a victim of its own success in attracting students, which is attributable, in turn, both to the quality of the programme and the professional dedication of the staff delivering it.

In part the response to the increasing demands has been to appoint part-time staff, and we note management's signal that claims for part-time assistance from the Geography Department are likely to be favourably regarded. However, part-time staffing should only be a stop-gap measure, and regardless of the quality of the personnel employed on this basis, it gives rise to issues in a number of areas including student access to part-time lecturers outside of class-contact time, the integration of part-time staff into the full range of departmental activities, the increased administrative burden in relation to recruitment and orientation of short-term staff, and the difficulty of engaging in effective long-term strategic planning.

Although staff felt that the provision of physical resources by the College was generally satisfactory, and that any reasonable request is met within the limits of budgetary constraints, they raised a number of legitimate concerns about facilities which also became very evident to us on our site visit. There is no doubt but that there are several deficiencies in accommodation that impact adversely on the activities of the department.

The first of these concerns the teaching accommodation. It is regrettable that the department has effectively lost the exclusive use of the Geography Room, and we would urge that the restoration and development of such a space be given active consideration. Apart from anything else, it is important that students have a space that they can identify with the department. To accommodate full class teaching, the large lecture theatres are used. Although facilities in lecture rooms, including IT facilities, have been recently upgraded, the Group is concerned that these need to be further improved. In particular, there is a need to have computers and data projectors in all the main lecture rooms. Lecturers should be able to bring files on USB memory sticks rather than carrying a laptop as at present. Many rooms that are used for classes do not provide a stimulating learning environment. Finally, some consideration should be given to the development of laboratory facilities to support both teaching and research in physical geography.

The Peer Review Group noted that staff offices are widely dispersed throughout the campus and consider that this is a factor that militates against the development of teamwork and the benefits of informal and unplanned interactions among staff members. One member of staff has an office space in an annex of a teaching room, one is sharing an office, and another is in a separate building.

While a number of these concerns may be addressed in the context of the new building programme at the College, in the interim we have listed a number of key recommendations later in this report.

## **5. Overall Analysis of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Concerns**

The following analysis highlights the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and matters of concern that we have become most aware of during the course of our visit.

### Strengths

- There is a strong sense of collegiality and *esprit de corps* among the staff of the department.
- The department has a very strong commitment to teaching, and to delivering courses to the highest standard.
- Staff members are enthusiastic about their teaching, and seek to innovate in course design and pedagogies.
- Collectively, the staff offers a wide range of subject-matter and pedagogical expertise, and this is reflected in an interesting and varied undergraduate programme.
- Staff members are research active and their scholarly contribution is recognised within Ireland and beyond.
- There is a long tradition of student-centered education in the department, and the staff is seen by students as very committed and approachable.

### Weaknesses

- There is a heavy reliance on part-time staff, which presents difficulties in relation to student access outside of class-contact time and integration of part-time staff into the full range of departmental activities. It also creates an additional administrative burden of recruitment and orientation of short-term staff, and difficulties in effective long-term strategic planning.

- There is a heavy administrative burden on academic staff, especially the Head of Department, arising from large student numbers and the practical nature of the subject.
- The absence of a system for the formal exchange of information is reducing effective communication between members within the department.
- There does not appear to be a formal system for ongoing review of the programme and of the overall Strategic Plan.
- Students express some reservation about arrangements for feedback on assignments.
- There is an absence of a taught Masters programme due to current staffing levels.
- The lack of dedicated storage facilities for a practical subject is a disadvantage.

### Opportunities

- Geography can be developed as a subject with high employability through building of IT and other transferable skills.
- It can further develop its track record of e-technologies in teaching and learning and research.
- Field work can be used to enthuse students and build their curiosity and skills, but can also be used as a marketing tool.
- There are opportunities for developing both taught and research postgraduate degree programmes, the latter to contribute to teaching through an appropriate assistantship scheme.
- The staff have strong research and pedagogic interests.
- 'Rolling release' offers a mechanism to advance research.

### Concerns

- The future of academic subjects within the BEd degree programme is under discussion.
- Geography has a reputation as a 'hard' subject with much work attached.
- There is pressure on the department to stretch across too many activities.
- There is a threat to morale arising from possible burn-out and the dissipation of staff energies in repetitive teaching at the expense of scholarship and developmental activities.

## **6. Recommendations for Improvement**

The following recommendations are put forward for consideration in the knowledge that in most cases their implementation will have resource implications. We are acutely aware of the unfavourable student to staff ratio under which the Geography Department labours and urge that the resources to facilitate these improvements be made available. However, we recognize that this may not be possible in the short term.

To facilitate planning of quality improvement measures, each recommendation has been qualified by an indication of priority as follows:

- A recommendation that is important *and* requires urgent action.
- A recommendation that is important, but can (or perhaps must) be addressed on a more extended timescale.

- A recommendation which merits serious consideration but which is not considered to be critical to the quality of the ongoing activities in the department.

Additionally, the PRG has attempted to indicate the level(s) of the College where action is required, whether Department, Faculty, or College Executive/Senior Management. However, it must be recognized that while certain actions need to be led by the department itself, the resource (including time) constraints referred to above mean that many of the recommendations identified as requiring department action in fact will also need support at College level.

The recommendations are organised using the same divisions as in section 4 above.

#### Organisation and Management of the Department

- We recommend that a regular schedule of formal departmental meetings be introduced. These meetings should have formal agendas, with standing items as appropriate, and the minutes should be taken by the Departmental secretarial staff, in order not to further increase the administrative burden of the Head of Department. [Department: important *and* requires urgent action]
- The management structure, administrative roles and responsibilities need to be made more transparent and communicated to all staff, particularly in the light of recent appointments. The identification and designation of the relevant areas of administrative responsibility is in the first instance a task for the Head of Department, and the allocation of areas to staff members should be undertaken by him in consultation with members of the Department. [Department: important *and* requires urgent action]
- Administrative responsibilities should be allocated on the basis of an agreed and transparent framework for measurement of workloads that takes account of class contact hours, supervision, research, and other service activities. [Department: important *and* requires urgent action]
- Part-time lecturers need to be integrated more effectively into the staff team. They need an appropriate work space or base within the College and a mentor from the permanent staff. While we recognise that the employment of part-time staff in the current academic year is anomalously high, we feel that it is not desirable for a part-time staff member to be the sole convenor of a module. Consideration might be given, therefore, to matching permanent staff with part-time. Coordination of the module should rest with the permanent member of staff. [Department: extended timescale]
- The reasons why the existing secretarial service appears to be underutilised should be investigated, and mechanisms put in place to increase usage. [Department: important *and* requires urgent action]

#### Planning and Evaluation

- Now that formal student evaluations of the geography programme are being undertaken, the department needs to develop and extend the evaluation system based around them. The Group recommends that the staff-student consultative committee be revived as a mechanism for consideration of, and response to, the feedback received. The students should also be provided with a summary of the chief findings, and how their concerns (if any) will be addressed. This Committee should have at least one minuted meeting each

semester and should operate as a forum for the discussion of academic related matters. [Department: important *and* requires urgent action]

- The department may wish to consider introducing, in the longer term, an online system of course evaluation, the administration of which should be one of the department's designated areas of responsibility. Evaluation proformas should be structured in such a way as to provide meaningful information that will improve the quality of the courses delivered. [Department: extended timescale]
- A review of the department's strategic plan and action plan should be undertaken as soon as possible, and formal provision should be made for on-going review on an annual basis. [Department: extended timescale]

### Programmes and Courses

- An agreed schedule of assignment tasks and assignment submission dates should be issued at the start of each semester. This should be available to all staff and students, and should clarify submission procedures and penalties for late submission. [Department: important *and* requires urgent action]
- Internal moderation should be used to check fairness and consistency of marking across modules. A small sample of scripts should be double marked. [Department: extended timescale]
- Feedback to students should be provided in a timely manner using the agreed 'feedback sheet'. This should be standardised and matched to the assignment criteria to ensure transparency and consistency in marking across modules. The annotated assignments and completed feedback sheets should be available for collection by students within a reasonable timeframe agreed by the department. A copy of the feedback sheets should be retained by the department. [Department: important *and* requires urgent action]
- Permanent members of staff should liaise closely with part-time staff in the delivery of the undergraduate programmes. There is a sense that part-time staff may be 'out on a limb' and need to be more fully integrated (see also recommendation under Organisation and Management). [Department: extended timescale]
- Further develop the departmental fieldwork programme subject to budgetary constraints. In particular, consideration should be given to the re-introduction of residential fieldtrips, about which former students were particularly enthusiastic. [Department: extended timescale]
- Carry out a review of material covered with BA students during the TP period, in order to counter the perception among students that teaching during this period is merely 'marking time'. [Department: extended timescale]
- Continue to develop the research Masters and PhD programmes. [Department: extended timescale]
- Investigate the possibility of setting up an inter-departmental taught Masters programme, subject to resource limitations [Department/Faculty: extended timescale]

### Research and Scholarship

- While there is no formal departmental policy on research, the department should consider formulating a research action plan in order to harness more fully the research strengths of staff. It should identify potential for collaborative research links within the department, College and beyond. [Department/Faculty: extended timescale]
- Greater support should be put in place to provide staff with information regarding internal and external funding opportunities and more practical assistance with research grant applications. [Faculty/College: important *and* requires urgent attention]
- Newly appointed/junior members of staff should be actively supported to develop their research capacity. Consideration should be given to the implementation of a mentoring system, which would probably be most feasible on a College-wide basis. [Department/Faculty: extended timescale]
- .
- While the department is to be commended for the system of 'rolling release' for research, forward planning of the schedule would allow members of staff to build the anticipated semester of release from teaching into their research timetable. It is recognised that this will always be subject to circumstances. [Department: extended timescale]
- The College should offer more research fellowships. [College: important *and* requires urgent action]
- The department may wish to consider setting up a research seminar series (perhaps with other subject areas) in order to further enhance the research culture. Department/Faculty: extended timescale]

### Social and Community Services

- Continue to forge links with, and provide educational outreach activities for, schools both locally and nationally. [Department: extended timescale]
- Build on the strong outreach profile that the department members individually and collectively have created with a range of organizations and communities in the local area and further afield. [Department: extended timescale]
- Consider outreach as one of the departmental responsibilities. [Department: extended timescale]

### Staffing, Accommodation and Resources

- An additional member of staff should be appointed in place of part-time staff. [College: important *and* requires urgent action]
- Introduce a Teaching Assistantship scheme in conjunction with the development of the research postgraduate programme in order to alleviate the burden of tutorials and practical classes. [College: important *and* requires urgent action]
- Suitable office space should be provided for all current and incoming staff. [College: important *and* requires urgent action]

- Part-time staff and graduate students should be allocated suitable work-spaces. [College: important *and* requires urgent action]
- An in-situ PC with networked internet access should be installed in all large-group teaching spaces so that lecturers no longer need to bring lap-tops to lectures. [College: important *and* requires urgent action]
- Appropriate black-out blinds need to be provided in all teaching spaces. [College: important *and* requires urgent action]
- Facilities for small-group teaching need upgrading. The tutorial spaces that we viewed are cramped and under-equipped. [College: important *and* requires urgent action]
- A lab space for physical geography should be provided and equipped, and the stock of mobile equipment for geographical fieldwork expanded, given the numbers of students in the department. [College: important *and* requires urgent action]
- Dedicated storage space is a necessary resource for a practical subject and should be provided. [College: important *and* requires urgent action]
- As a practical subject, the department should have technical support, perhaps initially on a shared basis with other departments. [College: extended timescale]

## **Appendix 1: Timetable for the Peer Review Group Visit**

### **Tuesday 11 March**

#### **9.00am**

Welcome by Dr Mary Shine Thompson, Dean of Research and Humanities.  
Briefing by the Quality Promotion Coordinator, Dr Daire Keogh.

#### **9.30 – 11.30**

Consideration of Self-Assessment Report

#### **11.30 – 12.15**

Visit to departmental facilities, accompanied by Dr Susan Hegarty

#### **12.15 – 13.15**

Lunch in Dining Hall.

#### **13.15 – 14.15**

Meetings with stakeholders – two groups.  
First from 13.15 to 13.45. Second from 13.45 to 14.15.

#### **14.15 – 15.30**

Meeting with members of department:

14.15 Dr Almar Barry

14.40 Mr Pat Kelly

15.05 Dr Gerry O'Reilly

#### **15.30 – 15.45**

Coffee break

#### **15.45 – 16.30**

Meeting with representative group of BEd students

#### **16.30**

Meeting with College President, Dr Pauric Travers, Registrar, Ms Olivia Bree and Secretary Bursar, Mr Martin Ward.

#### **17.00**

Group identify aspects to be clarified and finalise tasks for the following day

#### **18.30**

Dinner

### **Wednesday 12 March**

#### **9.00am**

Convening of group

#### **9.15 – 10.00**

Meeting with Head of Geography Department.

#### **10.00 – 10.30**

Meeting with the SU President.

**10.30**

Coffee break

**10.45 – 11.30**

Meeting with representative group of BA students

**11.30**

Meeting with members of department:

11.30 Dr Ruth McManus

11.55 Dr Susan Hegarty

**12.20**

Meeting with Head of Geography Department.

**12.30 – 13.30**

Lunch

**13.30 - 16.00**

Preparation of draft report

**16.00**

Exit Presentation