



## **National College of Art & Design**

**Coláiste Náisiúnta Ealaíne is Deartha  
A Recognised College of the National University of Ireland  
Coláiste Aitheanta D'Ollscoil na hÉireann**

**Quality Assurance Review in the Department of  
Core Studies  
2006-2007**

## **Peer Review Report**



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**Quality Improvement/Quality Assurance**  
**Peer Review Group Report**  
**Department of Core Studies**  
**Academic Year 2006/07**

**A Self-assessment Report was undertaken by Core Studies in the academic year 2005/2006. The Peer Review site visit took place on 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> November 2006.**

**Members of the Peer Review Group:**

1. Cynthia Deane, Options Consulting – Independent Chair
2. Dr. Denise Gray, University of Ulster
3. Russell Mills, UK
4. Dr. Niamh O'Sullivan, Head of Faculty of Visual Culture, NCAD

**1. Timetable of the site visit**

<u>Day</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Time</u>	<u>Action</u>
<b>Day 1</b>			
Tuesday 28 <sup>th</sup> November	Fallon & Byrne Restaurant	6.30 p.m.	PRG meet with Nicky Saunders, QA/QI Officer for an informal dinner to confirm schedule and roles of each member of PRG and agree format of review for next two days

<u>Day</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Time</u>	<u>Action</u>
<b>Day 2</b>			
Wednesday 29 <sup>th</sup> November	Oak Room	9.15 – 9.30 a.m.	PRG meet with Nicky Saunders, QA/QI Officer and prepare for day
Wednesday 29 <sup>th</sup> November	Oak Room	9.30 – 9.55 a.m.	PRG meet Director, Colm Ó Briain and Registrar, Ken Langan
Wednesday 29 <sup>th</sup> November	Oak Room	10.00 – 10.30 a.m.	PRG meet Head of Core Studies, Frank Bissette and SAR writer, Joe Wilson
Wednesday 29 <sup>th</sup> November	Oak Room	10.30 – 11.00 a.m.	Tea/Coffee & review of early sessions
Wednesday 29 <sup>th</sup> November	School of Design	11.00 – 12.00 noon	PRG, Head of Department & QA/QI Officer tour Department and related College facilities
Wednesday 29 <sup>th</sup> November	Oak Room	12.00 – 12.50 p.m.	PRG meet Department Staff – Group 1: Patricia McDonnell, Secretary Millie Cullivan, Lecturer Theresa McKenna, EPL Sean Kelleghan, Technical Assistant
Wednesday 29 <sup>th</sup> November	Oak Room	1.00 – 1.30 p.m.	Light lunch with all Staff of Department
Wednesday 29 <sup>th</sup> November	Oak Room	1.30 – 2.00 p.m.	PRG – private review of morning sessions with QA Officer
Wednesday 29 <sup>th</sup> November	Oak Room	2.00 – 2.50 p.m.	PRG meet Department Staff – Group 2: Kirsty McGhie, EPL Mary Cullen, EPL Aisling McLoughlin, P/t Technical Assistant Jackie Cooney, EPL observer
Wednesday 29 <sup>th</sup> November	Oak Room	3.00 – 3.50 p.m.	PRG meet with Department Staff – Group 3: John Waid, EPL Eamonn Connors, EPL Feargal Fitzpatrick, EPL Aonghus Fallon, Technical Assistant
Wednesday 29 <sup>th</sup> November	Oak Room	4.00 – 4.15 p.m.	PRG – private review of sessions with QA Officer T/C
Wednesday 29 <sup>th</sup> November	Oak Room	4.15 – 4.50 p.m.	PRG meet with Student Representatives: Michelle Campion Katie Black David Lunny
Wednesday 29 <sup>th</sup> November	Oak Room	5.00 – 5.30 p.m.	PRG meet with Mick Wilson, Head of Research & P/G Studies
Wednesday 29 <sup>th</sup> November	Oak Room	5.30 – 6.00 p.m.	PRG and QA Officer review sessions and note main issues and commendations for inclusion into report
Wednesday 29 <sup>th</sup> November	The Mermaid Cafe	6.30 p.m.	Dinner with PRG, Head of Core Studies, QA Officer and Joe Wilson

<u>Day</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Time</u>	<u>Action</u>
<b>Day 3</b>			
Thursday 30 <sup>th</sup> November	Board Room	9.15 - 9.30 a.m.	PRG & QA Officer meet to prepare for day
Thursday 30 <sup>th</sup> November	Board Room	9.30 – 10.30 a.m.	PRG meet Heads of Faculty: Dervil Jordan, Faculty of Education Brian Maguire, Faculty of Fine Art Angela Woods, Faculty of Design
Thursday 30 <sup>th</sup> November	Board Room	10.30 – 10.45 a.m.	Tea/Coffee
Thursday 30 <sup>th</sup> November	Board Room	10.45 – 1.00 p.m.	PRG draw up draft report with QA/QI Officer
Thursday 30 <sup>th</sup> November	Board Room	1.00 – 2.00 p.m.	Working Lunch with QA/QI Officer
Thursday 30 <sup>th</sup> November	Board Room	2.00 – 4.30 p.m.	PRG complete draft report
Thursday 30 <sup>th</sup> November	Board Room	4.30 – 5.00 p.m.	PRG present recommendations of draft report to Director, Registrar, Frank Bissette, Joe Wilson and QA Officer

While there was a very full timetable, especially on Wednesday 29 November, the Peer Review Group found that the efficient arrangements made it possible to complete all meetings within the allotted time.

## 2. Peer Review Methodology

The Peer Review Group (PRG) had an independent Chair, Cynthia Deane, who was appointed by the College. Denise Gray acted as the formal *rapporteur* and the other members of the group also took notes during meetings.

At the informal meeting on the evening before the review visit, the group agreed that members would focus on specific areas which would be included in the report:

- Department philosophy, aim and objectives: Cynthia Deane
- Curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment: Russell Mills
- Staffing and staff development: Niamh O'Sullivan
- Facilities and resources: Denise Gray

During the meetings with staff and students, all group members had an opportunity to ask questions so that the above areas were adequately addressed, together with other issues that arose from the self-assessment report. Staff and students were also invited to make additional comments or observations at the end of the meetings if they felt there was something important that the Peer Review Group should know and that they had not had an opportunity to say.

All members of the PRG contributed to the writing of the report. The group worked together on the second day of the review to note commendations and recommendations, which were recorded by the QA/QI officer in draft form. Based on this draft report, the Chair of the PRG made an exit presentation to the Director, Registrar, Head of Core Studies and QA/QI officer at the end of the second day. The QA/QI officer circulated the first draft report to all members of the Group immediately after the visit. Group members amended the draft and the agreed report was then sent to the QA/QI officer who forwarded it to Core Studies and the QA/QI Steering Group.

### 3. Description of the Department of Core Studies

#### 3.1 Mission Statement:

***“To provide a visual investigation programme which is essentially student-centred and driven by an ethos of inclusive thinking in regard to the various areas of Art and Design.”***

#### 3.2 The Role of Core Studies:

First Year Core has the responsibility for:

- admission procedure
- providing a learning programme for a broad-based cohort of applicants
- preparing students for progression to the next levels of BA / BDes degree programmes.

First Year Core functions as interface between the recruitment pool and degree level art and design programmes at NCAD. The course is based on student-centred learning strategies, which are topic-based and broaden the context in which ideas are explored. It seeks to establish art and design practice on a broad base of visual and intellectual enquiry for progression to subsequent levels of study. Students are introduced to processes, skills and materials in a similar context, i.e. as tools of practical investigation and enquiry. The student's individual curiosity and engagement is taken as the starting point for the learning and teaching programme.

The spirit of Core Studies is one of cooperative teamwork. The Core programme is more than the sum of the individual disciplines of each member of staff and their skills lie in their ability to utilise their own specialisations as well as to cross reference methods and potentials of other disciplines.

#### 3.3 Department History:

What is now called “Core Studies” has moved both in name and ideology through various transition phases since 1965. When the college offered a “Diploma” in Art and Design, what is now first year Core was a one-year course called “Pre-Diploma” with its own award, examined both internally and externally. This provided basic preparation for the Diploma courses at NCAD. The title changed to “Foundation Studies” in 1987 when the status of Diplomas was raised to Degree. This was in line with developments in UK and Europe. At this stage the foundation year was a prelude to the degree course, which was four years. However, it was felt that five years in all to obtain a degree plus one/two years for a masters or postgraduate qualification was too long. Foundation then became the first year of all undergraduate degree courses within the college - with the exception of Industrial design and Education (this was because these courses had already been set up within the CAO system). Examination of the course by external examiners ceased. The course was renamed Core Studies in 1989 as an indication of commonality of thought and practice across disciplines and of the course's central position in relation to the degree courses within NCAD.

When the course served as a pre-diploma or foundation year, it performed essentially a *diagnostic role* that enabled students to begin to understand the differences between the various Art and Design courses offered within the college. As pre-diploma the curriculum was largely prescriptive in nature – preparing students for very clearly defined ‘vocational’ courses within the college. Transition to foundation broadened the scope of the course curriculum and was influenced by the developing modes of art and design education at degree level in Europe, the UK and worldwide. This was the beginning of a more questioning approach to visual education including a range of cognitive and conceptual

skills. Degree courses in Art and Design required more from students than simply an understanding of a prescriptive grammar relating to clearly defined products or goals. In order to cope with the developments taking place in Art and Design practice – especially technology and ideology - students had to learn to question traditional procedures in new contexts.

Whilst in theory the foundation qualification from NCAD allowed students to apply to any college in Ireland or indeed anywhere in Europe, students almost exclusively applied to NCAD after the foundation year. With pressure to reduce the length of training for art and design graduates and the consequent rationalisation, foundation became the first year of Art and Design degrees at NCAD and was renamed “Core Studies”. The title is intended to communicate a pedagogic ideology that is common to all areas of art and design. First year Core provides an experience that informs students of the inherent nature of art and design practice as it stands at the moment, thereby allowing them to make informed choices at the end of the Core year. The department begins to provide them with intellectual and practical skills that will help them to cope with the demands of an intense further three years of the degree course and that will equip them with the necessary skills to contribute to the rich and evolving world of professional art and design practice.

#### **4. Preliminary Comments of the Peer Review Group**

The Peer Review Group considers that the Department of Core Studies has significant strengths, especially in the exceptional quality of leadership and teamwork displayed by department staff. Their enthusiasm, commitment and energy are evident both from meetings and from visits to their studios and workshops. There is a high level of support across the college for the work of the department and considerable respect for the way Core Studies prepares students for the later years of the degree programmes.

The self-assessment report in some respects may not have done full justice to the dynamism of the course. The report was more descriptive than analytical, and the PRG considers that the self-assessment process could have been used more effectively to enable the development of a future vision for Core, especially in the context of imminent changes in degree structures.

The PRG commends the decision of College to appoint a new head of department immediately on the retirement of the current head, and it is encouraging to note that the job description for the position was informed by the changes that are imminent.

The PRG wholeheartedly commends the department's integrated multi-disciplinary approach to curriculum design and the recommendations that follow in this report should be viewed in the light of this support and commendation.

During the Peer Review visit, the Peer Review Group became aware that the Core Studies department and the course experience a sense of isolation, both from the faculty structures in the college and from the remaining years of the various undergraduate programmes to which students progress from Core Studies. This is considered to be a bigger issue that needs to be addressed at college level, and the Chair of the PRG will submit a separate report to the college outlining a proposal for change.

## 5. Report of the Peer Review Group (Commendations and Recommendations)

### 5.1. Curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment

The PRG commends the course rationale as outlined in the self-assessment report: *“Preparing students for survival in today’s job market presents new challenges in Art and Design colleges. A lot of innovative industrial and social initiatives come from Art or Design graduates. Many of these graduates work in areas that do not necessarily utilise the particular specialist skills acquired. This is different from the traditional atelier or apprentice models upon which art and design education is based. These evolved from within a durable economic pattern from which the required skills were defined and taught. In the 18th, 19th, or early 20th centuries, for example, becoming a potter or portrait painter required a set of known skills, without which a practitioner would not have been able to survive. The skills required to become successful in Art or Design are far less stable or well defined. This means that students need to be far more self-reflexively aware, resourceful, adaptable, independent, and open-minded than ever before. The fluidity of the job market, and the challenges of the global market have pushed the boundaries beyond what we know well. On the other hand, the new market derives enormous benefits from the traditional practices that we know well. This is not to say, therefore, that the more familiar specialist skills are not needed, merely that the need for independent, self-reflexive, and cross-disciplinary studies has become increasingly important”.*

This is considered to be a very good rationale, not just for Core but for the whole of art & design education. It is evident that this philosophy has shaped the Core curriculum and that it has informed the implementation of learning and teaching approaches across the whole programme. There is a clear vision that the role of Core is not only to provide a basis for the later years of undergraduate study but also a firm foundation for life-long learning.

- 5.1.1. The PRG strongly recommends that a strategy should be developed so that the Core Studies ethos is translated into inter-disciplinary or cross-disciplinary programmes, strengthened across all College structures, which would continue to be available to learners up to degree level. The aspiration to continue the principles of inter-disciplinarity to postgraduate study would make sense only if there is a change in existing undergraduate programmes. The PRG discussed this issue with Heads of Faculty and senior College management and the Chair of the PRG will include a proposal for such a change in a separate report.
- 5.1.2. There should be better collaboration between Core Studies and the faculty structures. As an initial step, it is recommended that the Head of Core Studies should be a member of Faculty Forums and all Faculty Heads should sit on the Core Studies Board.
- 5.1.3. The PRG recommends that the department re-examine the titles of Core Studies modules to reflect more clearly the learning outcomes of each module e.g. Visual Development workshops could more usefully be entitled 2D/3D workshops. In addition, the module titles should be matched to a more coherent and easily understood course diagram and timetable for the students.
- 5.1.4. The PRG recommends that the term “discipline-neutral” be reconsidered because of its possible negative interpretation. The PRG understands the term to denote “fully integrated art & design practice”.
- 5.1.5. There needs to be more clarity and transparency in the documentation for applicants and teachers regarding the assessment criteria for the pre-admission project.
- 5.1.6. The PRG suggests that some elements of Teaching Practice for education students might

take place in Core Studies with department staff providing mentoring support to the students i.e. education students might be enabled to “shadow” Core staff in studio and workshop activities.

- 5.1.7. The PRG commends the inclusive approach adopted by Core Studies in encouraging the participation of mature students. This provides a good basis for looking at how other under-represented groups might be encouraged to attend NCAD and Core Studies is in a good position to work with the Access Officer to undertake outreach activities e.g. to local communities and ethnic minorities.
- 5.1.8. It is recommended that the Core Studies department should engage in more detailed discussion with Visual Culture on curriculum development and implementation, including for example the better integration of Visual Culture in the weekly timetable. The PRG supports the recommendation of the Core Studies department that Visual Culture staff should participate on field trips undertaken by Core Studies students.
- 5.1.9. The PRG supports the suggestion of the Core Studies department that further discussion should take place with Industrial Design with a view to the two departments collaborating on a mutually agreed modular structure to include relevant Industrial Design elective elements.
- 5.1.10. Assessment marks awarded by Core should be accepted for progression by all faculties, in addition, Visual Culture marks should be included in the final Core year result. This will ensure harmonisation of progression across Faculties. In addition, in keeping with common practice with other Higher Education Institutions, all student files and information should be held centrally.

## **5.2 Facilities and Resources**

- 5.2.1. The PRG considers that the main studio and workshop spaces available to the Core Studies department are appropriate, bright and well appointed. However, the sub-standard accommodation in John Street West needs to be addressed on Health and Safety and security grounds. The students have described this accommodation as “scary” and this is totally unacceptable.
- 5.2.2. The PRG recommends that the college should as a priority provide appropriately resourced teaching/lecturing/IT suites, (both PC and MAC) with AV facilities and dedicated technical support. In addition exhibition spaces should be provided. Such facilities would be available not only to the Core Studies department but to other faculties and would be centrally timetabled.
- 5.2.3. The social, cultural, physical and environmental facilities provided for students are not up to the standard of other similar institutions and need to be up-graded.
- 5.2.4. A comfortable and well-appointed hospitality suite with catering facilities and personnel would be a useful addition, not just to the Core Studies department but to all NCAD staff and would facilitate interaction internally and externally.
- 5.2.5. The PRG recommends that adequate resources should be available to the department to support its Quality Improvement Plan, however the Core Studies team needs to develop a prioritised list of requirements.
- 5.2.6. The library is considered to be an excellent resource in terms of its holdings, however the PRG suggests that space and seating for students are inadequate and recommends that these issues be addressed by the college. Other specific areas for development in the library include:
  - More availability of electronic sources

- Increased support for post graduate students and research (more specialist advice should be available to students).

### **5.3. Communication**

- 5.3.1. The PRG considers that there are excellent communications within the Department and that IT facilities are well-used to support that communication.
- 5.3.2. The PRG supports the recommendation of the department to develop a Course Handbook that should include:
- List of modules, module content and learning outcomes
  - Assessment criteria/regulations
  - Course timetable in detail
  - Student responsibility
  - Staff details – phone numbers/email addresses
  - Reading lists for modules
  - Procedures for dealing with student illness and absence
- The Core team should begin developing the handbook immediately so that it can be given to next year's cohort of students at the induction week in September 2007.
- 5.3.3. The PRG suggests that the need for a staff meeting room can be met through the introduction of centralised facilities that can be booked (see point 5.2.2). A structured timetable of Core Studies staff meetings would facilitate the booking of suitable rooms.
- 5.3.4. A student/staff consultative committee (student-led) should be set up to discuss issues pertinent to the course and to support the ethos of student-centred learning.

In conclusion, the PRG is confident that the Core Studies department will continue to play an important role in helping to formulate a vision and implementing the many changes now being enacted in NCAD. From the QA peer review process, it is clear that the Core Studies department is at the required stage of readiness to engage with change. In addition, the department's strong interdisciplinary teamwork approach coupled with its commitment to learning and teaching provides an excellent basis for future development.