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 Visual Communication
2006-2007

Peer Review Report

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Quality Improvement/Quality Assurance
Peer Review Group Report
Department of Visual Communication
Academic Year 2006/07

A Self-assessment Report was undertaken by Visual Communication in the academic year 2005/2006. The Peer Review site visit took place on 14th and 15th November 2006.

Members of the Peer Review Group:

1. Cynthia Deane, Options Consulting – Independent Chair

2. Phil Baines, Central St. Martins, UK

3. Anne Brady, Vermillion Design, Dublin

4. Kevin Atherton, Head of Media, NCAD

1.   Timetable of the site visit

Day	Location	Time	Action
Day 1			
Monday 13th 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

Day	Location	Time	Action
			Day 2
Tuesday 14th November	Board Room	9.15 – 9.30 a.m.	PRG meet with Nicky Saunders, QA/QI Officer and prepare for day
Tuesday 14th November	Board Room	9.30 – 10.00 a.m.	PRG meet Director, Colm Ó Briain and Registrar, Ken Langan
Tuesday 14th November	Board Room	10.00 – 10.30 a.m.	PRG meet Head of Faculty of Design, Professor Angela Woods
Tuesday 14th November	Board Room	10.30 – 11.00 a.m.	PRG meet Head of Visual Communication, Margaret Lonergan
Tuesday 14th November	Board Room	11.00 – 11.15 a.m.	Tea/Coffee & review of early sessions
Tuesday 14th November	School of Design	11.15 – 12.00 noon	PRG, Head of Faculty, Head of Department & QA/QI Officer tour Department and related College facilities – Core, Library
Tuesday 14th November	Board Room	12.00 – 12.30 p.m.	PRG meet Department Technical Assistant: Ed McGinley
Tuesday 14th November	Board Room	12.30 – 1.00 p.m.	PRG meet Department Lecturer: Ray Flynn
Tuesday 14th November	Board Room	1.00 – 1.30 p.m.	Light lunch with Staff of Department
Tuesday 14th November	Board Room	1.30 – 2.00 p.m.	PRG – private review of morning sessions with QA Officer
Tuesday 14th November	Board Room	2.00 – 2.20 p.m.	PRG meet Department Lecturer: Pat Mooney
Tuesday 14th November	Board Room	2.20 – 2.40 p.m.	PRG meet Department Technical Assistant: Sean Sills
Tuesday 14th November	Board Room	2.45 – 3.15 p.m.	PRG meet with Department Secretary: Fiona Hodge
Tuesday 14th November	Board Room	3.15 – 3.30 p.m.	Tea/Coffee & review of afternoon sessions
Tuesday 14th November	Board Room	3.30 – 4.15 p.m.	PRG meet with undergraduate Student Representatives: Claude Bachelier, 4th year Sarah Vasseghi, 3rd year Aisling Kennedy, 2nd year
Tuesday 14th November	Board Room	4.15 – 5.00 p.m.	PRG meet with Mick Wilson, Head of Research & P/G Studies & postgraduate Student Representative: Terry Monaghan
Tuesday 14th November	Board Room	5.00 – 5.30 p.m.	PRG meet with Design Research Group: Ciarán Swan Bob Gray
Tuesday 14th November	Board Room	5.30 – 6.30 p.m.	PRG and QA/QI Officer review sessions and note main issues and commendations for inclusion into report
Tuesday 14th November	The Winding Stairs Restaurant	7.00 p.m.	Dinner with PRG, Head of Faculty, Head of Department, QA Officer

Day	Location	Time	Action
Day 3			
Wednesday 15th November	Board Room	9.15 - 9.30 a.m.	PRG & QA/QI Officer meet to prepare for day
Wednesday 15th November	Board Room	9.30 – 9.45 a.m.	PRG meet Head of Core Studies: Frank Bissette
Wednesday 15th November	Board Room	9.45 – 10.15 a.m.	PRG meet Department Lecturer: Dr. David Caron
Wednesday 15th November	Board Room	10.15– 10.45 a.m.	PRG meet Department Lecturer: Brendon Deacy
Wednesday 15th November	Board Room	10.45 – 11.00 a.m.	Tea/Coffee
Wednesday 15th November	Board Room	11.00 – 1.00 p.m.	PRG draw up draft report with QA/QI Officer
Wednesday 15th November	Board Room	1.00 – 2.00 p.m.	Working Lunch with QA/QI Officer
Wednesday 15th November	Board Room	2.00 – 4.30 p.m.	PRG complete draft report
Wednesday 15th November	Board Room	4.30 – 5.00 p.m.	PRG present recommendations of draft report to Director, Registrar, Head of Faculty, Head of Department and staff of Visual Communication

While there was a very full timetable, especially on Tuesday 14 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. Kevin Atherton acted as the formal *rapporteur* and all 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 then constitute the sections of the report:

- Department philosophy, aim and objectives: Anne Brady
- Curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment: Phil Baines
- Staffing and staff development: Kevin Atherton
- Facilities and resources: Cynthia Deane.

During the meetings with staff and students, all group members had an opportunity to ask questions so that the above areas were adequately addressed. Staff and students were also invited to make additional comments or observations at the end of the meeting, 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 Faculty, staff of the department and QA/QI officer at the end of the second day. The QA/QI officer circulated the draft report to all members of the Group on the same day. Group members amended the draft and the agreed report was then sent to the QA/QI officer who forwarded it to the Head of Department on 8th December 2006. The QA/QI Steering Group accepted the report for publication on the NCAD website on 16th January 2007.

3.   Description of the Department of Visual Communication

3.1   Mission Statement:

The agreed mission statement of the Department of Visual Communication is:
"To educate students to be innovators not imitators."

3.2   Aims and Objectives:

The department mission statement can be broken down into the following aims:
1.   To lead educational practice in visual communication at a national level;
2.   To rank highly amongst our European and international counterparts in the provision of design education that emphasises the creative and the conceptual;
3.   To provide a flexible framework in which students can learn to work both as individuals and as part of a team;
4.   To engender in students a high level of creative and conceptual thinking;
5.   To develop in undergraduate students an awareness of the full range of visual communication practices;
6.   To provide at post-graduate level a programme that builds on the undergraduate experience, encouraging in-Department and original research in a national and international context;
7.   To contribute to the development of professional practice by upholding its values and methodologies amongst undergraduate and postgraduate students;
8.   To continually nurture a dynamic research culture among staff, students and associates;
9.   To foster a strong sense of professional and creative collegiality amongst staff, students and associates;

The department aims break down into the following objectives:
1.   To educate students in Visual Communication to NUI levels 8, 9 and 10 (BA Hons, MA and PhD Level);
2.   To enable staff to undertake research that benefits and enriches individual lecturers, department and the broader community;
3.   To deliver to students skills that are intellectual, practical, and academic, and which are adaptable and transferable in a broad range of future contexts;
4.   To engender a rich research and analytical ethos amongst all students;
5.   To provide an environment that promotes in students a sense of ownership over complex ideas and an ability to articulate and communicate these to the widest possible range of audiences.

3.3   Department History:

What is now Visual Communication was initially proposed as a graphic design department within the newly constituted Faculty of Design in 1973. In 1975, 'graphic design was restyled "visual communication". This department concentrated on projects for illustration, publicity and book design, all of which involved knowledge of drawing, typography and reprographic techniques. There was a small printing workshop at Kildare Street where projects could be realised in final printed form. Visual Communication and Painting were the most popular choices among incoming students. The department had many contacts with industry and the profession outside the college and its graduates found employment rapidly – often setting up their own design consultancies.

In 1980, Visual Communication was the first academic department in the college to move from its location on George's Quay to the newly-established Thomas Street campus. Also in 1980, NCAD won degree course validation from the NCEA. Course documents for the degree in Visual Communication were submitted in March 1981 and were recognised for

degree purposes by the NCEA. In 1991, Visual Communication became the first department in NCAD to award an MA in Design.

The department has experienced a great deal of change over the past three years. A new Head was appointed in September 2003, and there have since been other changes in staffing over the next three years. The Letterpress Print Workshop was moved from its location at the front gate of the College to within the department on the first floor of the School of Design for Industry.

Many changes have taken place across the College in this same three-year period. Amongst the most significant of these changes are the introduction of a unitised structure in conjunction with grade point averages and a new marking system; the introduction of exchange units in 2nd year of the Degree programme; the upscaling of existing postgraduate programmes and research initiatives in the College; the beginning of work on the development of taught MA programmes.

The department states that it is keenly aware of both the opportunities and the disadvantages of functioning in an environment of change, and that it has been enthusiastic in taking hold of the opportunity afforded to by these developments.

4.   Preliminary Comments of the Peer Review Group

The Peer Review Group considers this to be a talented, energetic and committed department that can deliver new approaches to education for Visual Communication. The team has already begun a process of change, and some of the particularly noteworthy aspects include an ideas-based conceptual approach to design, commitment to developing, "observing minds", strong philosophical foundations, and an awareness of critical issues in contemporary visual communications practice. The Department staff used the QA process to help reflect on the educational processes they are engaged in and how well the curriculum implements their philosophy.

The PRG found the report very informative and refreshingly frank and valued the individual insights encountered in the meetings with all staff. It is clear that there is widespread support for change in the Department, as well as a commitment to making change happen. The PRG sees its role as helping to provide a framework for that change. The PRG members brought a range of experience and expertise to the review, which enables the group to act as a "critical friend" to the Department.

Two major omissions were noted in the self-assessment report. Firstly, the department has not consulted formally and systematically with industry to identify the needs of new professionals in visual communications. Secondly, there has been no follow-up with graduates to find out how well their course has prepared them for their subsequent careers.

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

5.1 Department Philosophy – aims and objectives

Commendations

5.1.1. It is clear that all staff subscribe to the Department Philosophy. There is clarity of objectives and a strong philosophical foundation, which includes a useful teasing-out of the distinction between design education and the provision of IT training.

5.1.2. Education is seen as the foundation that leads into the profession and it is a strength of the Department that it is very grounded in the mission of creating a foundation for professional practice. The objectives of the department are considered by the PRG to be appropriate and well-stated.

5.1.3. There is awareness in the Department of issues in contemporary design and visual communications practice. The PRG commends para. 5.2 of the Visual Communication self-assessment report as a definition of the discipline *"The department understands and defines design as a conceptually-based, problem-solving practice which embraces many sub-disciplines. In essence, it is a combination of word and image in an unlimited variety of media to communicate an immeasurable array of messages. Critically, the discipline has inherent value as a practice in its own right, and its language elements – typography, photography, illustration, the moving image etc. – can take form in the personal, creative work of the graphic artist as well as in work of a specifically commercial or industrial nature."*

Recommendations

5.1.4. The PRG encourages the department to place the Mission Statement in the context of educating professional graphic designers who will be "innovators not imitators". In addition, the department needs to constantly refresh the professional vision and feed it back into the educational programme. An important part of this task is to build on the shared philosophical vision that exists to implement a shared approach to teaching and learning.

5.1.5. The department philosophy needs to state its design principles more clearly and clarify the learning outcomes within this philosophy. The curriculum needs to reflect the emphasis on design education and its relationship to IT as a complementary tool reinforcing the distinction between the "message" and the "media" aspects noted in the department's definition of the discipline (see 5.1.3 above).

5.1.6. The PRG suggests that the department should review its aims and put more focus on the student/learner.

5.2 Curriculum/Learning/Teaching/Assessment - The Degree programme

Commendations

5.2.1. It has become clear in discussion that the curriculum for the undergraduate programme is structured so that knowledge and skills are built sequentially over the three years. The PRG is aware that many very valuable skills and outcomes are implicitly included in the programme but are not explicitly mentioned in the documents.

5.2.2. It is evident that there are some specific aspects of very good teaching and technical support practice within the programme. It is also notable in discussion that students generally value the quality of their learning experience on the Department's programme.

Recommendations

5.2.3.   There is a need for a broad and flexible curriculum framework within the Faculty of Design, within which the curriculum framework for Visual Communication will fit clearly.

5.2.4.   In order to address the current mismatch between the philosophy and the curriculum in Visual Communication a number of steps are recommended:
- Actively engage with industry/employers on an annual basis to assess the needs of graduates entering the profession and develop programme learning outcomes related clearly to these needs. The needs include:
- Skills
- Knowledge
- Attitudes
- Competences
e.g.
- Problem solving
- Communication with peers, supervisors and clients
- Managing their own practice
- Understanding the integrated nature of the relationship between creative thinking and professional processes.

5.2.5.   The Curriculum framework and structure should be designed to enable students to achieve the learning outcomes. It is recommended that the department should take a holistic and team-based approach to designing and planning the curriculum including
- learning outcomes
- teaching & learning methodologies,
- materials and resources including staffing
- assessment – achieve a balance between process assessment and product assessment.

5.2.6.   The Department should give active consideration to the best solutions for teaching and learning. It is suggested that an effective approach is to harness the expertise of the relevant staff to write and teach appropriate modules (based on learning outcomes) across all years of the programme. IT skills should be included only as required to achieve learning outcomes as expressed in the course philosophy.

5.2.7.   The PRG strongly recommends that the Department reconsider the role of the year tutor. One aspect of current practice that could be maintained is for a tutor to have a mentoring role for a whole year group of students. However it is recommended that the course be structured in modules based on learning outcomes. These modules should be taught in all years by the staff members who are subject specialists. It is also recommended that the Department look into the possibilities of teaching combined year groups where appropriate within the modular curriculum framework.

5.2.8.   There are a number of ways of engaging with industry to enrich and expand the curriculum.
The PRG suggests, for example:
- Staff placements or exchanges
- Student placements – practice or research-based "internships"
A triangular placement model involving teacher/learner/practitioner provides benefits for all participants. To gain most value from the placement experience, it may be helpful if all three parties jointly write and agree the brief, making the learning outcomes clear. A suggested placement model for students would involve one week for 2nd year/two weeks for 3rd year/four weeks for 4th year students.

Another positive development would be to establish a formal and sustainable networking framework between College staff & industry. For industry, the benefits would include access to leading edge research & design. For the College, it would mean instant and constant conversation with industry. Such a collaborative framework could also provide opportunities for staff exchanges between the college and industry, which would provide excellent opportunities for continuing professional development of staff.

5.3. Curriculum/Learning/Teaching/Assessment - Postgraduate Development

Commendations

5.3.1.   The new structure for postgraduate study across the college is clear and it provides a good basis for a response from the Faculty of Design and from the Visual Communication Department. The Department has clearly identified the postgraduate market. The National Digital Research Centre (NDRC) is to be welcomed as an important development that has the potential to invigorate the work of the department and bring in new resources, students, and skills.

Recommendations

5.3.2.   The PRG considers that there is a need for a college-wide strategic development and implementation plan to support the aspirations of individual faculties/departments in the postgraduate area. It is recommended that there should be a plan to build the readiness and capability of the Visual Communication Department in this context.

5.3.4.   The PRG supports the proposal to initiate a faculty-wide taught Masters as a very good development for the future, and suggests that the faculty should reconsider its decision not to proceed with it. The common elements of the programme could include research methods/contemporary issues/design elements with specialisation in one area of design taking place in the "thesis" element or project element.

5.4   Staffing & Staff Development

Commendations

5.4.1.   The PRG was impressed with the range and level of skills that the staff bring to the department and the courses. It is evident that there is a high level of commitment and care for the students, and a good rapport between staff and students which creates a positive learning environment.

5.4.2.   Staff have adapted well to the many changes and transitions which are evident within the report. They also take responsibility for their own professional development which is a good basis for future development.

5.4.3.   As well as the academic staff, the department is fortunate to have a group of extremely able and dedicated technical and management specialists who add considerably to the quality of the Department's work and particularly to the quality of the student experience.

Recommendations

5.4.4.   The PRG recommends that the allocation of staff teaching and other duties be re-examined and restructured as necessary to align with the restructured curriculum. The restructuring of the curriculum should be viewed as an opportunity to balance the amount of time that staff spend on teaching/mentoring, research and professional development.

5.4.5.   If there are professional development needs arising from change, they should be clearly identified and a plan made by the Faculty to meet these needs within the near future e.g.

writing learning outcomes, teaching methodologies, team-working and sharing good practice among staff.

5.4.6.   The Department should adopt a strategic approach to filling any future posts in line with the new curriculum structure and content e.g. recruiting specialist expertise in digital media, software training.

5.5   Facilities & Resources

Commendations

5.5.1.   The PRG was impressed by the Visual Communication studio space and by the amount of interaction between students and staff that the space allows. There is extensive floor area and the working environment is bright and spacious.

Recommendations

5.5.2.   The PRG suggests that the Department might consider some modifications in the allocation and use of space and furnishings, especially in the context of a possible restructuring of the curriculum as recommended above, e.g.
- Tables and chairs suitable for laptop use should be provided for students
- Movable partitions might be used to create flexible working spaces including office and small group teaching/tutorial spaces.

5.5.3.   When planning the future configuration of space, the department should also consider how it might facilitate distance learning, virtual classrooms (e.g. Moodle) and other modes of teaching and learning that are emerging.

5.5.4.   It is recommended that the department consider allocating one room as a "programme team room" to facilitate department planning and provide a collaborative work space for curriculum development.

5.5.5.   The PRG recommends that adequate resources be made available to the Department to implement the Quality Improvement Plan that the Department will formulate based on the recommendations of this QA review.