Coláiste Náisiúnta Ealaíne is Deartha
National College of Art and Design

Faculty of Design
Department of Visual Communication

Quality Assurance Review in the Department of Visual Communication 2006/2007
Initial Response to Peer Review Group Report

The staff of the Department of Visual Communication acknowledges receipt of the Peer Review Group (PRG) report by Cynthia Deane, Phil Baines, Anne Brady and Kevin Atherton. We wish to thank the members of the PRG for their work and for the high level of commitment that they brought to the review process. We also wish to thank everyone who advised on the completion of the Self Assessment Report, and all who participated in the review, especially the students of the department whose excellent contributions were praised by the PRG members. We particularly want to thank Nicky Saunders whose support and professionalism during the process was invaluable.

The self-assessment process itself was very valuable and allowed the department to reflect on all aspects of its provision and procedures. In this regard, the PRG commends the staff of the department for the frankness and honesty of the self-assessment report, as well as the refreshing insights of the one-to-one exchanges it had with staff. Undertaking the self-assessment report also had the merit of permitting us to gather together all materials, information and reflections relating to the department and to produce a document that can now be used in many other contexts. Throughout this part of the process, the department identified key areas of success, as well as areas that required change and development. A number of these changes were implemented during the self-assessment process, and many more are being carried through at the time of writing.

We welcome the PRG's commendations of staff commitment and what they describe as, 'our grounding in the mission of creating a foundation in professional practice' for our students. We feel that these commendations, and others, capture and uphold the aspects of design education and practice that all staff consider to be most important, and it is gratifying to have this recognised in the report. In particular, the PRG's commendation of the department's definition of visual communication design is critical, especially in the context of future developments.

It is rewarding to see the PRG's commendation of the department's 'ideas-based conceptual approach to design' and our 'commitment to developing, "observing minds"'. We also welcome their acknowledgement that we are already engaged in a process of change and that we are committed to making change happen in the future. In this regard, the PRG saw its role as providing a framework for that change. The most challenging elements of the PRG framework for change require the department to concentrate on re-visiting and reviewing three areas:
-   Course learning outcomes, content and curriculum;
-   Teaching and learning methodologies;
-   Team-based approaches to teaching.
The PRG report acknowledges that the department has four strengths in undertaking this task:
-   A strong philosophical vision shared by all staff;
-   The talent, energy and commitment of the staff;
-   An awareness of critical issues in contemporary practice;
-   A commitment to change.
Nonetheless, this is a significant task which will take time and which will need to be well resourced in terms of professional support and facilitation. The department recognises the enormous opportunities that can arise from addressing these fundamental aspects of provision and practice, but is also aware of the amount of work required, and of the difficulties inherent in the management of change on these deep levels. If we can succeed in meeting these challenges,

we will have achieved something of significance for our students and ourselves, and we will also have encountered and mastered many aspects of contemporary education practice. We do not underestimate the scale and intensity of this task and we will look to the College for support in this.

The PRG's recommendation that we increase our network of contacts with industry in terms of student placements is already underway. There is huge enthusiasm from industry for this. The department has organised short observational visits for Second Year students to take place, for the first time, this year (Spring 2007). Additionally, we have had a very positive response from design companies with regard to longer (4-12 weeks) placements for Third Year students. However, the PRG recommends that we undertake the following model for placements: 'one week for 2nd year / two weeks for 3rd year / four weeks for 4th year students.' This is an overly simplistic model and does not take account of the fact that programme learning outcomes will determine the length of a placement, its content, and the year(s) of study in which it will take place. The Faculty of Design is currently looking at making exchange/placement/mobility compulsory in Term 2 of 3rd Year, and this would be an ideal time for us to place students in industry. Many already do Leonardo placements at this time. The department will be working on placement models based on these developments and on programme learning outcomes.

The PRG report uses the terms 'IT skills' and 'IT training' at various points in the report. Our provision relates solely to relevant, professional design software packages for use in the practice of visual communication, not to information technology per se.

At time of writing, the department has devised a strategy for approaching the Quality Improvement Plan and individual members of staff are currently undertaking actions in preparation for this. While preparing for the Quality Improvement planning process, we are addressing some of the PRG's recommendations directly, including the matter of student desks and the establishment of a team room, and we hope to be able to implement some of these changes before the end of 2007.

Margaret Lonergan
Head of Department of Visual Communication
11th February 2007