**Faculty of Theology External Quality Review**

May 1st – 3rd 2007

Reviewers:

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Overview

St Patrick’s College is to be commended for the care that went into the preparatory work leading to this Review. The Quality Review Report which was prepared internally showed a high degree of professional responsibility in presenting and analysing the quality of what is offered by the Faculty of Theology. It was generously assisted by the Quality Promotion Unity of the National University of Ireland at Maynooth (NUIM) and clearly St Patrick’s College has benefited from this collaboration and guidance. During the Review Visit, the reviewers were received warmly by the Faculty and given every assistance in enabling them to come to an accurate understanding of the way in which the College conducts its academic mission. St Patrick’s College approached this Review professionally in every way and should be congratulated first of all on taking the initiative and undertaking this process and on engaging in it with enthusiasm, diligence and a high degree of professional integrity. The College has shown itself to be maturely evaluating the quality of what it offers to students and the wider world, and it can be assured that what it offers students is a very precious and valuable education in theology.

St Patrick’s College is a Pontifical University which awards degrees in the name of the Roman Catholic Church and it is responsible to the Bishops of Ireland and the Congregation for Catholic Education for what it offers. It has two important structural relationships: the first is to the National Seminary, an internal component of the University, which trains students for the Catholic priesthood and the second is to the National University of Ireland at Maynooth (NUIM) with which it shares a common campus, common calendar and timetabling, library resources and other facilities, including security, maintenance, catering and student services. Both relationships contribute to the quality of what is offered by St Patrick’s College, the first by providing a clear focus for the academic direction of the theology faculty and the second by enabling the College to benefit both academically and practically from a unique relationship with its sister institution, NUIM.

The Faculty of Theology within St Patrick’s College promotes theological learning and research in accordance with the principles and norms presented in the Apostolic Constitution Sapientia Christiana and the Apostolic Exhortation Pastores Dabo Vobis. All the degrees taught by the faculty are Pontifical degrees whose character meets the prescriptions of the Congregation for Catholic Education in Rome.

The Review Panel is convinced that St Patrick’s College, which can lay claim to a rich historical tradition, offers and delivers high quality educational programmes in theology, with a remarkable range and depth of treatment in central areas of theology. The staff are professional, highly trained and dedicated both to teaching and scholarship. The judgements and recommendations of the Panel contained in this Report are offered as a way of helping Faculty improve the already high quality of theological education which students receive at St Patrick’s College.

Course Aims and Objectives

There are three related undergraduate programmes:

* Baccalaureate in Divinity (BD)
* Baccalaureate in Theology (BTh)
* Baccalaureate in Theology and Arts (BATh)

The BD is envisaged as a comprehensive theological degree which meets the requirements of priestly ordination in the Roman Catholic Church. It is a canonical degree, as are the STL and the DD (=STD) in the sense used in Roman documentation. The content of the BTh and the content of the BATh (a joint degree taught in conjunction with NUIM) are drawn from the fuller syllabus offered in the BD. There is no doubt about the quality of theological education offered in these programmes: it is of a high standard and is equal to the best of what is offered in comparable institutions. The faculty should be congratulated on delivering theology courses of such depth, range and diversity and for the dedication which they show to their disciplines and the needs of the students.

Each of the years in the BD and BTh is structured according to four core areas: Systematic Theology, Moral Theology, Sacred Scripture and History and supplementary courses. We are satisfied that the objectives of the undergraduate programmes as presented in the self-evaluation document are achieved.

While the link between the BD and the BTh is important in bringing together students from both programmes for shared courses, there are some drawbacks which should be addressed. While these undergraduate degrees share courses in common, they need to be more clearly differentiated from one another in terms of their aims as educational programmes. The Faculty should develop a rationale and aims and objectives for each degree and this should be clearly articulated and communicated to students.

It will help the Faculty to improve the quality of what they offer in these programmes if the degrees are distinguished by having identifiably different rationale and aims. While it is clear that the BD programme is governed by the needs of students preparing for ordination, the BA and BATh at the moment seem to derive their character from what is done in the BD. In our judgement, both the BTh and the BATh, the degrees which are taken by non-clerical students, would benefit from having a clearer structure articulated in the light of additional factors such as progression, flexibility and wider educational appropriateness.

There are also related M-level programmes, all of which are of high quality:

* Masters in Theology (MTh)
* Licentiate in Divinity (STL)
* Masters in Pastoral Studies (MPS)
* Higher Diploma in Theological Studies
* Higher Diploma/Diploma in Pastoral Studies
* Postgraduate Diploma/Diploma in Christian Communication and Development
* Higher Diploma in Pastoral Liturgy

 The STL is a two year specialised degree, leading to the award of the canonical degree of Licentiate, which continues investigation into the main areas of theology but with provision for specialisation in one of the major areas, namely, Systematic Theology, Moral Theology, Biblical Theology and Liturgy, while the MTh is a one year course of full-time study. The MTh requires a competence in two languages from Hebrew, Greek and Latin while the STL requires basic knowledge of Greek and Hebrew and a knowledge of two modern languages. The MTh can be completed in two ways:

* Mode A which involves five courses and a dissertation of between 25,000 and 30,000 words
* Mode B which involves the submission of a dissertation of 40,000 words

 The Higher Diploma in Theological Studies enables students whose first degree is in another subject to gain foundational knowledge of central areas of theology: Systematic Theology, Moral Theology, Scripture, Liturgy and electives. The Diplomas in Pastoral Studies include a CPE pastoral placement and a range of appropriate courses in Sacraments, moral theology, marriage, counselling, practical aspects of ministry.

Course Information

Information about the programmes and courses is provided in the Kalendarium. This is clearly a valuable guide to what is offered by the Faculty. Inconsistencies in the way in which matters are presented in the Kalendarium should be ironed out. The course aims of the MPS, for example, are clearly presented, but those for the MTh are missing. Details of Assessment should be integrated into descriptions of programmes. There should also be a consistency of presentation (a standard template) for courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels: this will make the communication of information to students more accurate and effective.

Particular attention should be paid to enabling students in Year 1 to grasp quickly the structure and demands of their programme. We recommend that the College look into the production of student-friendly course handbooks, perhaps through co-operation with NUIM, either hard-copy or on CDs. An Orientation Day, designed to familiarize new students with the programmes of study and the workings of the Faculty, would be useful.

Greater clarity is needed about communicating to students the difference between different elements of continuous assessment: undergraduate Students can have difficulty in understanding the difference, for example, between ‘Essays’ and ‘Tutorial Papers’. There is also a need for instruction on how to prepare for the writing of essays, including methodological guidance relating to the structure of the essay and the way in which to approach the relevant literature.

We also recommend greater use of the Website: increasingly, this is how the College presents important information to students about their courses – in other institutions, a Student Intranet and communication through email is used to great effect.

Course Assessment

The criteria used of assessment in the programmes is appropriate and of a high standard. The Faculty maintains parity with the standards of the Irish University system in grading examinations and awarding degrees. Continuous assessment is a feature of virtually all the undergraduate programmes, counting for 25-30% of the final mark and is estimated in the light of essays, seminar attendance and participation.

Attention should be paid to establishing a consistency in the forms of assessment used in the programmes. As a general rule, undergraduate courses which have 5 ECTS credits are assessed through 25% going to forms of coursework and 75% going to end of semester examinations. But there seems to be a fluidity operating among some modules as to how things are weighted: MT124 (5 ECTS credits), for example, has an assessment of 50% going to Essays and 50% to Tutorial participation; EH281 (2.5 ECTS credits) is assessed by essay assignment counting for 100%; MT322 (2.5 ECTS credits) is assessed by 25% going to essays and 75% to seminar participation. As far as possible, students should be able to expect a consistent pattern of assessment across the courses and staff should be encouraged to observe a consistent pattern of assessment.

There is an oral examination at the end of BD in Scripture, moral theology and systematic theology, constituting 5% of the mark in each course. The understanding is that it can only raise, not lower, the mark a student gets in this area. This seems somewhat redundant, given the extent of other assessment undertaken by students.

We also draw attention to the difficulties experienced in all institutions about how objectively to assess ‘seminar participation’ and ‘tutorial participation’. Objective criteria are to be preferred and should be clearly made known to the students.

As a way of improving and regularising what is offered we make the following recommendations:

* Attention should be paid to identifying subject-specific skills and generic skills at undergraduate level.
* The College should develop objective ways of signalling and understanding the different levels of attainment that Years 1, 2 and 3 represent in undergraduate programmes.
* We recognize that difference among undergraduate students is acknowledged in the arrangement of different seminar groups for them. But attention should be paid to the differing starting points of students in the three degrees. This is particularly important in relation to Year 1 of the BATh: students in this programme may not necessarily have the same background in theology as those in the other degrees, but their Year 1 modules are common to those taken by BD students. A programme of staff development would be helpful in which levels of attainment and learning outcomes in relation to the three years of undergraduate study are examined.
* Consideration be given to including in the BD a ‘Long Essay’ or Dissertation which gives students the opportunity to engage in autonomous, independent research and which is a standard feature of undergraduate programmes in other faculties of theology. We recognize that would add to what is already a heavy programme of study, but it ought to be included in a revision of the BD.
* It is not clear that the two ways of completing the assessment for the MTh programme, Mode A and Mode B, are properly equivalent. Mode A involves five courses and a dissertation of 25,000-30,000 words, while Mode B involves no assessed coursework but only a dissertation of 40,000 words. Since the standard of the dissertation in both modes is the same, at M-level, it is hard to see why an additional 10,000 words should exempt a student from assessment in five M-level courses. The recommendation is that the College take account of the Bologna process in reviewing the nature of its offerings at M-level and that it might consider transforming Mode B – essentially a focused research project – into an M.Litt (Theology), in line with the practice in NUIM.

Course Content

The content of what is offered by the Faculty is highly commended: few other institutions in the Atlantic Isles offer such a rich and detailed education in theology, and in the remarks that follow, this point should be borne in mind. St Patrick’s College offers perhaps the most extensive and enriching range of theological education currently offered in a University in these Isles. In few other places will a student gain a first class education in the range of courses offered in Maynooth in systematic theology, moral theology, scripture, history, liturgy, patristics, canon law, etc. This undoubted breadth of provision strength makes considerable demands on the teaching staff and, of course upon students.

The undergraduate degrees differ in their expectations of what a successful completion of the programme will involve, and this is something which the College ought to address. The expectation ought to be that what is required for the completion of one degree should be comparable with another degree at the same level within the institution. In the opinion of the reviewers, attention should be paid to the question of parity among the undergraduate programmes. There is no doubt, for example, that the BD is a more demanding programme than the BTh. For example, the BD is calculated at 225 ECTS credits plus 10 credits from qualifying courses, giving a total of 235 credits; the BTh on the other hand is calculated at 191.5 credits. The Bologna Process envisages an undergraduate degree as requiring 180 credits (60×3). So at the moment, the BD and the BTh are unequal in what they cover and in what successful undergraduates are expected to do. Hence a review should be undertaken of the comparative weighting of the BD and the BTh. It is not for this panel to judge the outcome of this review, but perhaps a way forward might be found in distinguishing more clearly than at present between required courses for the BD and supplementary courses relevant to priestly formation. This distinction could be signalled through different patterns of assessment for each area.

It is clear that students of the BD receive a greater amount of teaching than do students of the BTh and that their work load is heavier. While it is true that the isomorphic structure of the BD and BTh permit a progression through the sub-disciplines – for example, a range of significant themes in Systematic Theology can be pursued in both programmes – one of the drawbacks is that the BTh lacks a flexibility in what is offered to students. To take an example: ST203, ‘Theology of Grace’ is offered as a 2.5 credit module to BD students; but this important area of theology is available only to BD students and is not on offer to BTh students. Equally, SC334, ‘Scripture and Theology in Hebrews’ is available only in the BD programme, and again BTh students do not have the opportunity to study this important New Testament work.

We recommend that the College examine ways in which the structure of the BTh could be modified to permit students access to a wider range of options, and indeed for the articulation of a rationale for this degree which would make it a more coherent and better learning experience for the student.

For example, we commend the College for making available to students of the BTh the opportunity to study two Philosophy courses in Year 1 (in conjunction with NUIM), but the structure of the programme does not permit students to progress in this area. (There are at present timetabling problems which prevent this.) We ask the College to explore possible further collaboration with NUIM in appropriate topics in philosophy which could fall within the area of theological concern. Theology linked to philosophy is, after all, a major feature of the Roman Catholic theological tradition and perhaps one of the particular strengths of a revised BTh, with a renewed rationale, might be a bringing together of theological and philosophical disciplines.

Increasingly, philosophy of religion is becoming an important part of second level education in these Isles, and it is important that students of the Maynooth degrees have the opportunity to engage in university level engagement with this topic which is of widespread interest and discussion. In addition, religious pluralism and unbelief are features of the cultural landscape and it is right to expect that these topics have a more prominent place in the curriculum of theology degrees if Maynooth is to be attentive to cultural changes in the Irish and European landscape.

As stated in the Quality Review Report (2.6.3), External Examiners should be invited to comment on the content of the courses which they examine. This should be done in writing and there should be formal mechanisms for responding to the comments offered by External Examiners. They bring a valuable expertise to the College.

Course Delivery

The Faculty is highly commended for its degree of commitment to the teaching of students. Among the student body there is widespread appreciation of the quality of teaching they receive and the easy access students have to their lecturers. Tutorial groups, building upon lectures, are an important way in which students learn to express themselves, orally and in writing, in the fields of theology.

The Faculty’s desire to provide in the undergraduate programmes a broad and wide-ranging theological education means that in the BD students are expected to take a large number of courses each semester. This is a rich experience for students. But there are practical questions about how this heavy workload is actually managed by students. It can be difficult for students to keep up with the pressure of assignments needed for coursework and final assessment. The pressure is less in the BTh and in the BATh than it is in the BD – we recognise that there are additional pressures from the NUIM arts courses in the BATh – but it would be good for the Faculty to engage in a student consultation, in the light of which the question of workload could be appropriately assessed.

In theological education, the range of topics covered is clearly a central value, but there is also the need to attend to the quality of learning which takes place: in the former perspective, the focus is on what is taught; in the latter, the focus is on the quality and depth of what is learned. The strength of the undergraduate programmes at St Patrick’s College is their range and scope, sustained by a dedicated faculty. In the opinion of the reviewers, the work of the faculty will be enhanced by greater attention being paid to the quality of the learning experience of the students: this is why the aspect of progression and levels is important and why the quality of the student’s experience, particularly when they begin theology, needs particular attention.

Communication

The College is to be commended on the ease and quality of communication between staff and students. This could be improved through the introduction of student consultation in relation to degrees. The question of student representation on academic committees should be considered in line with the emerging practice in higher education.

Consistency should be sought in the information given to students about the coursework essays. It should be standard practice that essay sheets be prepared which give orientation, structure and bibliography relevant to the topic.

More use should be made of the Website in order to present accurate and up to date information about the College.

Student Support Services

The relationship which St Patrick’s College has with NUIM enables the College to benefit from the support services and chaplaincy which are offered there. These services are of a high order and are an enhancement of what is offered by the College. We support the recommendation of the Quality Review Report (2.8) that consideration should be given to the appointment of an Academic Support Officer. This will be of particular value to students of the BATh particularly in their Year 1 experience. The Faculty is aware that the high number of students who leave or switch courses at the end of Year 1 of the BATh is an important issue requiring action. Supportive student services and initiatives are needed, particularly in the first semester in order to make students feel confident about continuing with their studies in theology. In addition, the course content of what is offered in Year 1 of this degree needs to be examined and modified in order to meet the needs of a student body that differs in significant ways from those in the BD and the BTh.

Library and Resources

Since 1997, the library facilities, owned by St Patrick’s College, are shared with NUIM, enabling 34,000 titles in the theology disciplines to be housed in the John Paul II Library. There is no doubt that the College has the library facilities and resources to continue to be a centre of excellence in teaching and research. The presence of the historically significant Russell Library, with a collection of older theological material, and the library of the National Centre for Liturgy, with its 17,500 volumes and 35 periodicals, add to this resource.

Students of the Faculty expressed their wish for more extensive and accessible computer facilities.

Research and Scholarships

The high reputation of St Patrick’s College is shown in its active commitment to scholarship: the publication of the Irish Theological Quarterly and the initiatives shown in the Maynooth Patristic Symposium are of the highest level and of international significance. In addition, the staff are often called upon to act as advisors and consultants to the Irish Bishops and the wider international Catholic community. The National Centre for Liturgy plays a significant role in liturgical matters since the changes introduced by the Second Vatican Council. There is no doubt about the commitment of the College to maintaining a significant presence in international research in theology. We would encourage the College to establish a Conference Fund, operating on clearly defined conditions, in order to enable staff to maintain their professional contacts with their peers at conferences. Moreover, funding ought to be made available to assist staff in the purchase of the computers and office supplies that are essential for their work.

The College in the Quality Review Report envisages the development of new Masters programmes in conjunction with NUIM, Trócaire and Accord, and the possibility of setting up research centres on a range of social and religious topics, and to do this, where possible, in conjunction with NUIM. The more the College can establish ways of proceeding which bring it in line with the pattern of national and international universities, the greater the opportunity to develop creatively in partnership with others. This seems to us the right way forward.

Staff Development

Recognising that its staff is its most valuable resource, the College is committing itself to a programme of staff development in order to enhance the quality of what is offered to its students. Related to this is a commitment to continue the Quality Assurance aspect of the College in conjunction with NUIM. These initiatives are to be welcomed. It should also give strong consideration to fostering research plans and research leave in order to enable the staff to write and publish.