



Report on request by Galway Mayo Institute of Technology for approval to submit, on a case-by-case basis, applications for registration of PhD candidates the area of Heritage Studies

24th October, 2008

1 Introduction

In February 2008¹ HETAC received an application by Galway Mayo Institute of Technology for approval to submit, on a case-by-case basis, applications for registration of PhD programmes in the area of Heritage Studies.

The application included the following documents:

- *Application to HETAC for Approval to Provide Level 10 PhD Research Degrees in Heritage Studies at GMIT*
- GMIT Research and Innovation

The following additional documentation was provided immediately prior to and during the course of the visits:

- Postgraduate research policy and procedures
- Additional curriculum vitae
- Research Degree Programme registrations 07/08 and 08/09 projections
- GMIT Research Approvals Document

A panel of expert assessors was assembled by HETAC to evaluate the case for approval by perusing the documentation submitted and visiting the Institute. Details of the panel are provided in the final section of the report, Section 7.

A site visit at the GMIT Galway campus took place on October 3rd, between 09:00 and approximately 14:15. The panel also held a private meeting during the previous evening.

¹ In February 2008 GMIT submitted an application for two fields of study to be concurrently evaluated. A revised submission in respect of the other field was received in late April (it was subsequently withdrawn in August 2008). The resubmission in April, and the inability to convene a panel during the Summer months, accounts for the delay in conducting the evaluation.

Assessors met and had discussions with the senior management team; research active academic staff; and any current postgraduate research students; perused research outputs; and viewed relevant facilities.

2 Summary of findings

The panel recommends that HETAC approve Galway Mayo Institute of Technology to submit, on a case-by-case basis, applications for registration of PhD programmes in the area of **Heritage Studies**,

subject to the specific conditions identified in section 3.1, and the standard conditions that:

1. the Institute produce a response detailing how it will address the issues raised by the assessors and which is considered satisfactory by HETAC
2. approval be granted for a period of *five years*.

The panel is confident that Doctoral graduates will attain a standard that is equivalent to the standard typical of universities in Ireland and the United Kingdom.

3 General comments and summary of Institute conditions and recommendations

The panel proposes two conditions and a number of general Institute recommendations. A number of field specific recommendations are also made in the subsequent section, Section 4.

It should be noted that the documentation provided by the Institute on application was insufficient to make an informed assessment at that stage. Had it not been augmented immediately prior to the site visit, and had the site visit not been as thorough and rigorous as it was in addressing the policy criteria, it would not have been possible to make an evaluation.

3.1 Approval to submit candidates is recommended based on a suitable Institute response to the following conditions:

- 3.1.1 that all PhD supervisors who have not supervised a PhD Degree to completion previously, be appointed as co-supervisors, with another co-supervisor who has significant experience in the field. Where appropriate a mentor should also be appointed to assist the supervisor.
- 3.1.2 in the case of PhD candidates currently registered, in order to protect both the student and the supervisor, and enhance the latter's career development, that a co-supervisor, from outside the Institute, be appointed along with the current supervisor.

AND

3.2 to the following general recommendations:

- 3.2.1 The Institute should develop a clear policy and plan in respect of coherent research development and research groups centres across its campuses. This policy and plan should provide a supportive and focussed environment for research collaboration and unity of purpose in a specific field of study across campuses [as relevant.]
- 3.2.2 The Institute should update, complete and approve all policy and procedure documents pertaining to research students and the supports required, and make these publicly available on the Institute website. This should include greater guidance on the role of the external examiner.
- 3.2.3 The Institute research policy should actively encourage and support staff in publishing, particularly in peer-reviewed publications.
- 3.2.4 In keeping with Institute focus and strategy the Institute should undertake actions to assist in growing staff expertise in the supervision of theses.
- 3.2.5 The Institute should implement a clear training programme for both staff and students in research skills, both generic and field specific.
- 3.2.6 As a matter of priority the Institute should address greater online access to journals so that students can access the relevant knowledge resources which are essential to their studies and an appropriate research environment be sustained.

4 Specific Field comments and summary of specific field recommendations

4.1 Heritage Studies

The panel has made the following recommendations to assist the field of study in its development towards seeking accreditation in the future and to promote its research standing:

- 4.1.1 The work of Heritage Studies would benefit enormously from an overarching strategy for research in the area. A specific strategy which would combine a clear conceptual and theoretical framework for the field should be prepared. It should also include generally identified areas for future research, along with projected student numbers, and a context and focus for the work taking place jointly across the Galway and Castlebar campuses.
- 4.1.2 Additional training should be undertaken by staff members on assessment in respect of PhD studies
- 4.1.3 A clear supervisory strategy in the field of Heritage studies needs to be prepared and supervisory capacity be grown through the encouragement of existing staff to complete their doctoral studies and gain supervisory experience through a supporting supervisor role
- 4.1.4 The Institute should continue to maintain and develop the informal research collaborations with National University of Ireland, Galway and seek to have more formal partnerships.
- 4.1.5 Additional collaborations with other researching institutions in the field should be developed to support the development of the research community

5 Detailed Reports & Recommendations

5.1 Heritage Studies

5.1.1 Is there a clear and realistic research strategy?

Somewhat.

Strengths

The research leader has a clear vision of a strategy for the field identified, and is very research active. Some of the members of the team have a good track record in publications. It is evident that the area has strong applicability in terms of employment and regional development, most notably in tourism.

Areas for improvement

A clear and articulate statement of what the Institute believes constitutes Heritage studies is required.

It is essential that the Institute maximises the expertise at graduate level of its well qualified staff at both its Castlebar and Galway campuses.

5.1.2 Is there a suitable research environment including facilities (i.e. library, access to research journals, computer facilities, laboratories etc.)?

Yes, but access to online journals needs significant improvement.

Strengths

There are excellent research student facilities, with some limitations regarding book-stock.

Areas for improvement

Greater access to online journals should be sought as a matter of priority. Whilst it is acknowledged that this is a national issue, it is essential that the Institute actively pursue the acquisition of key research resources such as Irish Research eLibrary (IreL). The panel has also recommended to HETAC to put pressure on the relevant national agencies to redress this inequity between University and other higher education providers in their respective access to research resources.

The introduction of a schedule of focussed staff and student research seminars could enhance the field of study and could also usefully encompass both campuses. Perhaps video conferencing facilities could be used to facilitate this.

5.1.3 Is there adequate research leadership?

Yes.

Strengths

The field benefits from an enthusiastic, committed and competent research leader. The lead researcher is very committed, interested in the work of his colleagues and students.

Staff interaction with graduate students is excellent, notwithstanding the current lack of critical mass.

There is also a good track record of successful supervision of Masters theses by a number of staff members, works which were considerable in scale and depth.

Areas for improvement

Whilst there are a number of staff members who have successfully supervised Masters theses, there is a significant dependence on the lead researcher in the field identified. To strengthen and broaden research leadership other staff members may be supported in their development as researchers. Where appropriate they may be encouraged to complete PhD studies, and undertake supervisory work at PhD level, as well as engaging in peer-reviewed publication.

5.1.4 Are there research-active staff who can supervise research students?

Somewhat.

Strengths

As stated above there are significant strengths in the work and capacity of the lead researcher. There are also a number of other excellent staff members who have successfully supervised Masters theses to completion, and are very competent in their field.

Improvements

To ensure sustainability greater depth and experience needs to be garnered across the research area as suggested above.

5.1.5 Is there capacity for research success?

Yes. See 5.1.3

Strengths

Some of the Masters theses were very impressive and represent an important achievement in terms of supervising staff.

5.1.6 Has the institution established agreed institutional regulations and procedures, code of good research practice and administrative support?

Yes, but some improvements could be made.

Areas for improvement

Some of these regulations and procedures may require review since their last revision in March 2005. They should be approved by the relevant committees and councils, and amended as necessary. Some aspects at PhD level may yet require implementation.

Additional focus could be made on the appointment and role of external examiners and the assessment of PhD work.

5.1.7 On the compliance with the general requirements set out in Appendix C.

There is general compliance with these requirements.

5.1.7.1 Research performance indicators

It would be important to clearly identify requirements for both staff and students to seek to publish in peer-reviewed publications.

5.1.7.2 Research Administration and Quality Assurance

See 5.1.6

5.1.7.3 Access to research degree programmes

No issues.

5.1.7.4 Transfer between the Master's and Doctoral Registers

No issues.

5.1.7.5 Other Appendix C criteria

No issues.

5.1.8 On the assessment procedures for candidates for research degrees which are fair and consistent and for the purpose of compliance with standards determined by HETAC.

These are adequate, but in light of the Institute's experience in other field additional guidelines for staff on assessment may be provided.

5.1.9 On the implementation of procedures for access transfer and progression as determined by the Qualifications Authority under Section 8(2)(d) of the Act.

No issues.

Strengths

6. Conclusion

The research field presented for approval has significant areas of strength not least the commitment and capacity of various staff members. In order to support and grow this capacity and expertise it is essential that a coherent research strategy for the field be put in place. This must encompass a conceptual model, plans for the future along with associated research training enhancements. Practical plans to support staff members in addressing key research performance indicators must be part of a coherent approach to the field identified.

The panel is cognisant of the desire of the Institute to grow its research in specific fields in an incremental way and seeks to support the Institute in that mission in this report.

7. The Panel Members

Heritage Studies

Professor Brian Graham, University of Ulster

Professor Patrick O’Flanagan, University College Cork

Chairperson

Professor Eda Sagara, Trinity College, Dublin

In attendance

Ms Tara Ryan, Higher Education and Training Awards Council

8. Declarations of Interest

None