

UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

REPORT OF A MEETING OF THE REVALIDATION PANEL: SUBJECT UNIT 17B IRISH (UNDERGRADUATE / SOUTHERN REGIONAL COLLEGE, NEWRY)

1 June 2018

PANEL:

Professor U McMahon-Beattie, Head of Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Ulster University Business School (Chair)

Mrs C McCann, Department of Finance, Accounting and Economics, Ulster University Business School

Dr G O Domagain, Lecturer in Modern Irish, School of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Ulster University

Ms K Bird, Student Representative, Southern Regional College

Dr L Ó hAisibéil, Lecturer in Irish, National University of Ireland, Galway

Mr M Wringe, Senior Lecturer, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, University of the Highlands and Islands

REVALIDATION UNIT CO-ORDINATOR:

Mrs N Stevenson, Deputy Head of School of Applied Science and Academic Studies, Southern Regional College

IN ATTENDANCE:

Mr B McArthur, Academic Office, Ulster University

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Panel met to consider the following provision within Revalidation Unit 17B Irish (UG/SRC).

- Diploma in Irish Language (PT) with a Certificate in Irish Language exit award

1.2 The Diploma brought forward for revalidation was a level 3 award comprising four compulsory 30-credit modules. It would be offered in part-time mode only over two academic years with one module being delivered per semester. A certificate exit award would be available. A level 4 Diploma in Irish Language was currently offered by the College and comprises six 20-credit point modules, three of which are level 4 modules. In changing the programme to level 3, the College was following the University lead. The Ulster Diploma in Irish Language was revalidated in December 2017 when a level 3 version of the programme was brought forward. Graduates of the programme would be able to apply for entry to the BA Hons Irish Language and Literature at Magee or the BA Hons Modern Irish at Belfast.

1.3 The Panel met initially with a group of current students. It then met with a joint senior management / course team comprising Mr M McDonald, Head of School of Applied Science and Academic Studies, Ms N Stevenson, Deputy Head of School of Applied Science and Academic Studies, Mrs C Davison, Assistant Director of Curriculum for HE and Quality, Mr J McCaul, Course Coordinator and Mr C Markey, Lecturer.

2 DOCUMENTATION

The Panel received the following documentation:

- Agenda and programme of the meeting
- Guidelines for revalidation panels
- External examiners' reports for the last two years

- Preliminary comments from panel members
- Revalidation document

3 MEETING WITH STUDENTS

3.1 The Panel met with a group of six students, three from each year of the current Diploma programme. The following are summaries of their responses to issues raised by the Panel.

Motivation for taking the programme

- Always wanted to learn Irish
- Studied Irish to GCSE level
- Irish becoming more visible in society
- Classroom assistant in an Irish school where children attend
- As a hobby
- Many Irish speakers in the family

Student Experience

- Great support provided by staff
- Night classes suit employed students
- “Fit for purpose”
- Students integrate very well
- Great college; perfect course
- Great support from course coordinator, Mr John McCaul
- Staff accessible – emails responded to immediately

Interaction between year groups

- While year groups attend on different nights, there is some interaction
- Both year groups attend the (Donegal) Gaeltacht together
- Have a joint ‘WhatsApp’ group.
- Each year group has a mix of young and mature students

Divergence in prior knowledge of Irish

- Challenging for tutor
- There is a “clean slate” approach from the outset
- Entry requirements ensure all students able to successfully complete programme
- All students are motivated to complete the programme
- Start off at a basic level – as time goes on, less English spoken and more Irish
- The more students put into the programme, the more they get out of it
- Students with prior knowledge of Irish help those with no relevant background

Online element of the programme

- Pre-class reading forwarded weekly by email
- Students can respond via email with questions
- If students miss class, will still receive learning materials by email
- Telephone is the other means of communication outside of the classroom

Resources

- Mr Chris Markey, the main tutor on the programme, has his own wide range of resources – “fantastic teacher”
- Additional resources are available on ‘Moodle’
- Made aware from the outset of the availability and content of Moodle
- Moodle holds a wide range of teaching materials – students select what they need
- Aware that there is access to Ulster resources but internal resources considered adequate

Distance Learning

- Face-to-face teaching preferred
- “It’s a personal language so personal touch needed”

Progression opportunities

- Aware of progression opportunities within Ulster but travel distance (Belfast and Magee) is restrictive

Contribution to revalidation programme

- Completed questionnaires and had several meetings with the course coordinator

Suggestions for improvement

- Addition of a literature text

4 MEETING WITH JOINT SENIOR MANAGEMENT / COURSE TEAM

The following is a summary of responses to Panel questions provided by the Team.

4.1 The Diploma mirrored the Ulster Diploma in Irish Language that had recently been revalidated. Dr O Domagain stated that in developing the Ulster programme (which is mirrored by the College programme) for revalidation, consultation had taken place with all the “major players” in the Irish language sector who wished to see a higher level of language competence across the sector. He pointed out that many applicants to the Ulster programme were from people working in the sector who wished to upskill.

4.2 The programme had been substantially redesigned for revalidation and had been moved from a 6 x 20-credit module structure to a 4 x 30-credit module structure. Previously the four main language skills of written, spoken, grammar and comprehension had been divided across three modules per academic year. While this arrangement had facilitated a clear differentiation of an individual student’s strengths, current best practice in the acquisition of second languages through communicative and constructivist approaches pointed to a holistic model of delivery that introduces and develops the key language skills, and facilitates the acquisition of subject knowledge in an integrated way. This integrated approach would bring significant benefits in the way classes are delivered. The development of larger 30-credit point modules facilitates this approach to learning, teaching and assessment.

4.3 Regarding assessment, during years 1 and 2, in addition to summative assessments, formative assessment would be ongoing throughout each year. Inter alia, this would be in the form of class tests. In addition to monitoring students’ progress, this would prepare them for the formal written examinations at the end of Year 2. Since quite often students would have been away from formal education for a long time, formative assessment would begin early in the programme to help “ease them in”. In response to a Panel suggestion of using projects as an alternative to examinations, the Team replied that while this had been considered, they believed that projects would take up too much of students’ time and because it would normally involve group working, this would not be feasible given the widespread geographical spread of students. Furthermore, they considered projects more appropriate at a higher level. The written examinations, which would be the same as the Ulster Diploma examinations, would be coordinated with Ulster to ensure that they would be taken simultaneously at each institution.

4.4 The Panel noted that the programme would be delivered by only one member of staff and was informed that two lecturers had been asked to apply to join the College’s part-time register. One had already indicated their willingness to register and the Team were confident in regard to the other. Mr McCaul, the course coordinator would also be available to provide support where necessary.

4.5 Considerable links with the local Irish community existed. Many students attended conversational classes that were open to the public. Summer courses were also available and attended by some students.

4.6 The course tutor, Mr Markey, had built up a substantial array of resources to support delivery of the programme. All teaching materials would be made available on Moodle, the College's virtual learning environment. In addition, students would be directed to external resources. Each year, a "strategic" review of resources was carried out to ensure that all resources were current and no gaps existed.

4.7 There had always been excellent retention figures associated with the programme. This year, all 22 students who had joined the programme were retained to the end of Year 1. The College kept in touch with all early leavers to facilitate a return, where desired, within a reasonable period through the APL process.

4.8 Attendance was generally excellent. In the current year, only two students had been identified 'at risk'. The College's management information system contained a very good retention toolkit that aided supervision of attendance. Every two weeks the Deputy Head of School would be provided with attendance records and those students with less than 80% attendance would be contacted. The close relationship between staff and students aided attendance.

4.9 The College learning support centre provided support to those students who have notified the College of a disability. The process began at pre-enrolment during which the required support would be identified and put in place. In response specifically to dyslexia (highlighted by the Panel as being particularly relevant in a language course), appropriate support would be provided but the student would still be required to meet all the programme's language learning outcomes.

4.10 The course tutor had a great deal of experience in teaching a student cohort with diverse levels of academic study skills. At the outset, during induction, students would be made aware of the challenges they would face. Skills gaps would be identified and, where necessary, students would be provided with individual support. Further support would be available through the Quality Improvement Unit and, where necessary, a teaching and learning adviser would be assigned to the programme. In addition, other support packages would be available including the use of podcasts where usage can be tracked.

4.11 The programme did not require extensive digital skills. Many participants were mature students without technical skills who were often wary of information technology. However, the College provided extracurricular ICT courses for those who wished to develop their skills. Students would be made aware of online material and where and how to find it, for example, on the College's virtual learning environment, 'Moodle'. Online resources would be available for those students who wished to avail themselves of it but no pressure would be applied in that regard. In advance of classes, students would be sent via email notes and exercises to be completed. Links to relevant online materials would also be provided. Students would also be able to contact staff via email at any time between classes.

4.12 Regarding employability, normally about a third of the cohort were seeking a level 4 qualification (Leaving Certificate level) in order to be able to progress into a teacher training programme in the Republic of Ireland. Since the programme had been changed to a level 3 award, this may affect demand from that area. However, the development of an Associate Bachelor's degree in Irish Studies was currently under consideration by the College and would address this particular audience and provide a progression route for Diploma graduates. Most students' motivation for undertaking the programme was not job-related; most were already in employment. A small number wished to progress into a related degree programme at Ulster.

The Panel commended the Team on the following.

- Well-planned and carefully considered programme that was clearly presented
- Restructuring of the programme providing students with an opportunity to learn Irish language through an integrated and constructivist approach to language teaching thereby enhancing the student experience
- Expertise, enthusiasm and support provided by the course tutor and the general support provided by the course coordinator
- Success rate in terms of the numbers of students graduating from the programme year on year and the high level of student satisfaction.

The Panel agreed to recommend to the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee that the provision within Subject Unit 17B Irish (UG/SRC) be approved for a period of five years (intakes 2018/19 – 2022/23) subject to the condition and recommendations of the Panel being addressed and a satisfactory response and a revised submission being forwarded to the Academic Office for approval by the Chair of the Panel.

Condition

- 1) that all issues included in the appendix to the panel report be addressed.

Recommendations

- 1) that further articulation of the learning, teaching and assessment strategies be included in the revised document;
- 2) that further engagement be undertaken with Ulster colleagues regarding the new modules included in the programme;
- 3) that it be made explicit in the revised document how digital literacy would be achieved by students and articulate more fully on how teaching will be supported by the 'Moodle' virtual learning environment;
- 4) that it be fully articulated in the revised document the contingencies in place in the event of staff absences.

6 APPRECIATION

The Chair thanked the Panel members and in particular, the external members, for their valuable contribution to the revalidation process.