

### THE LIBRARY

An Leabharlann
ROYAL IRISH ACADEMY
Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann
External Quality Review

External Review Period Dates: Sept 29<sup>th</sup>- Sept 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021

## **External Quality Review Panel (EQRP)**

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## Summary of Findings

The Royal Irish Academy Library has an impressive reputation as a research resource in Ireland and internationally. It is a combination of reading, research and special collections library as well as a cultural institution with ambition to develop an online digital scholarship resource.

Since the operations of the RIA are supported largely by Irish Exchequer funding and only in small part by RIA membership fees, there is an expectation that the Academy, and the Library, provide access to the general public whilst balancing the expectations of members.

The External Quality Review Panel (EQRP) has identified a number of key findings in relation to areas of good practice operating within the RIA Library and areas which the Review Group would highlight as requiring future improvement. The main section of this Report sets out all observations, commendations and recommendations of the Review Group in more detail.

## 1.0 Introduction & Overview of the RIA Library

This report outlines, in summary form, the proceedings of the external quality review for the Royal Irish Academy Library. The quality review was requested by the Academy Librarian for the purposes of gathering feedback for the future development of the library and library services.

This strategic approach is timely as the current RIA strategic plan is due for renewal in 2023. The Library collection policy was last reviewed and published in 2018 and the most recent library audit was in 2019.

The selection of the reviewers was based on level of expertise and experience in Libraries, Special Collections, and Quality Assurance processes.

## 2.0 Background

The Royal Irish Academy was founded in 1785 as a society for 'promoting the study of science, polite literature and antiquities', and began publishing scholarly papers, assembling a library and museum, and encouraging new research in the sciences, Irish studies, languages, archaeology, and history. Today, the Academy continues to serve research interests throughout the island of Ireland and internationally. The Academy Library holds collections of national importance. Building on a strong tradition of bequests, donations and subscription towards major purchases, the collection strengths include holdings on Irish history, language and literature, archaeology, and Celtic studies, with good

retrospective scientific and natural history holdings and current and historic works by and on Academy members. The Library supports the research needs of Academy members, staff and projects as well as providing a quality service to registered readers and ALCID cardholders. It also supports the public engagement mission of the Academy through a user focussed service and outreach activities.

The Library position within the Royal Irish Academy is illustrated in the organisational chart found in Appendix B. The Librarian is in direct reporting line to the Executive Director.

## 3.0 Review Methodology

The review methodology for the RIA Library Quality review was comprehensive and informative. It sought to determine as much information from stakeholders to be presented to the EQRP. The steps of the review process were the following:

### 1. Preparation of Documentation

The following documentation was supplied to the EQRP in advance of the onsite visit.

- Peer Review Group (PRG) Schedule (see Appendix A for details)
- > Peer Review Group (PRG) Stakeholder Groups
- > RIA Library Self-Assessment Report (SAR)
- > RIA Strategic Plan 2019-23
- ➤ RIA Library Collection Policy
- Recommendations from Library Audit 2019
- 2. Involvement of internal RIA stakeholders, members, board of directors and The Library Committee.
- 3. Establishment of an external expert review panel.
- 4. A planned detailed two-day site visit (in person and online)
  - Key stakeholder interviewed
  - Site Visit of RIA facilities

### **Recommended subsequent steps**

The review panel recommends the following steps post submission of this review:

- The Review Group Report is disseminated to RIA internal stakeholders initially who will have an opportunity to provide feedback before further circulation
- An agreement of an action plan for improvement (Quality Improvement Plan) is developed based on the Review Group Report's recommendations.

• Implementation of an approach to monitoring progress against the Quality Improvement Plan; a report on progress toward achievement of improvements is recommended for 18 months following acceptance of the quality review report.

## 4.0 Library Staff & Library Services

The EQRP met with the Library Staff. These detailed exchanges were very informative and provided supporting but more comprehensive detail and scope of the staff insights reported in the Library Self-Assessment Report.

#### **Staff Profiles**

The EQRP met with three members of the library staff.

A lack of continuous professional development (CPD) was primarily rooted in the operational demands of managing library services on site. The unpredictability of members and general public researchers' visits was cited as the primary reason. The physical layout of workstations within the Library reading area, as well as the lack of training rooms, also contributes to the difficulty of staff engaging with online CPD alternatives. During the COVID- 19 pandemic an online booking system was introduced to facilitate visits to the library. This booking system has provided several solutions including:

- Library staff were able to anticipate the number of readers and their areas of research;
- This allowed for sourcing and preparation of research materials for readers which made their visits more efficient;
- The reader was guaranteed that they knew they had a seat to work from;
- It allowed more effective management of staff timetabling.

Staff however, perceived the booking system as a necessity under the circumstances but did not want its use to continue into the future. There were concerns that the members especially were feeling disenfranchised as they could not come into the library spontaneously, and older members found the use of online booking challenging.

The library staff appeared to be very knowledgeable about the collection, specialist areas of research, and demonstrated commitment to the members and the protection of the physical collection.

Availability of information about the Library's holdings is constrained by both the technologies and descriptive standards used, and access to digitised materials from its collections is very limited. Discussions about the limitations of the library catalogue identified inconsistencies in the

cataloguing of material, a lack of knowledge of what items in the collection had not been catalogued and lack of a cataloguing strategy to balance the collection development policy. The system used for cataloguing holdings of the collection and exposing descriptive records to users is very limited. Diverse materials—such as books, archival holdings and digitised images—are described in a common format that is not appropriate for all materials; this requires that staff catalogue materials without reference to well-established library and archival standards. The broader consequences of this circumstance are that the library's metadata records are not interoperable with other systems and therefore cannot be integrated with online meta-catalogues such as OCLC's *Worldcat* (https://www.worldcat.org/), which includes the holdings of many other Irish libraries and archives.

A modest digitization programme has been underway. It is not apparent, however, what the criteria is for the selection of material to be digitized. Staff were aware of standardised metadata cataloguing schemes but were resistant to use them in part due to constraints with the existing library management system. All staff interviewed expressed enthusiasm for expanding the digitisation programme, citing the expectations of users. Reference was also made to RIA Library holdings potentially accessible via *Irish Script on Screen* (https://www.isos.dias.ie/), which is hosted by the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.

It was noted that the library staff have experienced significant personnel changes in the past two years. Most notably the former Academy Librarian had retired after more than twenty years of holding the post and more recently three other members of staff had left (one through retirement and one through the conclusion of a contract). One member of staff who had resigned had been responsible for developing the RIA Library social media profile and online presence.

Some staff were concerned that there were no hand-over periods between departing and new staff, noting that there were delays in time from when staff left the RIA to when new staff were recruited and put in place.

The physical layout of staff workstations is not conducive to safe and effective work. There is no professional privacy in the current layout.

Staff expressed extreme frustration at the positioning of the reading room as a main thoroughfare for visitors to the Academy' principal meeting room.

In addition to the relative lack of development opportunities for library staff, there are concerns about the operational management of the staff. Staff demonstrated no autonomy but rather were reactive to pressures of members. The lack of coordination of types of queries, patterns of engagement or resources, has the potential to negatively impact on staff effectiveness and

management of collection resources. Staff were not risk averse to readers in the library touching and handling material, and even climbing on ladders to select items independently.

The Library has been involved in a number of collaborative activities such as the *Irish Script on Screen* project, the Doegen web archives project and the sponsorship of the Biennial manuscript conference.

#### **Commendations**

The RIA library staff demonstrated very strong commitment to the users of the RIA library, above all their devotion to the Academy's members. The engagement with and appreciation of the collection is impressive. The staff have been significantly challenged with the change in personnel and the pandemic and welcome a new direction for the RIA library.

#### Recommendations

- The booking system should remain in place. The benefits of the system should be communicated to staff. The application of the booking system should have three primary goals: (1) better management of library services and facilities, (2) provide for regular periods of staff development and CPD, and (3) to effectively monitor and record the use of library resources to help in the prioritization of conservation, etc.
- Whilst the staff were very internally focused on the RIA library, history and previous work
  patterns, exposure to other specialist libraries and cultural institutions would help to develop
  more current operational practices.
- All staff should engage in Continuous Professional Development. The lack of professional development was evident. Given the proximity of the RIA to other libraries and cultural institutions a work exchange or shadowing exercise would be beneficial.
- A review of the possibility of closing the Library one day a week to external readers to facilitate staff professional development should be considered.
- The staff were very insular in their approach to library services. There is an awareness of the funding from the government and therefore a requirement to facilitate and encourage members of the public to use the collection. Steps should be taken to create awareness of access to the library and to embark on outreach so that there is more general access to the library.
- Involvement of staff in related professional bodies such as the Library Association of Ireland or the Archives and Records Association should be encouraged and supported.
- The RIA should actively engage in succession planning.
- An external consultant should be brought into the RIA to evaluate staff working conditions in terms of Health & Safety and effective workflow management. Staff need to be more aware of

and be encouraged to enforce appropriate health and safety issues.

 A review of all library roles should be undertaken and a staff skills and a development audit should be undertaken. A library staff development plan should be put in place to identify related courses, professional development as well as the requirement for non-traditional library skills such as photoshop and graphic design.

### 5.0 RIA Collection

The RIA Collection is of national and international significance. The Library's collection of over 1,500 manuscripts began in the foundation year 1785 with the presentation to the Academy of the fourteenth-century Book of Ballymote by the Chevalier O'Gorman. Home to the *Cathach*, the sixth-century Latin psalter reputed to have been copied by St Colum Cille (Columba), it houses the largest collection of Irish language manuscripts in the world, including *Lebor na hUidre* (the Book of the Dun Cow), the oldest extant manuscript completely in Irish. Significant manuscript resources in English and Latin include the seventeenth-century *Books of Survey & Distribution*, the deeds of the Guild of St Anne, the Haliday manuscript collection, and numerous sets of correspondence and papers including important natural history collections, such as the correspondence of AG. More, 1830-95, which contains letters from Charles Darwin among others.

The Library holds over 8,000 drawings of antiquarian interest from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries including works by Gabriel Beranger, Sir Richard Colt Hoare, Henry Dryden, G.V. Du Noyer, George Petrie, W.F. Wakeman and T.J. Westropp. The Ordnance Survey records of the great nineteenth-century 6-inch mapping project include Memoirs, Letters, Extracts & Inquisitions, and an extensive collection of drawings. The Library has excellent collections of antiquarian books and periodicals such as the library of Thomas Moore, the philological collection of Osborn J. Bergin and the book collection of Henry A.S. Upton. Charles Haliday's pamphlet and tract collections, donated by his widow in 1867, relate to every important event in Ireland over a 300-year period and include much of interest to economic, political, religious, social, and local historians.

The value of the manuscript collection of the RIA to understanding Irish history and heritage is inestimable. The pamphlet collection as well as other modern print collections are also invaluable. The cataloguing of these collections has had an impact on engagement, research, and awareness of the RIA as a research source.

However, there is a lack of a centralised inventory or catalogue that can accurately identify all of the diverse items in the RIA Collection. The academic, research, and cultural value of the collection is

understood, but this does not appear to be the case with the monetary value The library collection is without doubt the most valuable asset of the RIA culturally and monetarily.

### **Physical Condition of the Collection**

The physical collection of the library collection appears to have been neglected. Whilst the appreciation of the cultural and historical value of the collection is accepted as important and indeed unique, many items in the collection are visibly in need of repairs and restoration.

A lack of a centralized inventory of all items is concerning. This prevents in the first instance knowing the breadth and depth of the collection and the associated items. The library does not have a mechanism for collecting information about the use of the items in the collection--there is currently no monitoring system to know what is being used, for what purpose or when. This chaotic but researcher-responsive approach to making the collection available on demand makes it almost impossible to prioritize what can be sent out for repairs, book binding, or other conservation treatments.

Budgetary constraints have led to a non-continuous maintenance of material. The collection is primarily housed in the main reading room but is also stored in the basement and an offsite facility provided by the OPW. While the review group did not have access to the offsite storage facility, a tour of the storage areas with the Academy House revealed questionable collections security. The high value collections are housed in an environmentally monitored secure storage area.

This lack of consistency of shelving and storage coupled with the lack of a centralized inventory of the collection is extremely risky. Further deterioration of material is inevitable if not addressed in the immediate future. The lack of cohesiveness of the relationship between items poses a risk to comprehensive research. The mixing of rare, invaluable items in a reading room where staff and the public have physical access to handle directly is alarming.

#### **RIA Facilities and Infrastructure**

Environmental conditions for the collection are challenging in the main reading room but most importantly in the basement of the RIA. Items stored in the basement (with the exception of the strong room) were not in a controlled environment, items were physically exposed which posed a high risk for damage from human engagement, fire, or water damage. The positioning of items on open shelves posed the risk that they could be moved or lost, or not returned to the assigned section of storage.

The lack of security systems or identity tagging of items poses significant risk of theft of items of the collection as well. There appear to be security cameras, but these are effective only after an incident

has occurred and are not preventative measures. The reviewers did not visit the offsite storage of the library's items so cannot offer opinions on this.

There are benefits to the RIA library being a small, specialized library. It can be flexible in ways that larger libraries are not able to. It can accommodate readers and directly support readers in ways larger libraries cannot. There is a significant advantage in it being a close contact research facility where library staff can obtain direct feedback from users.

The positioning of the main reading room and its composition are challenging. The main reading room is in the centre of the main floor of the RIA. Visitors to events held in the adjacent meeting room have to use the reading room as a throughway. This is disruptive to staff and readers and also poses risks to the collection with a large volume of traffic. Library staff workstations are wedged in between shelving areas and on corridors in the upstairs gallery. There is inadequate space between staff and readers. The lighting is poor throughout and inadequate for onscreen viewing. For staff working in the upper balcony there is an added distraction of all noise below travelling upwards.

The establishment of a digitisation station in the upper gallery is inappropriate. Lighting is very poor, environmental conditions are not adequate and the risk of damage to items in process scanning is high.

There is an enormous table in the middle of the main reading room. It takes up significant space and does not offer flexibility for use. The size and layout of the table limits the number of reading spaces and access to the library collection. While interviews with stakeholders revealed a sense that the 19th-century ambiance of the room and its furnishings was valued by Academy members, the current furnishing and their arrangement is unergonomic as well as hostile to effective and safe use of the space and library collections.

### **Commendations**

- The library collection has been cared for as best possible despite a lack of consistent funding for ongoing maintenance and conservation.
- The development of specialist exhibitions online as well as the lunchtime talk series have helped in raising the awareness about the collection.
- The collection is an invaluable and unique asset to Ireland in terms of cultural, research and academic significance.
- Staff have been very accommodating in less-than-ideal working conditions. They have demonstrated flexibility and tolerance for uncomfortable working conditions.

#### Recommendations

- As a priority the library collection (in all locations) must undergo a professional conservation needs assessment to identify what is in the collection, and to identify and prioritise the conservation and repair of items. Based on the resulting conservation needs assessment, a review of the insurance cover for the collection should be examined to ensure it is adequately covered.
- Security arrangements and systems, including video surveillance, access controls to the basement store, and water detection systems are typically deployed to protect valuable special collections and deployment should be given due consideration.
- A Health and Safety Audit of all staff working areas needs to be undertaken.
- An external workplace designer should be commissioned to identify alternatives to workstations in balance with readers requirements.
- As part of the recruitment process a professional archivist should be employed for the management and development of the archival material to meet best practice and archival standards.
- An alternative to the existing antique reading table that is sensitive to the architecture of the
  facility while also meeting contemporary ergonomic standards should be deployed. n alternative
  location for the table in the reading room is recommended since it appears to be culturally
  significant to members and officers of the RIA; it might be suitable for a Board Room, for
  example..
- Establishment of another, discrete location for the digitisation activities, with proper lighting and environmental controls; outsourcing of digitisation activities might also prove cost-effective and potentially yield higher quality reproductions.
- Display of adequate signposting is needed to help facilitate the library as a workspace when there are external visitors to the RIA.

## 6.0 Library Committee

As part of the Governance structure of the RIA the library is supported by The Library Committee. The Library as a service line reports directly to the Executive Director but has procedural and governance issues reviewed by the Committee. For example, the library budget which is approximately 30K/annum is monitored by this committee. The committee is invited to give opinions on issues. The annual subscription list goes to The Committee for approval and some projects within the library require its formal approval, such as the *Irish Heritage Online* (IHO) project.

The Library Committee is constituted by members of the RIA. There are no external librarians or archivists as members of this committee. The committee meets two times a year.

#### **Commendations**

The library is fortunate to have the support of members of the Academy, many of whom are current or retired academics or researchers. The establishment of a specific committee to support the library is a recognition of the value and the esteem the library is held by the RIA. As The Library Committee is constituted of members this represents the positive value members hold about the library as well.

#### Recommendations

- The Library Committee should look to add a professional librarian and a professional archivist to the library committee; given the critical role of technology in the operation of modern libraries, the Academy's Head of Information Technology should also sit on this group. This level of expertise and awareness of key library issues, strategic and sectoral developments would be invaluable. A precedent for appointment of external professionals to advisory committees of the Academy to assure that optimal expertise is available is seen, for example, in the constitution of the Information Technology advisory committee.
- The Library Committee should consider meeting more than twice a year to address potential issues that arise in a timely manner.

## 7.0 General Information – Positioning of the library in the RIA

The library has a complex structure within the RIA. It is centrally positioned with the various functions and projects of the Academy using library resources, but not necessarily in collaboration. The publications unit could perhaps be the most engaged with the library. The overall governance is by the Executive Director with Academy Officers and then Academy members involved in different capacities and guidance to the library. In the 2019-2023 RIA strategic plan there is a description of the library collection and its relationship to research and collaboration but there is no direct indication of how the library fits within the overall strategic planning of the RIA. This may be the root of some of the ambiguity of the purpose and role of the library. For such a small library, in terms of size and staffing, it is involved in the multiple activities sponsored by the RIA but does not appear to directly benefit from this involvement. For example, there is no direct link of repository deposits from the library to the DRI (Digital Repository Ireland). There appears to be multiple budgets and cross-funding, yet the library is allocated a very small budget of approximately €30K, an amount insufficient to support badly needed conservation activities, for example.

There appears to be an excellent working relationship between the library and Academy Functions and Projects, and this is a good foundation for developing potential joint research applications for funding and initiatives. The library as the central hub of the RIA contributes significantly to these other academic endeavours. Each of the other RIA components were challenged with the question to imagine the RIA without the library and there was unanimous consensus that there would be no RIA without the library. Whilst the library is held in high esteem in many cases as service or supporter there appears to be missed opportunities to work with the library as a collaborator or partner in the further development of research, digitisation, and scholarship.

#### **Commendations**

The library and library staff are held in very high esteem by colleagues in all functions and projects. RIA Academy officers and the Executive Director. Functions and projects are very dependent on the library collection for development of their own initiatives.

#### Recommendations

- The library to develop its own strategic plan in line with the overall RIA new strategic plan.
- That there are defined clear reporting lines and structures for the library. Cross budget
  considerations and financial recognition for the contributions that enable funding and
  sponsorship for other functions and projects.
- Inaugurate a development program to identify grant opportunities to support library needs (such a conservation and preservation); look for opportunities for Academy-sponsored projects to prepare joint proposals with the Library for external funding.
- Review the potential for targeted fundraising, for example, establishment of a Friends of the library RIA group.
- Explore the relationship of the library with internal stakeholders beyond service and support to collaborators or partners in a range of areas.

## 8.0 Overall Findings

### **Main Findings EQRP**

- The full extent of the collection, storage location and condition of material is an issue that requires immediate review. The Library collection is perhaps the most valuable asset of the RIA but this is not possible to quantify. The risk to the collection is high.
- The RIA Library staff is a committed, professional and collegiate unit with a strong team ethos.
- The Library staff were engaged and openly positive with the PRF. Their commitment to the Library and especially members of the RIA was consistently evident.
- There are some concerns about staff development and at present staff are challenged to deliver within the immediate confines of their own roles and are missing out on skills development, reflection and wider contribution to the RIA.

### Commendations

- Strategic Leadership demonstrated by recent appointment of Academy Librarian;
- the preparation of the material was excellent;
- the engagement of Library staff;
- active participation by all stakeholders.

### Recommendations

- Undertake a formal risk-assessment study of Library facilities, including reading areas and storage facilities, identifying potential threats to safety of collections as well as health and safety issues for staff and Library users.
- Undertake a conservation needs assessment with the aim of identifying materials in need of
  conservation treatment, while also enabling development of a long-term, prioritised plan
  that targets collection resources for conservation. This is a necessary first step toward
  understanding the true value of the collection, but also of understanding the long-term
  investment needed to preserve priceless collections.
- Evaluate procedures for documenting collections, including evaluation of the current library management system and cataloguing practices; establish a long-term goal for improved accessibility of information about Library holdings, including archival holdings, graphical content, maps, etc.
- Articulate a coherent digitisation plan that is sensitive to user expectations and of a scale
  appropriate to the size of Academy staff and its technological capacity. Identify appropriate
  partners for collaborative ventures, whereby the identity and provenance of materials
  digitised from the collection are not obscured.
- Engage with the DIAS to review the technologies supporting *Irish Script on Screen* with a
  view toward development of a platform that integrates current technologies, above all
  incorporating the standards of the International Image Interoperability Protocol (IIIF), which
  opens up exciting new possibilities to end users for use of digitized materials (the DRI
  supports IIIF, for example).
- When developing the RIA Library Strategy attention should be given to as to how the strategy of the library contributes to the over RIA Strategy. Some areas for the Library Management team to reflect on include how the Library might be recognised as contributors to the research portfolio of the RIA. This would embed the Library more visibly into the overall strategic priorities of the RIA.

# 9.0 Appendix A – PRG Schedule

## Library Quality Review 2021 PRG Schedule

## Weds Sept 29<sup>th</sup>

09.00-09.15 PRG meets Council Room
09.15-10.00 Briefing by Academy Librarian Council Room
10.00-11:00 Tour of Library and storage areas Library
11.00-11.15 Coffee Council Room
11.15-12.15 Meeting with Library Staff Reading Room
12.15-13.00 PRG discusses Self-Assessment Report (SAR) Council Room
13.00-14.15 Lunch
14.15-15.00 Meeting with Executive Director Council Room
15.00-16.00 Meeting with Library Committee Council Room
16.00-17.00 PRG private meeting Council Room

## Thurs Sept 30th

09.00-09.30 PRG private meeting MS Teams
09.30-10.15 Meeting with Heads of Functions MS Teams
10.20-11.00 Meeting with Heads of Projects MS Teams
11.00-11.20 Coffee
11.30-12.30 Meeting with Academy Members MS Teams
12.30-13.15 Meeting with Officers MS Teams
13.00-14.30 Lunch
14.30-15.15 Meeting with Academy Staff MS Teams
15.30-16.30 Meeting with Librarian to discuss initial findings MS Teams
16.30 PRG visit ends

# Organisation chart



