

APPLICATION FOR SUSTAINED EXCELLENCE TEACHING AWARD 2016
Professor Sean O'Connell, History and Anthropology

1. PREVIOUS TEACHING AWARDS (200 words maximum)

If you have ever previously won a Queen's Teaching Award, please note the year and category (e.g. Rising Star, Team etc) below. You should also provide a short explanation of how the work outlined in this application differs from the work for which you were previously recognised.

2. CONTEXT FOR THE APPLICATION (300 words maximum)

Please provide a brief summary of your application and a context for your work. Examples of the information you might include are; the subject you teach or the area of learning support you work in, the type of learning and teaching/learning support activities you are involved in, how many learners are involved, your particular learning and teaching/learning support interests and an outline of your overall teaching/learning support philosophy?

Despite my leading research role (Professor/DR/REF Champion) I have significant involvement in teaching: my load has always consisted of four UG modules (206 students this year) and two MA modules (6-10 students). The core of this application focuses on recent examples of my holistic approach towards teaching and research. Research interests in oral history have fed innovative teaching practice at both UG and PG levels and strong contributions on student employability. This built upon my longstanding commitment to teaching excellence. I have had important roles as History Pathway Co-ordinator (2006-8), DE (2008-11) and CLA (2011-14). In the first role, I chaired meetings that hammered out the remodelling of the UG History curriculum. Level 1 was re-shaped and a dissertation module added at Level 3. Significant outcomes included the emergence of the award winning 'History and Historians' module and improved student attainment due to the quality of work on the dissertation module on which students perform exceptionally. I contribute on employability in a number of ways. Most significantly, via my module 'Recording History', which involves a number of distinctive activities (including carrying out ethical oral history interviews, working to create interviews and transcripts, and pitching potential documentary ideas to BBC Radio Ulster producers). It provides a powerful skills/experience narrative that students can relate in employment applications. My commitment to increasing student employability extends to the creation of the School's Voluntary Summer Internships. Up to 20 undergraduates per year work with organisations such as the Holylands Reunion Group, Carntogether Community Association (South Derry), Ulster Museum, Artsetka, (working on oral histories with Northern Ireland's Asian communities), the Prison Memories Archive, the Royal Historic Palaces (at Hillsborough Castle), and the Sion Mills Preservation Trust. My philosophy is straightforward: provide innovative student experiences and then step back to empower student development and achievement.

3. DISCUSSION

You should illustrate your discussion throughout with reference to specific learning and teaching/learning support activities. You should also provide examples of the influence of learner feedback on your learning and teaching/learning support practice.

(a) Promoting and enhancing the learners' experience (1000 words maximum)

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I focus here on Recording History (35 students) and my efforts to address skills/employability. Being DE and CLA alerted me to student resistance to engagement with career planning. My practical position is that School-level initiatives are often most effective. In tackling employability, I set up two schemes where students had to make formal applications (and attend interviews) for various positions. These were for roles as Student Peer Mentors (established in 2009) and for the Voluntary Summer Internships (established in 2012). Both schemes were created in response to student requests articulated at SSCC. Unsuccessful candidates receive feedback and are encouraged to reflect on this in advance of job applications. Student involvement in these roles develops important skills and enhances the narrative of personal development that they can relate to potential employers. I instigated these measures in tandem with a complementary teaching initiative: Recording History.

The BA History Level 2 module 'History and Society' is a vehicle for elements of the employability agenda. It is an interesting, well-taught, module. However, some student module evaluation critiqued the inclusion of lectures on entrepreneurship. The module's compulsory status added to their frustration. I set about designing an alternative module that offered an employability/skills focus embedded in a History-centred module. The result is 'Recording History'. The module develops a range of working practices and skills with which students have no previous experience. They engage in tasks that highlight the importance of accuracy, team-working in a number of forms, and researching for presentations and pitches. This offers the students an experience that closely approximates to elements of assessment that will face at from graduate employers. Involvement in the module enables students to relate a powerful narrative of personal development to these employers. It engages students in the completion of an oral history project in partnership with the BBC (which provides a workshop on sound recording, interviewing, and documentary making). Students receive training in ethical interviewing and research. They are directed to secure the interviewees' informed consent to use their oral testimony. Students work in pairs to conduct and transcribe the interviews. They produce high quality and accurate transcripts, which are formally assessed (20% of marks). They also write a short reflective assessed piece on their own interview (20%). In subsequent weeks, they have the opportunity to consult all the transcripts and prepare the final two assessments. The first is an individual project report on a theme, agreed with me, which explores some aspect of the oral history process (40%). The students also return to the BBC to pitch ideas for potential radio documentaries (10%). They are prepared for this via workshops and practice sessions, and work (in groups of four or 5) to develop their group's pitch. The pitch is a close substitute for the type of preparation they will have to undertake for interviews or assessment centres with graduate employers. They have to identify their potential documentary's theme, title, presenter, broadcast slot, potential audience, and any potential online spin-offs; all of which requires significant research and coordinated group work. The pitch to the BBC follows the format expected of professional production companies and each group faces rigorous questioning. Each year, the students have performed exceptionally and the BBC team has described the pitches as 'superb', 'slick' and 'professional'. Ultimately, the potential reward is the opportunity to make a BBC documentary. In February 2015, three students from the 2012/13 class had their idea 'Diamond in the Rough' broadcast on Radio Ulster and Radio 5 Live. For all students, the experience builds a skillset, enhances CVs and forms a strong personal narrative to assist career development.

Assessments of the module are extremely positive. Despite the fact that it is a compulsory - and challenging - Level 2 module 90% of students in 2015 were satisfied with the module (the other 10% ticked 'neither'). Professor Taylor, the external examiner who saw its implementation praised its ambition, achievement and the exceptional quality of work coaxed from students by assessment design. Two students from last year's group were 'commended' in the Undergraduate Awards, placing them in the top 50 of submitted work from 300 universities. Student written feedback also provides clear evidence of the module's effectiveness.

'I loved the interviewing, the hands-on experience, meeting real people and doing something productive outside the academic sphere. It was good to put down the books and get out into the community. The BBC involvement was amazing and truly inspiring. I found a calling for my future and I'm so grateful for an opportunity!' (2013)

'This module was completely different from anything I have done before. It offered new and more practical ways to learn about history through oral history...The BBC pitch was also very exciting and I learnt a lot of new skills from this. Overall this has been my favourite module so far!' (2014)

'Sean was an interesting lecturer and was clearly passionate about what he was teaching. He motivated us to complete a variety of individual work and group work and also offered individual meetings with us to offer one on one support and advice for the group project'. (2014)

'Professor O'Connell is a very enthusiastic and engaging lecturer and his own interest in his topic helped to inspire my own interest in it. He has a very detailed teaching style ... a friendly approach to his students and provides support for which I have been very grateful.' (2015)

'Clear passion for the module! I don't think there is another lecturer who dedicates themselves to a module to the same extent as Sean does in HIS2063.' (2015)

'Prof O'Connell should be commended for his hard work and creativity in delivering this most enjoyable module.' (2015)

'An absolutely brilliant module, providing remarkable insights into oral history, effectively opening it up as a medium that has amazing potential and providing students with in-depth knowledge of this that they likely would not pick up from other modules...Very well planned and presented and I would very highly recommend it to other students.' (2015)

**(b) Supporting colleagues and influencing support for student and/or staff learning
(350 words maximum)**

In terms of student learning, I would like to highlight the Voluntary Summer Internship Scheme I have set up in the School as a case of good practice. It has achieved consistently pleasing results producing satisfied students and earning praise from those groups who took the students as interns. Examples of student feedback include:

'I feel that it has improved my communication skills with others and also improved my confidence in this area.... This has given me food for thought in that would I consider pursuing a career in research.'

'I'm looking forward to working with Artsekta again when I have more free time and so am grateful for the opportunity.'

'The internship has already helped me when applying for jobs so on that front the internship has been invaluable. I think the range of internships was fantastic, there was so many to choose from. That was helpful because then you could pick the one that would be most likely to help out with your career.'

'As I am hoping to go into a career within the Museum industry, possibly as an archivist, this experience has really opened my eyes to the type of work that would entail, and has definitely encouraged me that it is something I am interesting in pursuing.'

'The project has strengthened my interest in history and shown me that there are a lot of different avenues I could go down career wise. I found the process of application and recruitment very straightforward and the project was very flexible which was perfect during the summer as I could work it around my job.'

In assisting staff learning, my contributions include inviting Dr Sarah Richardson (Warwick University/HEA) to visit in 2009. The event examined broad pedagogical issues and focused on national trends in History NSS scores. The event led to the decision to move to online feedback on exams, which has been much appreciated by our students and may well be a factor in improved NSS scores.

(c) Ongoing professional development (350 words maximum)

Relevant experience in this respect includes roles as external examiner at Manchester Metropolitan, Worcester and Limerick universities. This informed my dealings (as DE) with our own external examiners and in compiling Annual Programme Reviews with a strong sense of how our curriculum compared with others. I was also (for two years) the School's delegate to History UK, which meets to discuss the HE History sector. Most recently, my energies have focused on a holistic approach towards my work in oral history. My research feeds into innovative teaching practice at both UG and PG levels. Of particular significance was my time as a Visiting Fellow at Concordia University's Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling. Whilst there, I collaborated with Dr Steven High who is one of the world's foremost oral historians and discussed his approaches to teaching. We set up a student exchange scheme. Two QUB MA students spent time in Concordia last May and a Concordia PhD student will visit QUB this May and take a role on the Recording History module. Dr High and I intend developing this relationship by creating a cross-Atlantic module that will be taught simultaneously in both institutions.

As editor of the leading journal *Oral History*, I further my own research profile and also keep abreast of the latest developments in all aspects of oral history. The journal has a focus on technical developments, oral history in education, and oral history in the community. My involvement in shaping the journal's content will have tremendous benefits for continuing innovation on Recording History and in encouraging our students to get involved in community outreach via oral history. In the medium term, much of this innovation will be in the form of technological issues that will add a further element to the transferable skills associated with the module.

I have also engaged with the Science Shop in its project on embedding responsible research skills in the undergraduate curriculum. I have met with Emma McKenna to discuss this on several occasions and recently was a keynote speaker at a QUB workshop on the theme.