



University College Dublin

Periodic Quality Review

UCD School of Economics

April 2010

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1. Introduction and Overview of UCD School of Economics

Introduction

- 1.1 This report presents the findings of a quality review of the UCD School of Economics, at University College Dublin. The review was undertaken in April 2010.

The Review Process

- 1.2 Irish Universities have collectively agreed a framework for their quality review and quality improvement systems, which is consistent with both the legislative requirements of the Universities Act 1997, and international good practice. Quality reviews are carried out in academic, administrative and support service units.
- 1.3 The purpose of periodic review is to assist the University to assure itself of the quality of each of its constituent units, and to utilise learning from this essentially developmental process in order to effect improvement, including:
- To monitor the quality of the student experience, and of teaching and learning opportunities
 - To monitor research activity, including: management of research activity; assessing the research performance with regard to: research productivity, research income, and recruiting and supporting doctoral students
 - To provide an opportunity for units to test the effectiveness of their systems and procedures for monitoring and enhancing quality and standards
 - To provide a framework within which the unit can continue to work in the future towards quality improvement
 - To identify shortfalls in resources and provide an externally validated case for change and/or increased resources
 - Identify, encourage and disseminate good practice – to identify challenges and address these
 - To provide public information on the University's capacity to assure the quality and standards of its awards. The University's implementation of its quality review procedures also enables it to demonstrate how it discharges its responsibilities for assuring the quality and standards of its awards, as required by the Universities Act 1997.
- 1.4 Typically, the review model comprises of four major elements:
- Preparation of a Self-assessment Report (SAR)
 - A visit by a Review Group (RG) that includes UCD staff and external experts, both national and international. The site visit normally will take place over a two or three day period.
 - Preparation of a Review Group Report that is made public

- Agreement of an Action Plan for Improvement (Quality Improvement Plan) based on the RG Report's recommendations; the University will also monitor progress against the Improvement Plan

Full details of the review process can be found on the UCD Quality Office website: www.ucd.ie/quality.

- 1.5 The composition of the Review Group for the UCD School of Economics was as follows:
- Professor Mary Clayton, UCD School of English, Drama and Film (Chair)
 - Dr Áine Ni Dhubhain, UCD School of Agriculture, Food Science and Veterinary Medicine (Deputy Chair)
 - Professor Brian Nolan, UCD School of Applied Social Science
 - Professor Gareth Myles, University of Exeter
 - Professor Cillian Ryan, University of Birmingham
- 1.6 The RG visited the School from 26th – 29th April 2010 and held meetings with School staff, University students and staff, including: the Head of School; College Principal; School academic staff; School support staff; employers of graduates; postgraduate students, taught and research; recent graduates; undergraduate students; the Deputy Registrar, Teaching & Learning; and student advisors.
- 1.7 In addition to the Self-assessment Report, the RG considered documentation provided by the Unit and the University. This included the UCD Strategic Plan, the School of Economics Undergraduate Handbook, module descriptors and assessments, minutes of School meetings and School Executive meetings, the 2007 School Strategic Plan, the new Workload model, the report of the Curriculum Review Committee and minutes of the staff-student forum.
- 1.8 In preparing the Self-Assessment Report, the School set up a Self-assessment Co-ordinating Committee in accordance with the UCD Quality Office Guidelines. The members of the Co-ordinating Committee were:
- Professor David Madden, Head of School (Chair)
 - Dr Tiziana Brancaccio
 - Mr Rob Gillanders, PhD Student
 - Ms Joanna Gumularz, School Administrator
 - Dr Vincent Hogan
 - Professor Morgan Kelly
- 1.9 The Co-ordinating Committee met 5 times between October 2009 and April 2010, and Self-assessment Report sections were divided amongst the members of the committee. The report was informed by informal communication between the unit

staff and members of the Co-ordinating Committee. A preliminary draft of the report was also circulated to staff for comments. Questionnaires were designed and circulated for staff and student (undergraduate and postgraduate) feedback.

The University

1.10 University College Dublin (UCD) is a large and diverse university whose origin dates back to 1854. The University is situated on a large, modern campus, about 4km to the south of the centre of Dublin.

1.11 The current University Strategic Plan (to 2014) states that the University's Mission is:

“to advance knowledge, to pursue truth and to foster learning, in an atmosphere of discovery, creativity, and innovation, drawing out the best in each student and contributing to the social, cultural and economic life of Ireland in the wider world”.

The University is organised into 35 Schools in five Colleges;

- UCD College of Arts and Celtic Studies
- UCD College of Human Sciences
- UCD College of Life Sciences
- UCD College of Engineering, Mathematical and Physical Sciences
- UCD College of Business and Law

1.12 As one of the largest universities in Ireland, UCD supports a broad, deep and rich academic community in Science, Engineering, Medicine, Arts, Celtic Studies and Human Sciences. There are currently over 22,000 students (14,000 undergraduates) registered on University programmes, including over 3,000 international students from more than 110 countries.

UCD School of Economics

1.13 The School of Economics at UCD is the largest such unit in Ireland and one of the largest Schools in UCD. It is one of ten Schools in the College of Human Sciences. The School consists of 23 FTEs in teaching staff and two administrative staff. The School has an undergraduate teaching programme that delivers modules principally to students in the Colleges of Human Sciences, Arts and Celtic Studies and Business and Law. The School also delivers modules at Masters and PhD level. The School has a well-defined structure linking the Masters and PhD programmes and co-operates with the Schools of Economics at Trinity College Dublin and NUI Maynooth in the provision of graduate teaching as well as supervision of theses. The School also has a strong commitment to research and to publication in high-quality peer-reviewed outlets and in this regard, by all commonly used metrics, it is the most research active Economics School in Ireland and compares favourably with similarly sized institutions in Europe.

2. Organisation and Management

2.1 The School has recently moved from a situation when much of the organisation and management was undertaken by the Head of School, with consequently little delegation and a “light touch” approach to organisation. A more structured system is

evolving in the School. It now has an Executive Committee as well as three sub-committees: one for Teaching and Learning, one for Graduate Studies, and one for Research. The Executive Committee meets at monthly intervals and deals with routine matters which may arise under the three headings.

- 2.2 The School is currently engaged in developing a formal workload model, which will be used to inform future workload allocations.

Commendations

- 2.3 Significant progress has been made in moving to a new Committee structure for the management of the School.
- 2.4 School meetings are held regularly.
- 2.5 In 2009-2010 a curriculum review team was established to undertake a review of the undergraduate programme.
- 2.6 The School is currently developing a workload model.

Recommendations

- 2.7 The School should consider a more transparent decision-making process.
- 2.8 The School should consider a formal and regular review of various aspects of the curriculum.
- 2.9 Given the issues highlighted in the SAR and elsewhere in this report regarding the high failure rates in Stage 1, the School should consider appointing a Stage 1 co-ordinator from among the academic staff, with specific responsibility for student engagement; co-ordinators for other stages should also be considered.
- 2.10 The School should consider means to increase the engagement of academic staff in the running of the School.
- 2.11 Notwithstanding the desirability of stretching targets, the current version of the workload model should be reconsidered to ensure that the research targets are set at realistic and attainable levels.
- 2.12 In light of anticipated constraints/reductions in the budget, the School should consider capitalising on its research reputation to attract international students. However, recognising the challenges facing the School in other areas, this should only be done if an agreed proportion of the financial benefit is returned in an identifiable way to the School in order to take pressure off other areas (see 6.13).

3. Staff and Facilities

- 3.1 The staffing situation in the School has changed significantly over the past five years. In the recent past the School undertook an aggressive and successful process of hiring at the senior level, supported by some careful junior level appointments. The outcome of this process is that the School achieved a good level of staffing (in terms of FTEs) by 2008 and a very strong research position, as recorded in the SAR, given that it has the second-highest staff-student ratio in the University.

- 3.2 The change in the financial environment has resulted in a reduction in staffing since 2008 and the School faces further losses of senior staff in the short term. Some of these losses will occur as contracts expire while others arise from natural turnover of staff. The current financial environment has changed the context for staffing considerably and may impact upon the composition of the School. The current expectation is that some replacements will be made available at junior level but these remain subject to approval at central University level and cannot be guaranteed. Any replacements will not be in position until September 2011 at the earliest. The need to plan to mitigate the consequences of reduced resources in the short- to mid-term is the common thread that runs through the comments below.
- 3.3 The level of academic staff is currently adequate to cover the core discipline and a range of specialisms. Any reduction below the current level will make it increasingly difficult for the School to maintain this coverage. Difficulties in this regard would be felt first at MA level because of the greater degree of specialism that is required. The possibility of working with TCD on a joint MA would bring benefits here, but we consider elsewhere in the report (9.6) the potential drawbacks of collaboration.
- 3.4 It was observed that the student-staff ratio is the second highest in the University. This is not reflected in the level of resources that flow to the School from the University and has implications for the provision of teaching to undergraduate classes. The potential threats arising from the predicted reduction in staffing levels would be averted if the School was financially rewarded by the University in a way that fully reflected its contribution to teaching.
- 3.5 When judged from the perspective of an individual faculty member the balance between research and teaching responsibilities is very satisfactory. Despite the high number of students the School has succeeded in keeping teaching loads relatively low and this has liberated research time for staff. The School expressed concern in the SAR, and this concern is echoed by the RG, that this balance may be negatively impacted by the expected reduction in staffing level. The number of FTEs is already quite low and the loss of two or three further staff will therefore have a proportionately significant effect upon average teaching loads of remaining staff. The possible consequences of this for research output are discussed in more detail in the Research section.
- 3.6 A different picture emerges if the balance is judged from the student perspective. The School can only sustain the excessive student-staff ratios by not providing small group teaching for the large Stage 1 classes. This aspect is reviewed in detail in the Teaching section.
- 3.7 The School employs only two non-academic staff. This is entirely inadequate given the very large number of students and the RG believes that the University must provide the School with the resources to increase the number of non-academic staff. There are several areas in which additional support could be used and the School should be invited to prioritise.
- 3.8 The employment of senior figures, retired from other institutions, as lecturers has been very cost-effective and adds considerable strength to the School but it does affect the development and employment opportunities for young scholars. While it may be tempting to make more of these appointments if the financial situation worsens, this should be resisted if it threatens the long-term development of the School through an unbalanced age distribution.

- 3.9 The SAR does not provide details of any staff development programmes. Most recent hires have been at the senior level so this has not been an issue. In the future, new hires are more likely to be at the junior level, given the financial circumstances. Hence, mentoring will be more important. In the past the School relied upon an informal process of mentoring for junior members of academic staff. This has now begun to change with the beginnings of a formal mentoring process being implemented by the Head of School and at College level. We commend the School on the recent development of a mentoring structure and recommend that this be placed on a formal footing within the School.
- 3.10 The RG was also informed that induction programmes for new members of academic staff provided at the University level were inadequate. It appears that the current induction process presumes that all new academic staff are adequately informed of local banking and taxation regulations. In the new era of internationalisation this can no longer be taken for granted and the induction process needs to be modified to cater for international staff.
- 3.11 The RG was informed that there are a number of management development modules available for new Heads of School, but, inevitably, these will tend to be treated as of secondary importance, given the other demands a Head faces. Best practice would suggest that new Heads are actively mentored by experienced Heads (from the same or other Colleges) in order to support their development.
- 3.12 The RG was not shown teaching facilities and no laboratory space is used by the School. It appears that the financial environment up to now has enabled all staff requests for resources (e.g. computers) to be met. The ability to use the facilities of the Geary Institute has been a considerable advantage for the School.
- 3.13 During the Review process it became apparent that among the students there was a lack of identification with the School. A step to overcome this would be the provision of a room and computing facilities for graduate students in the Newman Building. The computer room could be developed as a dual-use computer room/experimental laboratory.

Commendations

- 3.14 The School is currently in a strong position after a period of sustained success in hiring.
- 3.15 The provision of research resources for academic staff has been generous.
- 3.16 The School has maintained teaching commitments at a level favourable to research.
- 3.17 Provision of facilities is further enhanced by the Geary Institute.

Recommendations

- 3.18 That the School undertake planning to mitigate the consequences of expected staff departures.
- 3.19 That the University accept the critical importance of replacing academic staff and increasing the number of non-academic staff.
- 3.20 That the School obtain dedicated space for graduate students in the Newman building.

- 3.21 That funding be sought for a dual-use experimental laboratory/graduate computing facility.

4. Curriculum Development and Review

- 4.1 The RG recognises the importance of economics both as a major contributing discipline to a liberal arts education and as a developer of analytical and other essential graduate skills, and commends the School for its commitment to the modular system, the BA programme, and the provision of electives in economics, thereby ensuring that all students across the University have access to an education in the fundamentals of the discipline.
- 4.2 The RG also commends the School for its commitment to the provision of 'high quality teaching at undergraduate and graduate level' (SAR, page 4) particularly in its Single Major and MA programmes in Economics.
- 4.3 The RG feels that a clearer articulation of the twin objectives of the provision of non-specialist and specialist education, and the associated learning outcomes for each, would be beneficial both to students and the development of the School's strategy for teaching and learning.
- 4.4 The RG endorses the SAR assessment that the breadth of the curriculum compares favourably with that available internationally, for example UK Single Honours programmes and North American liberal arts programmes, but is concerned that the heterogeneous nature of the student cohort, even at stage 2, presents the School with particular challenges which may limit the depth of study available to Single Major students.
- 4.5 The RG endorses the School's suggestion that Introduction to Quantitative Economics should become a prerequisite for the Intermediate Macroeconomics and Microeconomics modules.
- 4.6 The RG was impressed by the professionalism and expertise exhibited by its graduates and by the Single Major and postgraduate taught students which it met, but noted that the Single Major students did not have a clear perception of themselves as a group of students who were specialist in the discipline until a very late stage in the programme.
- 4.7 The RG commends the School's recent introduction of a dedicated module for Single Major students at Level 3; however, in the light of the above, the School may wish to consider whether the provision of additional dedicated modules (perhaps one per semester at each level in Stage 2) and small group teaching might both enable these students to explore some topics in greater depth and send a valuable signal to students who can be nourished as key ambassadors of the programme, both for future students and employers. Such teaching need not exclude the best non-specialists but should be primarily focussed on developing greater depth in the best students.
- 4.8 The RG commends the School's recent curriculum review and recommends that other aspects of learning, teaching and assessment are similarly reviewed on a rolling basis. While the RG felt that, taken individually, all module assessment strategies were appropriate, the programme would benefit from an overview of the

range of assessments and the School may wish to consider adjustments which would allow students to display a greater range of skills and more comprehensive analysis in selected modules.

- 4.9 The RG commends the School's recent curriculum review and recommends that other aspects of learning, teaching and assessment are similarly reviewed on a rolling basis.
- 4.10 The RG appreciated the School's analysis of its Stage 1 failure rates in the Principles of Microeconomics, Principles of Macroeconomics and Introduction to Quantitative Methods but was surprised that this carried over to the elective Economics and Society module. The student handbook states that 'this module is intended to provide a broadly non-technical overview of economic issues for students who intend to major in other areas and who may wish to take an elective economics module.' Having reviewed the examination paper, the RG felt that there was scope to adjust this module, given its non-specialist target audience, to reflect more accurately the title and aspiration.
- 4.11 While the RG felt that the level and assessment of Microeconomics, Principles of Macroeconomics and Introduction to Quantitative Methods appropriately reflected the level of knowledge required for progression to Stage 2, it noted the concerns expressed by the College, University and student advisors about the difficulties which students new to the university encountered in adapting to independent study in Stage 1. It notes, too, the commitment to Stage 1 students in the UCD Strategic Plan, in which the University commits itself to early intervention to ensure student engagement and to promote successful learning.
- 4.12 The RG also appreciates the challenges faced by the School both in obtaining the financial resources and in identifying the personnel who could provide small group teaching. However, the RG is not convinced that the School's proposal to provide recorded teaching sessions would, on its own, address the level of failure in these modules which appeared to result from a combination of poor academic ability and a disjoint with the academic process. The solution to this challenge is likely to require significant additional resources, and the RG therefore suggests that the University and School may wish to consider the following options, among others:
- a. A number of combined PhD/Graduate Teaching Assistants to provide an on-going cohort of Teaching Assistants.
 - b. The recruitment of a dedicated Stage 1 Teaching Fellow(s) who would take primary responsibility for extensive small-group teaching at Stage 1.
 - c. Identifying a cohort of part-time Teaching Fellows who could balance their UCD duties with other professional or domestic obligations.

The RG would also be concerned that any success in reducing failure rates in Stage 1 might simply push the problem into Stage 2, and that progression to Stage 2 might therefore require a threshold grade as a prerequisite or be the subject of strong advice.

- 4.13 The School may wish to consider appointing members of the academic staff as Stage co-ordinators.
- 4.14 Student induction at Stage 1 could usefully be enhanced to increase understanding of independent learning at University. The RG commends the plan to introduce a study skills module in the BA programme for 2011.

- 4.15 The RG commends the MA programme, the quality of which bears favourable comparison with the best in the UK. While there is considerable scope for internationalising the cohort, the RG strongly recommends that the School takes steps to ensure that the quality of the intake and the consequent graduates is maintained at a high level. It is also essential for both the quality of the student experience and the perception of the brand that any international intake is diverse.

Commendations

- 4.16 The RG commends the School for its commitment to the modular system, the BA programme, and the provision of electives in Economics.
- 4.17 The RG also commends the School for its commitment to excellence in its Single Major and MA programmes in Economics.
- 4.18 The RG commends the breadth of the undergraduate curriculum but is concerned that the heterogeneous nature of the teaching cohort presents the School with particular challenges which may limit the depth of study available to Single Major students.
- 4.19 The RG commends the School's recent curriculum review.

Recommendations

- 4.20 The RG endorses the School's suggestion that Introduction to Quantitative Economics should become a prerequisite for the Intermediate Macroeconomics and Microeconomics modules.
- 4.21 The RG noted that the Single Major students did not have a clear perception of themselves as a group of students who are specialists in the discipline until a very late stage in the programme. The School may therefore wish to consider whether the provision of some dedicated teaching might both enable these students to explore some topics in greater depth and send a valuable signal to students who can be nourished as key ambassadors of the programme, both for future students and employers.
- 4.22 The RG recommends that aspects of learning, teaching and assessment other than the curriculum are also reviewed on a rolling basis.
- 4.23 The RG recommends a clearer articulation of the twin objectives of the provision of non-specialist and specialist education, and the associated learning outcomes for each, as beneficial both to students and the development of the School's strategy for teaching and learning.
- 4.24 The RG recommends that the School consider options to provide small-group teaching for Stage 1 students.

5. Teaching Learning & Assessment

- 5.1 The RG commends the School's analysis of its Stage 1 failure rates and has considerable sympathy for the arguments articulated. The RG nevertheless notes the

concerns expressed by the College, University and student advisors about the difficulties which students new to the university encountered in adapting to independent study in Stage 1. The RG therefore recommends that further thought be given to tackling this issue.

5.2 The RG noted that:

- a. Final examinations placed a heavy emphasis on problem-based questions in many questions at the expense of reflective analysis on the origins, robustness, appropriateness and relevance of competing theories.
- b. The current range of assessments, and in particular many problem-based final examinations, did not afford students the opportunity to display a high level of writing skills.

The RG felt that, taken individually while all module assessment strategies were appropriate, the programme would benefit from an overview of the range of assessments and the School may wish to consider adjustments which allowed students to display a greater range of skills and more comprehensive analysis in selected modules.

5.3 The RG also felt that it might be useful to review the assessment weightings for Semester 1 modules at Stage 1 in the light of the difficulties students appear to face in adapting to University.

Commendations

5.4 The RG commends the School's analysis of its Stage 1 failure rates.

5.5 The RG commends the MA programme, the quality of which bears favourable comparison with the best in the UK.

Recommendations

5.6 The RG recommends that further thought be given to tackling the issue of Stage 1 failure rates.

5.7 The RG recommends that the School considers adjustments to assessments which would allow students to display a greater range of skills and more comprehensive analysis in selected modules.

5.8 The RG recommends a review of the assessment weightings for Semester 1 modules at Stage 1 in the light of the difficulties students appear to face in adapting to University.

5.9 The RG recommends that, if MA students are to be recruited internationally, the School takes steps to ensure that the quality of the intake and the consequent graduates is maintained at a high level.

6. Research Activity

6.1 The School displays clear evidence of a very strong research culture. This has been strengthened in recent years by a number of senior appointments. The School has a

single research objective which is to achieve international excellence in research. This objective is clearly articulated and supported by all School faculty and the School is delivering on this aim. The rate of research publication for the median member of staff correctly reflects the research activity. It is also a factor in the achievement of the School's high ranking.

- 6.2 The current position of the School in research reflects the abundant financial resources of the recent past. The deliberations of the RG have been framed in the context of decreasing resources and the need to reduce expenditure. If this process is handled badly then there could easily be a dramatic effect on research output. The key requirement for the School is the need to maintain the morale of faculty and to keep faculty aligned with the process. There are numerous examples of institutions where morale has fallen rapidly, with the consequence that high-quality staff have moved on and carefully constructed reputations have evaporated. This threat is especially significant in the case of this School which has many highly marketable faculty.
- 6.3 As a consequence it is necessary that the School begin the process of planning a response to the new scenario that avoids the problems identified above. The difficulty of losing senior people is that external reputation can fall quickly. It is therefore very important to safeguard high-level research output by hiring promising new-blood staff who will quickly make an impact. The RG wish to emphasise that departments with similar international rankings to the School are typically much larger: 40 -50 FTEs would be typical in the UK and even higher in many parts of Europe.
- 6.4 The School is very aware of how it ranks in comparison with other departments of Economics in Europe and world-wide. A variety of rankings are available since economists, as a profession, are frequent producers of rankings. The School is very focussed upon change in the ranking and would be concerned were the ranking to fall. The information we were given in the SAR benchmarks the School against REPEC data. There are well-known limitations of this dataset but it does have the advantage of being more up to date than most rankings which are typically based on publications from 5-10 years previous. In any case, the picture given by the rankings about the position of UCD are uniform: it is the top-ranked Economics department in Ireland, would sit comfortably within the top twenty in the UK (there is very little quality difference between the departments ranked 5-20 in the UK), and is within the top fifty in Europe. This is a very creditable performance for a department that is small in size of staffing since the majority of indicators do not adjust for size.
- 6.5 The culture of the School, as is common in all successful Economics departments, is to pursue independent research, with joint work arising from natural synergies rather than as the result of a team-based structure. It is not the objective of the School to specialise in any particular areas or to develop research via research groups. This aim is supported by the RG. It is typical for an Economics department to pursue general excellence, and very atypical to focus on narrow research areas. In fact, those that have concentrated on narrow areas have tended to be very unsuccessful because of the problem of being locked in to areas that have rapidly faded from prominence in the discipline. Maintaining a broad base of research is the best form of insurance against the ever-changing focus of research in Economics.
- 6.6 The University has identified a range of research themes in the Strategic Plan. The School contributes to these, but more by coincidence than by design. The RG views a greater focus on these themes as problematic for the School for two reasons. First, the observations in the previous paragraph emphasise the fact that this will threaten the continuing international excellence of the School. Second, the current reduction

in staffing presents the School with limited flexibility when making new hires: covering core needs will always be more important than matching themes. Overall, the School is delivering on its aim of international excellence and should be commended and supported by the University.

- 6.7 This laissez-faire attitude has proved successful because of the quality of the staff in place and the degree of self-motivation. It does, however, have the drawback that there may occasionally be some faculty who do not succeed in establishing a continuing research agenda and for whom the “light touch “ approach will allow issues to persist longer than is desirable.
- 6.8 There are many areas of economic analysis where few physical resources are required to deliver excellent research outcomes. The SAR notes that in these areas the major resource is time, and this is currently supplied by the relatively low teaching loads and administrative burdens. The other inputs – finance for computing equipment, software, submission fees, and conference attendance – have been plentiful in the past but are expected to be limited in the near future.
- 6.9 One area in which concern was expressed was in the post-award management of research grants, with a specific illustration provided. The perception that the University’s grant-related processes could be long-drawn out and time-consuming for staff was regarded as a disincentive to pursuing funded research projects and networks. The School is fortunate that the Geary Institute is in a position to provide direct administrative support in this respect.
- 6.10 The Geary Institute and the School faculty involved in the Institute have developed a specialism in research in microbehaviour. A major element in this field in other institutions is the use of experiments. These experiments require access to an experimental laboratory (meaning a group of networked computers with specialised software and programming support). At present there is no such laboratory at UCD. The provision of a laboratory would enable the research programme and enhance the success of grant applications. It would also be attractive to PhD students. Moreover, the School has expressed a wish to provide dedicated computing facilities for graduate students. An experimental laboratory is quite capable of delivering this dual role and providing general computing facilities when not in use for experiments.
- 6.11 The theme of limited administrative support runs throughout this Review. If the School is to expand its graduate provision then additional non-academic support is necessary. This will be particularly important in providing a unifying identity to the PhD programme run in collaboration with TCD and NUIM.
- 6.12 The School practices the standard policy of aligning teaching allocations with research interests to the best extent that is possible. This ensures that current research is incorporated within teaching. The connections are clearest at the graduate level but still apparent in undergraduate teaching.
- 6.13 The School has very clear ideas about the purpose of the graduate programme and the target audience. These ideas reflect the historical position and may need to be revised in the light of the growing internationalisation of higher education. The current position is that the vast majority of graduate students are from Ireland. In this respect the composition of the students does not reflect the international position of the School. Nor does it reflect the situation of graduate programmes elsewhere in Europe. The School needs to give some thought to its plans to develop the MA programme, in particular with respect to overseas student recruitment. In doing this it needs to reflect on the balance between maintaining standards and the aim of

meeting local training needs against the benefits of increased overseas fee income (but with possible compromises to academic standards). The outcome of this reflection may well depend upon the resource allocation processes of the University. If there is no direct link between overseas student income and funding for the School then the incentive to recruit additional students is non-existent. The allocation mechanisms need to be addressed at University level if an appropriate structure is to be put in place that encourages expansion at the graduate level.

- 6.14 The revised PhD programme taught in conjunction with the partner Institutions was discussed. The RG wishes to observe that the programme needs to be given a more coherent image to ensure that it can be adequately branded and marketed. One model would be the “Scot Doc” programme which has achieved recognition within a very short interval of time.
- 6.15 The underlying issue with PhD provision is the limited sources of funding for students. Recent history has seen the sporadic provision of scholarships for PhD students, mostly the result of one-off grants or programmes. The development of a PhD programme needs to go hand-in-hand with the development of a system of support that is sustained and predictable. We touch upon the use of graduate tutors to support teaching in 4.12, but it would be an obvious development to finance PhD students via teaching scholarships. The implementation of such a proposal would require the provision of resources at the University level but would naturally tie in with incentives for increasing the number of MA students.
- 6.16 On marketing of graduate programmes, see below 8.8.
- 6.17 The RG has also been informed that the resource constraint on research support has not been binding in the recent past. In effect, all requests for conference funding etc. have been met. This may not be the case in the future. The refusal of funding can be a major contributor to reduced morale. Therefore, it is necessary for the School to formalise procedures for allocating reduced resources, make the procedures public, and ensure that the procedures are generally perceived to be fair. There are many systems that can be used, but one that has proved successful elsewhere is a fixed sum per annum, transferable across time.
- 6.18 Obtaining research grants is seen by some of the School faculty as important. It appears not to be a priority for other. The University encourages the gaining of research funding but this requires some incentives to be put in place to secure grants. Grants could be a means to provide support for PhD students.

Commendations

- 6.19 The School has delivered high-quality research and attained a commendable international ranking.
- 6.20 There is an established culture of research in the School.
- 6.21 The new PhD programme has the promise to provide an internationally competitive training.

Recommendations

- 6.22 That the University be aware that the retention of the School’s current international ranking requires maintenance of staffing levels.

- 6.23 That the School consider the formalisation of fair procedures for allocating research funding.
- 6.24 That the School continue to develop and implement its mentoring system.
- 6.25 That the University consider the provision of a dual-use experimental laboratory/graduate computing facility for the School.

7. Management of Quality and Enhancement

- 7.1 Quality in teaching and learning and in research are at the core of the aims of the University. UCD's recent Strategic Plan has set out the metrics by which progress in both teaching and learning and in research is to be assessed. Quality enhancement in teaching and learning is supported by a Vice-Principal for Teaching and Learning at College level, and the teaching and learning function of the Registrar's Office at University level.
- 7.2 Quality in undergraduate teaching and learning is monitored in the School using student evaluations of all modules and external examiner reports.
- 7.3 Quality in postgraduate teaching and learning is monitored using student evaluations of all postgraduate modules. The School has also been involved in a pilot programme for quality assurance at postgraduate level.
- 7.4 Peer-reviewed publications are central to quality research. The monitoring of research output and quality in the field of economics is facilitated by the availability of widely-used databases of publications in peer-reviewed economics journals, and by a broader degree of consensus than in some other fields about the ranking of journals.
- 7.5 The student learning experience is an important indicator of quality. Regular meetings of student representatives and module co-ordinators are held. These provide feedback on the students' general opinion of the modules' content and delivery, as well as of the curriculum structure.

Commendations

- 7.6 All undergraduate and MA modules are subject to student evaluation.
- 7.7 The School has recently undertaken a review of the curriculum.
- 7.8 The School has a staff-student forum which meets regularly.
- 7.9 The School has been involved in a pilot programme for quality assurance at postgraduate level.
- 7.10 The external examiner reports have been generally supportive of the quality of the education provision.
- 7.11 The School monitors the quality of its research via reference to a number of international research rankings.

Recommendations

- 7.12 A more structured self-reflection process by module co-ordinators in the light of student evaluation of modules should be considered.
- 7.13 The staff-student forum, which has recently been re-established, provides an important insight into the student learning experience. The Committee recommends that this process of on-going and regular student consultation continue. The staff-student forum has proved to be an important channel for feedback, and other ways of involving students at different levels in School structures to provide further channels of communication might usefully be considered.
- 7.14 The Curriculum Committee should review all module offerings in light of the desired skill set to ensure that these are taught across the programme as a whole.

8. Support Services

- 8.1 The School of Economics, like other Schools in UCD, relies on support from other parts of the University in areas such as curriculum management, exams and assessment, library, computing services, and the administration of funded research. It also engages with the teaching and learning functions at College and university level, while student guidance is provided through the relevant programme office and student advisors.
- 8.2 With the introduction of modularisation and semesterisation, many of these support services have been the subject of very substantial change in recent years, posing serious challenges for Schools as they deal with the introduction of new systems and processes. While the major structural changes have now been implemented, continuing changes in some administrative processes imply an on-going burden for Schools, particularly where administrative support within the School is limited as in the case of the School of Economics.

Commendations

- 8.3 A high level of support is available from the Library and from the University Teaching and Learning unit.
- 8.4 The support provided by the Student Advisors is very valuable.

Recommendations

- 8.5 Concerns were expressed about aspects of the administration of curriculum management and assessment and the impact this has on the functioning of the School. Continuous changes in the curriculum management and assessment procedures were seen to impose a particular burden on School staff; ways of minimising these burdens should be sought.
- 8.6 On research grant support and post-award administration, see above 6.9.
- 8.7 Support from the Teaching and Learning unit could be more widely availed of by staff across the School as they deal with the challenges identified in engaging undergraduate students generally, and with Stage 1 and those with lower maths ability in particular.

- 8.8 If the School were to seek to expand the number of international students (a topic discussed in the next section), intensive support and engagement from other units in the University would be required both at marketing stage and in supporting the School and the students attracted. If the University is able to raise its profile in the marketplace for graduate students then the number entering into the School's programmes will naturally increase.
- 8.9 A student-to-student mentoring structure would be a very positive initiative; this would require the appointment of an additional Student Advisor at College level, to provide training and support for the student mentors.

9. External Relations

- 9.1 UCD places considerable store in its engagement with domestic stakeholders external to the University and with the wider world. Its recently-published Strategic Plan emphasises the importance of an outward-looking, internationally aware focus, and of attracting greater numbers of international students. The ultimate objective is to increase the percentage of international students from 17 per cent towards 25 per cent, with the percentage of non-European Union students increasing from 9 to 15 per cent by 2013/14.
- 9.2 The University has also highlighted innovation in its recent Strategic Plan, to be facilitated by the establishment of the Innovation Alliance partnership with Trinity College, Dublin (TCD), aiming to enhance collaboration with government and industry. This is intended inter alia to enable the University to make a major contribution to national economic recovery.

Commendations

- 9.3 Within the University, the School has significant links with the College of Business and Law. Externally the School has recently established strong links with Trinity College and NUIM in the joint doctoral programme, an important development for the School and for graduate education in economics in Ireland.
- 9.4 A substantial proportion of the staff is actively engaged with the international academic community. The School also has good links with national bodies such as the Central Bank, the Department of Finance, and the Economic and Social Research Institute. School staff engage actively with policy-makers and policy debate across a range of areas, and have a high media profile in that respect.

Recommendations

- 9.5 The potential for deepening links with the College of Business and Law in terms of shared modules is worth exploration, and a joint Masters in Economics and Finance also merits serious consideration.
- 9.6 The potential for collaboration with TCD and NUIM in delivery at Masters level merits careful consideration, with potential advantages and disadvantages for the School and for UCD. If a critical mass of students can be maintained by a (mostly) UCD offering, then allowing one or two modules to be taken at TCD would not entail dilution of the School/UCD brand and would broaden the topics covered. If on the other hand a sufficient number of students was unlikely to be sustained – or if the number of students attracted could be very substantially expanded – then a fully-

fledged joint programme would have attractions. The same comments apply to the integration of the PhD programme with that at TCD.

- 9.7 Staff who are currently less fully engaged with international academic activity should be encouraged, facilitated and supported in doing so. Participation in funded research networks is one route to sustaining such links, and the Geary Institute has a valuable role in that respect and in providing a channel to international academic activity more generally.
- 9.8 There is very little student mobility at undergraduate level, with very few participating in the Erasmus programme. The reasons for this could usefully be explored – in the first instance, it seems that the number of places offered via the School is very low. Efforts could be made to promote participation in the programme and overcome any perceived or actual obstacles. Other international School links via the EDGE network of universities have also led to a disappointing level of flows to and from UCD: the potential of other structured engagements with universities outside the country in this regard could be examined.
- 9.9 Internationalisation at graduate level gives rise to a different set of issues and challenges. The Masters programme at present has predominantly Irish students. With the appropriate (high) level of support from other University units, it might be possible to significantly expand the number of international students at both Masters and doctoral level. As noted in 5.4, stringent admission criteria would need to be maintained if the value of the School and University brand were not to be seriously undermined. Diversity in international intake would also be an important desideratum. (The extent to which this would be seen as a sensible strategy for the School would be influenced by the budgetary issues referred to earlier.)
- 9.10 In taking on staff from other countries, more structured orientation might usefully be provided both by the University and by the School.

10. Summary of Commendations and Recommendations

a. Organisation and Management

Commendations

- 2.3 Significant progress has been made in moving to a new Committee structure for the management of the School.
- 2.4 School meetings are held regularly.
- 2.5 In 2009-2010 a curriculum review team was established to undertake a review of the undergraduate programme.
- 2.6 The School is currently developing a workload model.

Recommendations

- 2.7 The School should consider a more transparent decision-making process.
- 2.8 The School should consider a formal and regular review of various aspects of the curriculum.

- 2.9 Given the issues highlighted in the SAR and elsewhere in this report regarding the high failure rates in Stage 1, the School should consider appointing a Stage 1 co-ordinator from among the academic staff, with specific responsibility for student engagement; co-ordinators for other stages should also be considered.
- 2.10 The School should consider means to increase the engagement of academic staff in the running of the School.
- 2.11 Notwithstanding the desirability of stretching targets, the current version of the workload model should be reconsidered to ensure that the research targets are set at realistic and attainable levels.
- 2.12 In light of anticipated constraints/reductions in the budget, the School should consider capitalising on its research reputation to attract international students. However, recognising the challenges facing the School in other areas, this should only be done if an agreed proportion of the financial benefit is returned in an identifiable way to the School in order to take pressure off other areas (see 6.13).

b. Staff and Facilities

Commendations

- 3.14 The School is currently in a strong position after a period of sustained success in hiring.
- 3.15 The provision of research resources for academic staff has been generous.
- 3.16 The School has maintained teaching commitments at a level favourable to research.
- 3.17 Provision of facilities is further enhanced by the Geary Institute.

Recommendations

- 3.18 That the School undertake planning to mitigate the consequences of expected staff departures.
- 3.19 That the University accept the critical importance of replacing academic staff and increasing the number of non-academic staff.
- 3.20 That the School obtain dedicated space for graduate students in the Newman building.
- 3.21 That funding be sought for a dual-use experimental laboratory/graduate computing facility.

c. Curriculum Development and Review

Commendations

- 4.16 The RG commends the School for its commitment to the modular system, the BA programme, and the provision of electives in Economics.

- 4.17 The RG also commends the School for its commitment to excellence in its Single Major and MA programmes in Economics.
- 4.18 The RG commends the breadth of the undergraduate curriculum but is concerned that the heterogeneous nature of the teaching cohort presents the School with particular challenges which may limit the depth of study available to Single Major students.
- 4.19 The RG commends the School's recent curriculum review.

Recommendations

- 4.20 The RG endorses the School's suggestion that Introduction to Quantitative Economics should become a prerequisite for the Intermediate Macroeconomics and Microeconomics modules.
- 4.21 The RG noted that the Single Major students did not have a clear perception of themselves as a group of students who are specialists in the discipline until a very late stage in the programme. The School may therefore wish to consider whether the provision of some dedicated teaching might both enable these students to explore some topics in greater depth and send a valuable signal to students who can be nourished as key ambassadors of the programme, both for future students and employers.
- 4.22 The RG recommends that aspects of learning, teaching and assessment other than the curriculum are also reviewed on a rolling basis.
- 4.23 The RG recommends a clearer articulation of the twin objectives of the provision of non-specialist and specialist education, and the associated learning outcomes for each, as beneficial both to students and the development of the School's strategy for teaching and learning.
- 4.24 The RG recommends that the School consider options to provide small-group teaching for Stage 1 students.

d. Teaching Learning & Assessment

Commendations

- 5.4 The RG commends the School's analysis of its Stage 1 failure rates.
- 5.5 The RG commends the MA programme, the quality of which bears favourable comparison with the best in the UK.

Recommendations

- 5.6 The RG recommends that further thought be given to tackling the issue of Stage 1 failure rates.
- 5.7 The RG recommends that the School considers adjustments to assessments which would allow students to display a greater range of skills and more comprehensive analysis in selected modules.

- 5.8 The RG recommends a review of the assessment weightings for Semester 1 modules at Stage 1 in the light of the difficulties students appear to face in adapting to University.
- 5.9 The RG recommends that, if MA students are to be recruited internationally, the School takes steps to ensure that the quality of the intake and the consequent graduates is maintained at a high level.

e. Research Activity

Commendations

- 6.19 The School has delivered high-quality research and attained a commendable international ranking.
- 6.20 There is an established culture of research in the School.
- 6.21 The new PhD programme has the promise to provide an internationally competitive training.

Recommendations

- 6.22 That the University be aware that the retention of the School's current international ranking requires maintenance of staffing levels.
- 6.23 That the School consider the formalisation of fair procedures for allocating research funding.
- 6.24 That the School continue to develop and implement its mentoring system.
- 6.25 That the University consider the provision of a dual-use experimental laboratory/graduate computing facility for the School.

f. Management of Quality and Enhancement

Commendations

- 7.6 All undergraduate and MA modules are subject to student evaluation.
- 7.7 The School has recently undertaken a review of the curriculum.
- 7.8 The School has a staff-student forum which meets regularly.
- 7.9 The School has been involved in a pilot programme for quality assurance at postgraduate level.
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Appendix 1

Response of UCD School of Economics to Review Group Report

The UCD School of Economics found the internal Quality Review to be a very useful and constructive process. It welcomes the Quality Review Report and is very grateful to the Quality Review Team for all the time and effort they put into its preparation. In addition to the Self-Assessment Report and the Quality Improvement Plan, the Quality Review Report will provide a vital input into the School's academic and resource planning in the future.



Appendix 2
Schedule for Review Visit to
UCD School of Economics
26-29 April 2010

Monday, 26 April 2010

- 17.30-18.45 Preliminary Meeting, Radisson blu St Helen's – **RG and UCD Quality Office only**
- 19.00 Dinner for Review Group - **RG and UCD Quality Office only**

Day 1: Tuesday, April 27

Venue: Room G214, Newman Building

- 09.00-09.30 Private planning meeting of Review Group
- 09.35-10.15 RG meet **School Senior Management Team**
- 10.30-11.30 RG meet Group **representative of Teaching and Learning; Assessment; Curriculum Review; and Quality Enhancement**
- 11.30-11.50 Review Group break
- 11.55-13.00 RG meet Group **representative of Research and Scholarship**
- 13.15-14.15 **Working lunch – meeting with representative group of students**
- 14.15-15.00 Private meeting of Review Group – reflect on earlier meetings and examine documentation supplied for site visit
- 15.00-15.45 Meeting with **representative group of administrative staff**
- 15.45-16.00 Tea/coffee break
- 16.00-17.00 Meeting with individual staff – 10 minute sessions
- 17.00-17.45 Meeting of Review Group to identify remaining aspects to be clarified/explored and to finalise tasks for the following day
- 17.45 RG Depart

Day 2: Wednesday, April 28**Venue: Newman Building, Room G214, unless otherwise indicated**

08.30-09.00	Private meeting of Review Group
09.00-10.00	Meeting with College Principal (<i>meeting in room G213</i>)
10.00-10.30	Meeting with Deputy Registrar for Teaching and Learning (G214)
10.30-11.00	Tea/Coffee break
11.00-11.45	Review Group meeting with Student Advisors
11.45-12.30	Private meeting of Review Group
12.30-13.30	Working lunch – Review Group to meet recent graduates and employers
13.30-14.00	Private meeting of Review Group
14.00-15.00	Meeting with recently appointed staff
15.00-15.20	Tea/Coffee break
15.20-17.45	Review Group meet to prepare first draft of Review Group Report
17.45	RG Depart*

Day 3: Thursday, April 29**Venue: Newman Building, Room G214**

09.00-10.00	RG meet with Head of School and senior academic staff member to clarify outstanding issues.
10.00-12.30	Review Group continues to prepare first draft of Review Group Report, identifying feedback points for (i) commendation and (ii) recommendations for improvement
12.30-13.15	Lunch
13.15-15.30	RG finalise first draft of RG Report and prepare unit presentation
15.30-15.45	Informal meeting between RG and Head of School to feedback outline strengths and areas for improvement
16.00-16.20	Exit presentation to all available staff of the unit summarising the key findings of the Review Group
	Review Site Visit ends