University College Dublin

Pilot Thematic Review

Academic Supports for Students

March 2011

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1.   Introduction and Overview

1.1.   This report presents the findings of a thematic quality review of student supports at University College Dublin. The review was undertaken in March 2011.

The Thematic 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. Additionally, the framework for quality assurance in Irish universities makes reference to the use of a 'thematic' approach, to assist universities in exploring quality issues that are beyond the scope of any individual unit, or to explore significant 'themes' in a focused manner.

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. One of the recommendations of the EUA UCD Institutional Review Report (2005) was that the University should *'consider introducing a specially adapted quality review capacity to review University-wide issues, not units'*. The University has, among other developments in its Quality Assurance mechanisms, developed procedural guidelines for undertaking Thematic Reviews at UCD.

Thematic review is broadly defined as one in which an activity or function relating to the strategic objectives of the University is reviewed, with recommendations for improvement being made.

1.4.   The thematic review approach uses the typical review model, which 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 in the case of periodic reviews)
   - 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 Quality 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 Thematic Review of Academic Supports for Students was:
   - Professor Danielle Clarke, UCD School of English, Drama and Film (Chair)
   - Professor Brian Glennon, UCD School of Chemical and Bioprocess Engineering (Deputy Chair)
   - Professor Lorraine Stefani, Director of the Centre for Academic Development, University of Auckland
   - Professor Duncan Lawson, Associate Dean of the Faculty of Engineering & Computing, Coventry University and Director of SIGMA, HEFCE Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning
   - Professor Liz Thomas, Director, Widening Participation Research Centre, Edge Hill University and Senior Adviser at the Higher Education Academy

1.6.   The Review Group visited the University from 21-24 March 2011 and had meetings with University students and staff, including: the Registrar and Deputy President; the Project Sponsor and Self-Assessment Report (SAR) Co-ordinating Committee; College Principals; Programme Deans; Heads of Schools and other academic staff; a range of staff involved in provision of student support services and UCD students. Additionally, the Review Group had opportunities to see a number of relevant University facilities and review particular student support initiatives. The site visit schedule is included as Appendix 1.

1.7.   In addition to the Self-assessment Report, the Review Group considered documentation provided by the University, for example – details of academic structures, UCD Strategic Plan to 2014; details of facilities and resources; reports on particular facilities (e.g. Maths Support Centre Annual Reports etc.).

1.8.   The Office of the Director of Access and Lifelong Learning secured funding from the HEA to conduct a review of student support. It was decided to conduct this review in an innovative and collaborative manner by undertaking an over-arching thematic review of student supports rather than the traditional focus on individual units and providers. The UCD Registrar nominated Professor Bairbre Redmond, Deputy Registrar for Teaching and Learning to Chair the Academic Supports SAR Co-ordinating Committee.

1.9.   This Thematic Review of Academic Supports piloted use of the Thematic Review methodology at UCD. All key aspects of the process will be evaluated following the conclusion of this pilot thematic review, with particular regard to the experiences of the various stakeholder groups (i.e. the Self-Assessment Co-ordinating Committee; Project Sponsor; reviewers; UCD Quality Office etc.). Learning from the pilot process will be used to inform development of the approach.

Membership of Co-ordinating Committee

1.10.   The membership of the Co-ordinating Committee was as follows:
- Professor Bairbre Redmond, Deputy Registrar for Teaching and Learning (Chair)
- Dr Maria Meehan, Senior Lecturer, School of Mathematical Sciences and Director of UCD Maths Support Centre
- Ms Aisling O'Grady, Student Adviser, College of Arts & Celtic Studies
- Mr Feargal Murphy, VPTL, College of Arts & Celtic Studies
- Dr David Foster, Director, Career Development Centre
- Dr Roy Ferguson, Director of Quality
- Ms Joan Mullan, Deputy Director of Quality
- Ms Anna Kelly, Director of Access & Lifelong Learning (Project Sponsor)
- Dr Bairbre Fleming, Director, Adult Education
- Ms Fiona Sweeney, Access Centre Manager
- Ms Aine Galvin, Director, Centre for Teaching & Learning
- Ms Annette Forde, Programme Office Director (Science)
- Ms Carmel O'Sullivan, Associate Librarian
- Dr Erik Lithander, Director, International Office

- James Williamson, UCD Students' Union Representative
- Mr Colm Small, Head of Support, Administrative Services, Registry

Objectives of the Thematic Review of Academic Supports for Students

1.11.   To undertake a thematic review of academic supports provided across the University for undergraduate students, so that a consistent, coherent rational approach to the provision of these supports can be ensured. The terms of reference for the review were:
- To design a coherent approach for undertaking Thematic Review
- To define clearly the term 'Academic Supports'
- To scope the range of academic supports to be included in the review
- To determine the methodology to review existing supports in UCD – including a combination of Questionnaire & Focus Groups
- To include international comparative literature review of academic supports
- To prepare a Self-Assessment Report
- To organise a site-visit by reviewers that includes external members with expertise in the provision of academic supports
- To prepare a Quality Improvement Plan from the Thematic Review Group Report

Definition of Academic Supports

1.12.   For the purposes of this review, the Co-ordinating Committee agreed the following definition of academic supports:

Academic student support refers to a range of services provided to undergraduate students, both full and part-time. Support includes advice and guidance at various points of transition and progression through UCD. It also encompasses the various skills, practical, generic and specific to the programme students are studying. Academic support also encompasses the specialist skills and services some students with particular needs require to participate and succeed in higher education.

1.13.   It was decided that this thematic review should focus on undergraduates, with a particular emphasis on new entrants. It was anticipated that this review of academic supports in UCD would inform and complement the various student retention and success initiatives. The issue of student support for post-graduates is no less compelling, but was not included in this phase of the review. However, the outcome of this review should inform future reviews and development of student support in the postgraduate programmes.

1.14   This review is intended to facilitate the investigation and implementation of an academic support structure, with a view to facilitating an informed approach on best practice for providing teaching and learning supports for students in UCD.

The University

1.15.   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 city.

1.16.   The 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, innovation and excellence, 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 currently 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

1.17.   As one of the largest universities on the island of Ireland, UCD supports a broad, deep and rich academic community in Science, Engineering, Medicine, Veterinary Science, Law, Business, Life Sciences, Arts, Celtic Studies and Human Sciences. There are currently more than 24,000 students (15,400 undergraduates, 6,900 postgraduates and 1,900 Occasional and Adult Education students) registered on University programmes, including over 4,600 international students from more than 120 countries. UCD offers a diversity of programmes to a diverse student population. Undergraduate programmes are fully modularised and semesterised under the novel *UCD Horizons* curriculum, which provides greater flexibility and new opportunities for students, including the ability to take module options and electives outside of their core discipline, as well as enabling important curricular developments and reforms.

Academic Supports at UCD

1.18.   UCD has developed a range of generic and discipline-specific academic/learning supports to address students' study needs. These academic supports are provided by various Schools and services in UCD.

1.19.   Current student supports in UCD are organised in a myriad of ways, reflecting the size and complexity of the University. The principal differentiation in how supports are structured is determined by whether they are academic, administrative or social. The academic supports are often the responsibility of the School or Programme. Other supports are organised through various structures and offices. The complexities of the supports in place are compounded by the widely varying numbers of undergraduates in the various programmes. Typically, academic supports, including academic staff, tutors and demonstrators and academic writing are in the main offered by the Schools and Programmes, with additional types of support operating across these structures. Other supports tend to centre from the Registry and Library. Specific staff members work with targeted under-represented student groups such as mature students, students with disabilities and New Era students. The

supports available for part-time students are less evident and accessible, and mainly rely on locally sourced supports and interventions.

2. Methodology

2.1. The Thematic Review of Student Supports was a far-reaching exercise. An extensive series of meetings provided the Review Group with a thorough overview of the wide range of activities that are currently taking place at UCD. The Review Group availed of the opportunity to meet with key stakeholders (staff and students), visited providers of student support, and consulted a range of relevant written and online materials. All members of the Group participated in all discussions and meetings, although different members took responsibility for different parts of the report. However, the report has been read and approved by all members of the Group. The Review Group did feel that there was some overlap and duplication in terms of the individuals and staff and student groups with whom they met and that some individuals and groups were not as well briefed on the purposes of the Review as they might have been. For external members, in particular, some difficulties were encountered in terms of understanding the organisational structures which have a high level of complexity, and sometimes this was a hindrance to the Review Group's deliberations. Key information that might be expected to be in the public domain (retention and progression figures by programme, for example) was not always available.

2.2. During the review process, the Review Group met with students and a wide range of staff of varying levels of seniority. This was helpful in providing insights into a broad spectrum of perspectives. Given the nature of the topic being reviewed, at the exit presentation, the Review Group would have welcomed the opportunity to present initial findings and recommendation to a wider group, including members of UCD SMT.

2.3. The Self-Assessment Report (SAR) is a model of its kind, and proved an invaluable guide and framework for the site visit, and the Review Group would like to congratulate the Committee for the high level of accuracy, reflection and presentation evident throughout. The Report alone is a highly useful document to point the way forward for student supports in UCD, and indeed, the Review Group shares many of its conclusions.

3. Key Issues and Commendations

3.1. It is clear that the issue of student support is high on the agenda of many staff both (academic and non-academic across different departments and units in the University. The Review Group met highly committed staff from various areas of the University, who have the best interests of the students as their primary motivation. During the course of discussions the Review Group learned of and observed a significant number of initiatives and activities, several of which are to be highly commended.

3.2. Although the brief of the review was not to carry out an in-depth evaluation of specific activities and functions within the University, the Group felt it appropriate to note excellent practice it observed including:

- The quality of the Self-assessment Report, particularly the literature review and the depth and honesty of reflection
- The Mathematics Support Centre
- The Computer Science First Semester Curriculum
- The Principles of Scientific Inquiry module for incoming Science students
- Disability Support Service
- New ERA Programme
- Teaching and Learning Fellowship Scheme
- The Level one Enquiry Based Learning modules in English

3.3.   During the course of the Thematic Review, the Group learned a substantial amount about a wide range of student supports. Whilst detailed comments could be made about the operation of a number of these activities and initiatives, including specific recommendations to improve the level of service provided, the brief of the Review Group was to provide comments at a higher level of operation and highlight issues of a strategic and overarching nature. This is what the remainder of this Report seeks to do.

3.4.   The inclusion of a Teaching and Learning agenda in the University's strategy is welcome. In addition, the students who met with the Review Group highlighted various support services which were important in their interaction with the University. While not uniformly implemented across the University these initiatives are valuable and clearly valued. They include:
- Student advisors
- Programme Offices
- Careers Development Centre
- The peer mentoring scheme
- Class representatives
- First Year Orientation

3.5.   A primary issue with regard to these services is the degree of inconsistency; provision of student supports is highly variable, and consequently not all students have the same university experience. The success of provision appears to be closely linked to the size and coherence of the academic programme, and how well resourced the programme is. The implementation of a more coherent, holistic student support structure across the University could resolve this matter.

4.   The Business Case

4.1.   A fundamental question for the University to address is "Why invest resources in student supports?" From the perspective of the Review Group there are several reasons to invest in student supports. These include:

a) **Economic** – a student leaving an institution before completion of their programme of study represents lost income for the institution. This income may include fees paid by the student, funding from the Higher Education Authority or professional body and possibly other income such

as accommodation costs. Effective student supports should reduce the number of students who fail to complete their programme.

b) **Reputational** – the standard of student support has a significant impact on the University's reputation. High quality, accessible student support contributes to a positive learning experience which in turn contributes to institutional success in recruiting high quality students. The informal reputation of the university may be shaped by students' experiences and becomes 'hot knowledge' in the communities the students come from. Internet-based social networking for example, ensures that messages from an individual student have an audience of thousands within seconds. If a student has a good experience at UCD they will tell their family, friends and internet contacts. Such information impacts on the choice of university for potential and prospective students.

c) **Ethical** – institutions have a social and moral responsibility to take reasonable steps to enable and promote the success of all students they have admitted and enrolled on their courses.

d) **Legal** – institutions have a legal obligation to review and adapt their policies, procedures and practices to ensure they do not adversely impact upon those enrolled on their courses who have protected characteristics according to equality legislation.

e) **Cultural** – an institution's success in promoting student retention and success goes beyond the sum of policies and practices therein to consider mission, values and ethos. Retention and success have been linked to the culture of the institution and in particular, efforts to foster a sense of belonging and community amongst staff and students.

4.2. The Review Group members believe that the case for providing high quality, effective student support is overwhelming. However, this does not mean that carte blanche should be given to anyone to do anything. There clearly needs to be accountability and measures of effectiveness. In order to judge the effectiveness of student support, it is necessary to have key statistical information readily available. The Review Group was struck by the noticeable lack of statistical information covering matters such as retention, progression, achievement and employability. The Review Group understands that at present there are few external drivers related to these measures which have prominence in English universities and elsewhere. It is likely that there may be external drivers requiring the production and analysis of such statistics in Ireland before too long. Irrespective of the external drivers, these data provide useful management tools to identify areas where improvements need to be made. They give those responsible for the student experience an insight into the effectiveness of curriculum design and delivery, assessment, academic development, student services and other key elements.

4.3. In the light of the establishment of this thematic review, the volume of activity already taking place and the areas of good practice observed the Review Group drew the conclusion that UCD has the potential to secure an international reputation as a leading university in the provision of high quality, student-centred education. The recommendations in Section 5 are intended to support the University in moving to a position of international eminence in this important aspect of the student experience.

5.   Recommendations

5.1.   Leadership

5.1.1. The most important matter to emerge from the Review is that no single senior individual has overall responsibility for Student Supports. Instead, many people have an interest or involvement in the provision of such services. As a consequence, there is no overall co-ordination of student support activities and this has led to a lack of coherence amongst the many supports provided with resulting overlap in some instances, gaps in others and in several instances support being provided by units that do not appear to be the natural home for such activities. Furthermore, the complexity of the organisation means that students are often unsure of where to go to receive a particular type of support. The provision of some supports in "unusual" places causes further complication.

Recommendation 1: *That a senior member of staff be given overall responsibility for the development and co-ordination of Student Supports. Such responsibility should not be an "add-on" to an already overloaded portfolio, but should be a significant part of that member of staff's responsibilities so that it is given the amount of attention it deserves.*

5.2.   Language/Discourse

5.2.1. Nomenclature can have powerful effects. In this case, the terminology Student Support is not helpful as it has connotations of being remedial, providing for special cases or, as one student put it, "support is for wimps". A more positive approach would be to use phraseology such as "Student Success", "Success for all", "Excellence for all" or "Enabling students to fulfil their potential". It is for UCD to decide the exact terminology to be used, but it should convey the message that these activities are relevant to **all** students, not because the students are in any way "sub-standard" but because, in order to be successful in higher education, all students must develop in multi-faceted ways and this will be achieved through the good offices of many colleagues with very different roles.

5.2.2. Furthermore, the phrase "Student Supports" carries with it the implication of many different services when what is more appropriate when thinking of, say, "Student Success" is an integrated approach which may have several dimensions but all of which contribute to a single whole, focussed on the specific needs of the individual student.

5.2.3. In the absence of an agreed new terminology, this report will continue to use the phrase "Student Supports" but the Review Group hope that UCD might be able quickly to adopt new positive terminology.

Recommendation 2: *That different terminology be adopted instead of "Student Supports"; the new terminology should be indicative of an integrated array of services accessed by all students to enable them to achieve their full potential*.

5.3.   Vision and Strategy

5.3.1.   Development of a vision and a strategy for implementation of Student Support at UCD is strongly recommended.   The strategy should not, however, be seen in isolation from other aspects of the overall student learning experience.   The Institutional Mission includes the aspiration of *"drawing out the best in each student"* which aligns with the idea of "success for all" and the concept of student support should sit under this banner.

5.3.2.   "Success for all" should encompass the idea of enabling students to develop the right skills at the right time in a contextualised manner.   This means that student support is part of the overall curriculum as students experience it.   Complementing the change of discourse discussed in Section 5.2 above, this will help students to appreciate that support is for all, not just for those who for some reason have "special needs".

5.3.3.   It was not clear from the Review whether there is an underlying philosophy and underpinning pedagogical principles that currently drive student support.   The absence of a clear statement of philosophy provides the opportunity for ad hoc arrangements to flourish.   While it is clear that staff who are assigned to or who have taken on the role of providing student support in a range of ways are dedicated to their role, it is not at all clear who develops these staff members and what pedagogical principles drive their work.   This makes it difficult to judge if the measures adopted are successful.

5.3.4.   The ethos and philosophy of student support must be one of positivity, preparing students for an uncertain world.   This positive philosophy needs to be shared by all, and this may require a cultural shift within the Institution that will need to be promoted by senior management.   The philosophy in itself is however insufficient, there must also be an underpinning pedagogical model or models driving student support.

Recommendation 3: *That the University develop a vision for student support underpinned by a positive philosophy and ethos enabling all students to develop the knowledge, skills and attributes required for success in learning and beyond.   In addition, that the University produce a strategy to implement its vision which promotes a pedagogical model of student support and considers ways in which the outcomes of student support can be measured.*

5.4.   Inclusion

5.4.1.   The student body in the 21st century is complex, diverse and heterogeneous.   This inevitably means that a one size fits all approach to facilitating student learning is outdated.   While student learning support can be crucial to factors such as retention, attainment and progression, the curriculum itself should allow for and actively encourage different approaches to learning. Dedicated support outside of the formal curriculum should encompass the needs of different learning styles.

Recommendation 4: *That the student support strategy should take into consideration alternative ways of providing support for students, including aligning the nature of support with programme requirements and challenges*

5.5.   Student Involvement

5.5.1.   If the University is committed to providing a student-centred learning experience, then it is important that there is student involvement in the process. Student involvement should be more than receiving their feedback at various times when specific services are being evaluated. Instead, students should be involved as partners in the design of service provision. This will facilitate the development of services that better match the needs of the student body. A basic principle of student-centredness is that provision is built around student needs rather than staff convenience. This may require staff to reconsider old and established practices. For example, the provision of many services only during standard office hours may not be the most effective in terms of reaching students[1]. Likewise, the adoption of a single referencing style across the whole institution, for example, may upset devotees of styles not chosen, but will reduce the confusion of students studying three subjects, each of which use a different referencing style.

5.5.2.   In the short-term, whilst an appropriate mechanism for the involvement of students is developed, the University should make use of student focus groups to ensure more regular input from students than is currently occurring. The students who participated in the Thematic Review were articulate, reflective, imaginative and willing to participate (as evidenced by one student who had produced a "mock up" of a web interface for students in social networking style which, if implemented, could go some way to helping students in the BA programme to identify others on their modules with shared interests). The student body is a valuable resource in the process of the development of student-centred learning supports.

Recommendation 5: *That students be integrally involved as partners in the development of student-centred "Student Supports", moving beyond consultation towards empowerment.*

5.6.   Structures and Communication

5.6.1.   The complex nature of student support arrangements is in part attributable to the absence of overall leadership and the ad hoc responses that different parts of the University have introduced to address identified needs. However, another cause of the complexity is the structural organisation of the University, for example, the incomplete alignment of programmes with Colleges.

5.6.2.   The Review Group found it difficult to gain a reasonable understanding of the structure and organisation of the University, particularly as they relate to student support. This complexity has a number of sources but includes the fact that, in some instances, several different parts of the University contribute to delivering the same service. As a consequence, students in one part of the University may receive support from one function or section of the University, whilst in another the same service is provided by a different section. The perceived overlap between School and Programme Offices and the Student Help Desk are an example of this. The roles of particular offices may be distinct but the distinctions are not always clear to those requiring assistance. Whilst it might be

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[1] "24/7" is an oft used phrase. It is recognised that the resources to provide many services, particularly those that require staff, on a "24/7" basis are not available; even if they were it would not be efficient to provide many services at 3.00am for example. However, it may be that 11.00am to 7.00pm is more productive to students than the more normal 9.00am to 5.00pm.

thought that providing support from several different places is beneficial (in that students might be more likely to find someone to help them), it turns out that for many students it becomes bewildering and results in them not knowing where to go for support.

5.6.3. Clearly, many factors affect the way that the University structures itself - however if the University is to be truly student-centred it should ensure that structures which are of no concern to students do not impinge negatively on the student experience. In an ideal student-centred institution, structures would be designed to best serve the needs of the students to give them the best possible learning experience.

Recommendation 6: *That a review of the structure of the University to include both academic and support services, be undertaken with a view to producing simplification, and alignment of structures to activities.*

5.7. Modularisation

5.7.1. Most of the staff members who spoke to the Review Group were of the opinion that modularisation had brought many benefits and they indicated that they would not wish to return to the situation that existed before the introduction of a modular system. Without wishing to contradict these views, the Review Group noted that the way in which modularisation has been implemented has also produced some negative effects. These include, in some cases, divorcing students from programmes leading to a lack of a sense of belonging, a separation of academic skills from academic content, too much choice for some students and a "hectic calendar". With modularisation now firmly established it would be worthwhile for the University to undertake a review of the benefits and drawbacks that have been encountered. This review might give some consideration to whether or not some restrictions of choice, and fewer modules with higher credit weightings (particularly in semester one) might produce a more coherent system which improves the experience of the vast majority of students, even if this may result in the loss of some of the philosophical benefits of modularisation.

5.7.2. The importance to students of relationships both with peers and tutors cannot be over-stated. There is considerable research-evidence that shows that these relationships are key factors in determining levels of student satisfaction and success. Many of the students from the Professional Undergraduate Programmes that the Review Group met with spoke highly of the way orientation and subsequent teaching activities had been structured to ensure that they were given opportunities to establish strong relationships with others on their course. There was, however, a stark contrast presented by students from the Arts Programme. They spoke of feelings of isolation and never meeting the same person twice. Although they referred to events during Orientation they felt that these were highly unsuccessful in terms of establishing relationships, primarily because of the size of these events.

5.7.3. For many students, there appears to be a lack of access to academic advice about which modules to take. Whilst Programme Offices are able to inform students about whether particular combinations of modules are valid in terms of the regulations, they are not in a position to offer advice about the suitability, from an academic point of view, of various combinations of modules. Many students did not know where to go to receive such academic advice.

5.7.4. Several students reported difficulties in accessing the modules they wished to pursue, particularly at later stages in their course – a typical comment was that "the good modules go first". The number of places on some popular modules was reported as typically 25. In a truly student-centred system such excess demand would lead either to more places available on the module or to additional iterations of the module.

Recommendation 7: *That a review of the impact of modularisation be undertaken to identify ways in which its implementation might be modified to improve the student experience. In particular, opportunities to ensure that students have a sense of identity and can make meaningful relationships with peers and staff should be built in from the very beginning of all programmes.*

5.8. Staff Development

5.8.1. The dedication and the skills of the staff who have responsibilities for providing student support is commendable. However, it is not clear what professional development opportunities are available for these staff and for the student Peer Mentors who work in partnership with staff. This issue arises from the previous points made regarding 'ownership' of student learning support and the lack of senior level leadership in this regard.

5.8.2. There are already considerable resources being put into student support, although the dispersed and sometimes ad hoc nature of that support means that it is difficult to ascertain the real costs. Drawing together student support into one overarching service, from which the staff could be assigned to particular Colleges, could enable a culture of continuous development.

5.8.3. At present there is a disconnect between different aspects of student learning support. For example the Disability Support Service, which clearly has an excellent reputation, does not appear to be aligned with other aspects of learning support. There is a strong argument for all staff involved in learning and teaching and supporting students to have some understanding of the adjustments that may need to be put into effect to support students with disabilities. Likewise, it is difficult to see in what ways English Language Support and other forms of learning support come together. Furthermore, a coherent approach to the professional development of staff would help ensure a shared institutional philosophy to student support and the associated pedagogical principles.

5.8.4. From the Thematic Review process, what seemed anomalous was the lack of coherence between staff and student development opportunities. This has been common in many universities but the current trend is to develop better cohesion between academic staff development and student learning support.

Recommendation 8: *That appropriate professional development opportunities are provided for staff and students involved in providing student support.*

5.9. Academic Skills

5.9.1. The greater flexibility offered by the modular system gives students a huge range of choice. This choice can however make it difficult to ensure that all students receive timely instruction in developing learning skills appropriate to higher education (such as essay writing, referencing, etc.) as an integral part of the taught curriculum. Where programmes have a more tightly defined structure (as in some of the Professional Programmes), it is relatively straightforward to ensure that this is the case (as demonstrated by the modules "Computer Science in Practice" and "Principles of Scientific Enquiry"). The Review Group firmly believes that such key academic skills are developed most effectively when delivered in a contextualised manner as an integral part of the student's curriculum and not as a generic, de-contextualised "bolt-on".

Recommendation 9: *That critical academic skills (essay writing, referencing, information skills etc.) should be fully integrated into the Semester 1 curriculum, and built on through subsequent stages of each programme in a discipline appropriate way.*

5.10. BA Programme

5.10.1. The BA Programme is the largest degree programme in Ireland. Its size means that it is possible to offer students a massive range of choice in determining their programme of study, and a range of very different learning experiences. However, its size is a significant hindrance for its students, in terms of developing a cohort identity and a sense of belonging. In addition, the administrative support available to students on this programme through the Programme Office is disproportionately small (in terms of numbers of staff) when compared to other programmes. This combination of the greatest complexity and the least administrative support inevitably results in a student body that feels dissatisfaction. The latest recruitment information appears to indicate that this dissatisfaction is impinging on UCD's reputation and leading to a lower level of applications, and crucially to lower quality applicants. It was clear from the BA students that the Review Group met, notwithstanding that this group were well-motivated, that many of them feel lost and alienated, lack clear direction for their studies, and find it difficult to make meaningful relationships with staff and/or students.

5.10.2. Some restructuring of the first semester, along with the simplification of subject combinations and pathways would enable students to find a 'home' within the programme. This may require a rethink of the programme and entry pathways (for example, assigning each student to a 'home' school on the basis of their pre-selected major)[2]. Peer mentoring will help with some of these problems, but there is a clear need for easily available, student-focussed (and student-friendly) academic advice, delivered by someone with whom the student seeking support the student can establish a rapport. The students from the BA Programme who met with the Review Group were unanimous in their criticism of key aspects of provision – most particularly the difficulty in establishing relationships both with academic staff and with fellow students. The Review Group concluded from discussions with the students, that

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[2] Since the vast majority of students pre-select their majors on the CAO form, the BA could use denominated entry. This would assist Schools in planning teaching provision, matching supply to demand, would give students an obvious 'home', and would alleviate the huge pressure on the Programme Office with regard to Stage 1 registration: all students would be pre-enrolled to core modules in Semester 1 and could choose modules once they were in college and able to avail of academic advice.

the sense of alienation within the BA Programme is the issue that is having the most immediate (and powerful) detrimental effect on the reputation of UCD. There is an urgent need to address the problems caused by the scale of this programme.

Recommendation 10: *That steps would be taken to improve the experience for students on the BA programme, particularly through providing structured opportunities during Orientation and throughout the first semester, for students to make relationships with their peers and with academic staff. In addition, an urgent high-level review needs to be undertaken to streamline provision and to improve the clarity of structures and pathways within the BA programme.*

APPENDIX 1

Response to Review Group Report

We warmly welcome the Thematic Quality Review Report, and wish to record our gratitude to the members of the External Review Group for the time, energy and expertise that they brought to the process. This exercise was the first Thematic Review undertaken at UCD. As such, the members of the internal Review Committee represented a very diverse group from across the University with a wider-ranging remit than would be usual in a School or Unit Review. Despite the challenges that this posed for the Committee, overall we found the Thematic Review to have been a very valuable, collegial and instructive process. In particular, the self-assessment review allowed us to take a wide perspective on the considerable variety of academic student supports that exist across the institution. Our internal UCD reflective process was further enhanced by the External Review Group's perceptions of both the individual services and also the overall impact of the services taken in tandem with each other.

We are happy that the Report captures the essence of the Review, and that the student voice has been well represented in the process. A key tenet arising from the self assessment exercise and confirmed by the External Review Group is that academic supports are a basic requirement for all students to allow them to maximise their potential at university. The Report rightly acknowledges the quality of many of the services that support student achievement at UCD, and the effort put in by many individuals in the creation and development of these services. It also points to the need for strategic leadership in expanding these services into the future and in the coordination of academic supports in an integrated way.

This Report identifies and articulates very clearly the wider challenges that we face in the overall development and management of academic supports, and how best to communicate their existence to both students and staff. By tackling these challenges, we can maximise the impact of our existing resources individually and collectively for institutional benefit and to improve the overall educational experience for our students.

Finally, we wish to thank the UCD Quality Office for its guidance and encouragement throughout this process.

APPENDIX 2

Schedule for Review Visit

Thematic Review of UCD Academic Supports for Students

21-24 March 2011

Pre-Visit Briefing Prior to Site Visit: Monday, 21 March 2011

17.30-18.15   Review Group meet in the hotel to review preliminary issues and to confirm work schedule and assignment of tasks for the following three days - **RG and UCD Quality Office only**

18.15-19.15   Review Group meet UCD Registrar and Deputy President

19.45   Dinner for the Review Group, hosted by the UCD Registrar and Deputy President

Day 1: Tuesday, 22 March 2011
Venue: Oval Room, Belfield House

09.00-09.30   Private meeting of Review Group

09.30-10.15   Review Group meet the **review project sponsors**:

10.30-11.15   Meeting Theme: **Academic Structures and Student Supports**

11.15-11.45   Tea/Coffee break – Review Group only

11.45-12.00   Walk to Hopkins Centre, UCD Main Restaurant

Venue: Global Lounge, Hopkins Centre, Main Restaurant

12.00-13.00   Review Group meet with **representatives of the Self-assessment Co-ordinating Committee**

13.00-13.45   **Informal Tour** guided by UCD Director of International Affairs, followed by lunch with the **Self-assessment Co-ordinating Committee**

13.45-14.00   Private meeting of Review Group to review findings

14.00-15.00   Review Group meet with **Student Group 1 (Arts/Humanities)**

15.00-15.15   Private meeting of Review Group to review findings

15.15-15.30   Brief **Tour of Facilities** guided by Director of Maths Support Centre
15.30-15.45 Maths Support Centre (MSC)
15.45-16.10 Careers Centre
16.10-16.30 Access and Lifelong Learning (ALLL) Meeting Room

Venue: Room 130, Level 1, Staff Area, James Joyce Library

16.30-16.45   **Tour of Library Facilities** guided by Deputy Librarian

16.45-17.45   Meeting Theme: **Academic supports in Library/Careers/Maths Support Centre and Access and Life Long Learning**

17.45-18.00   Private meeting of Review Group to review findings to date

18.00   RG depart

Day 2: Wednesday, 23 March 2011
Venue: Computer Science Building, Boardroom

08.45-09.15   Private meeting of Review Group at CSI Boardroom, Computer Science Building

09.15-10.00   Meeting Theme: **Programme Supporting Students** – Case Study: Computer Science and Informatics
09.15-09.30 Tour of Facilities
09.30-10.00 Presentation by Head of UCD School of Computer Science and Informatics

10.00-10.15   Break

10.15-11.00   Review Group meet **Student Advisers, Programme Office and School Office staff**

11.00-11.10   Tea/Coffee break

11.10-11.45   Meeting Theme: **Systems Supporting Students** – UCD Registry

12.00-13.00   Review Group meet **students from Professional Undergraduate Programmes**

13.00-13.15   Review Group return to Belfield House

Venue: Belfield House

13.15-13.30   Lunch – Review Group

13.30-14.00   Review Group meet UCD Deputy Registrar for Teaching and Learning (Chair of the Thematic Review Steering Group)

14.00-14.30   Private meeting of Review Group to review findings and plan ahead

14.30-15.30   Meeting Theme: **Focus on First Year**

15.30-16.00   Tea/coffee break

16.00-17.00   Meeting Theme: **Changing Student Profile**

17.00-17.45   Review Group meeting to review findings to date

17.45   Review Group depart

Day 3: Thursday, 24 March 2011
Venue: Oval Room, UCD Belfield House

08.45-09.15   Private meeting of Review Group

09.15-12.45   (Optional) Review Group meet with unit or University staff to clarify outstanding issues or start preparing draft Review Group Report and feedback presentation

12.45-13.30   Lunch – Review Group only

13.30-15.00   Review Group finalise first draft of Review Group Report and prepare exit presentation – and confirm arrangements/deadline for Review Group completion

15.00-15.20   Review Group meet with key staff to feedback outline strengths and recommendations on areas for further development

15.20-15.30   Move to Seminar Room, Belfield House

15.30-16.00   Exit presentation to be made by an external member of the Review Group (or other member of the Review Group, as agreed) summarising the key findings of the Review Group

16.00   Review Site Visit ends – Review Group depart