University College Dublin

Quality Improvement Plan

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School of Geography, Planning and Environmental Policy

June 2013

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1. Introduction

The Quality Review process started in year 2011 with the School's preparation of the Self-assessment Report (SAR) which was submitted in October 2012, and followed by the Quality Review Group's (QRG) visit on November 27-29. The Quality Review Group's draft report was received in February of 2013 to be thoroughly discussed by the School's Executive Committee and the subsequent Staff meeting on February 22nd, 2013. With regard to any issues of factual error or misinterpretation, the School provided the QRG with a detailed response to the draft submitted to the UCD Quality Review office on March 8th, 2013. The final report was received from the QRG on March 13th, 2013.

The Quality Improvement Committee (listed below) whose membership largely overlaps with the membership of the Self-assessment Report Committee was charged with generating and discussing the initial ideas and consolidating them into the QIP. The Committee met on April 4th to review the draft and recommend it for discussion among the School's staff at the School meeting on May 10th. The staff meeting was also used as a working session toward enhancing the draft QIP. Feedback from staff was also received in writing as edits and comments to the draft text. The current version of the QIP is the outcome of this process.

Date of Quality Review site visit: 27 – 29 November 2012

Quality Improvement Committee:
Professor Zorica Nedovic-Budic
Professor Peter Clinch
Professor Alun Jones
Dr Finbarr Brereton
Dr Veronica Crossa
Dr Berna Grist
Dr Gerald Mills
Dr Enda Murphy
Dr Mark Scott
Ms Ruth Comerford-Morris
Ms Clare Ní Cholmáin

Categories

1. Recommendations concerning academic, organisational and other matters which are entirely under the control of the unit
2. Recommendations concerning shortcomings in services, procedures and facilities which are outside the control of the unit
3. Recommendations concerning inadequate staffing, and/or facilities which require recurrent or capital funding

Timescale

A. Recommendation already implemented
B. Recommendations to be implemented within one year
C. Recommendations to be implemented within five years
D. Recommendations which will not be implemented

Report	RG Recommendation	Category (see list above)	Action Taken/Action Planned/Reason for Not Implementing	Timescale (see list above)
		ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT		
Para. 2.12	The School needs to define its mission and future direction, drawing on the potential of all its component parts and the synergies between them. The Review Group believe a connection via the organising power of a "space and place", scientific, policy-driven mission is very feasible. A stronger, more explicit and focused mission statement and set of goals are needed to strategically direct future development and find a way to fit the pieces of the unit together in a more synergistic way. Some initial steps might include the following:	1	The School consists of 3 subject areas with strong identities and distinct communities with very small likelihood that any of them could be replaced with a common denominator without a negative implication on the existing linkages and disciplinary identification. This has already been communicated to the Review Group both verbally and in writing.

For a relatively young school, various and substantial synergies in teaching and research have been achieved and formalised through the research themes and educational programmes. The School has already developed a Strategic Plan (2007), a Business Plan (20012-13) and SWOT analysis as part of the Quality Review Self-assessment Report. | B |

	a. Take more careful stock of faculty resources; identify strengths and gaps; think about synergies among domains within the School and across the University; and use this analysis to establish future hiring priorities. b. Assess the contribution of the Unit in advancing the state of the discipline/ profession and the position of its programmes relative to peer institutions. c. Identify a set of specific goals for each programme and establish procedures for reviewing and updating those goals.		**Action:** 1. **Retreat with an external facilitator to explore further the School's identity and synergies** 2. **Update on the current Strategic Plan**	
Para. 2.13	Moving forward will require a stronger consensus regarding the future direction of the school. Along with the analysis of synergies highlighted above, this will include an understanding of the balance between teaching and research, fully recognising the valuable contributions of every staff member. The Review Group recommend a facilitated retreat to discover the "heart and soul" of this unit, including a concerted effort to reconcile competing visions, to be followed by an implementation plan.	1	See above	B

Para. 2.14	Alongside this School exercise, the college and University should recognise the key position of the School as a multidisciplinary spatial integrating unit capable of drawing together different schools and connecting to research institutes. The ability to foster integration has real implications, particularly the leveraging of external funding focused around interdisciplinary grants, where the school has had notable success. The School has expressed the view that its multidisciplinary nature, from which much of its potential is derived, is not reflected in its budget allocation. This should be investigated.	2	The School is one of a small number of multidisciplinary schools. The administrative systems are calibrated to calculate university statistics at the unit level, which, in the case of GPEP, does not reflect the variety and distinguished character of its constituent parts. **Action:** **On-going conversations with College and University representatives with respect to the willingness to support an interdisciplinary school and the recognition of its value**	C
Para. 2.15	The School workload allocation model is an important tool for the management of teaching, research and administrative workloads, and the School has been proactive in the development of this model. However, the model needs to be refined further and operationalised.	1	This model was implemented on a trial basis over the past 2 years. In the process, shortcomings have been revealed and improvements suggested, but with staff overloaded already and the extensive time and effort that went into the current policy, capacity for restarting the task was limited. In addition, there was no clear agreement about the nature of changes, which promised another prolonged process. The initial implementation experience showed that the tight and unstable staffing situation does not leave much room for reallocation of workload with staff already well involved in teaching, administration and research. **Action:** 1. **Keep the model as is with a view to making modifications where necessary and in line with College efforts to harmonise the models across the schools**	C

			2. **Explore the approach suggested by the QRG to capitalise on the staff's exclusive interests, e.g., in research or teaching, and agree with individual staff to assign higher proportion of workload in the specific area of activity.**	
			STAFF AND FACILITIES	
Para. 3.9	The Review Group accept that there are shortages in staff provision. While recognising the realities of the financial climate, the Group supports the School's desire for recruitment and recommend that such recruitment should seek to enhance synergies within the School and build up a GPEP identity.	3	Staff positions in Environmental Policy and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) / spatial (quantitative) analysis are identified as needed; both are with cross-school reach. The current staffing is at the level that cannot sustain further cuts. Any attrition (for retirement or relocation reasons) will require a replacement, including the geography staff on the leave of absence in case that the position is not resumed. **Action:** **Request the 3 positions to be filled**	B
Para. 3.10	It is not appropriate for this review to attempt to dictate priorities for hiring – these should emerge from a strategic exercise within the School. However, the Review Group recommend that a position in the area of GIS should be given particular consideration. GIS is a key area of need across the University in which the School has a natural leadership position. It brings together the different school disciplines and	3	See above	

	it provides employable skills for graduates. It can generate revenue through consultancy, research grants and continuing professional development, while also being attractive to international students. However it is currently vulnerable in terms of staffing (academic and support) and IT provision. Without strong GIS the school will find it difficult to compete, especially in the US and China.			
Para. 3.11	The School should initiate a formal practice of mentoring junior faculty and conveying a more unequivocal understanding of the expectations upon them.	1	**Action: HoS to organise**	B
Para. 3.12	Regarding facilities, the physical separation of Geography from Planning and Environmental Policy is a significant concern, particularly since it is the integration of these domains that lies at the heart of this unit's essential value and purpose. The School should be encouraged to seek out creative ways of addressing this separation. One idea would be to enlist the support of students, and seek their input on ways to improve the collaborative culture of the school.	N/A	Both Richview and Belfield facilities are adequate, the former being custom made and dedicated (donated) to the planning and environmental policy groups (formerly departments) for their teaching and research activities. Richview location allows Planning and Environmental Policy to keep important links with Architecture, Landscape Architecture, the EPA and the Urban Institute (now part of UCD Earth Institute) which are all in close proximity. Geography group is well settled in Newman Building. The space in Belfield is likely to undergo an upgrade through the renovation and modernisation of the Newman-Joyce complex and the School is included and actively participating in the planning process. A bike scheme is used to increase accessibility of the two campus sites, but regardless, the staff attend the two sites as needed and cooperate based on their joint interests and goals (evidenced by joint publications and membership on PhD panels). **No Action**	D

Para. 3.13	Given the importance of GIS and spatial analysis, facilities in this area should be upgraded as a matter of urgency. The current server-based delivery of data and software is highly problematic, and should be addressed in a number of ways, such as the use of open source software and the resolution of licensing issues. The Review Group suggest the formation of a sub-committee that includes students and staff to examine ways of resolving this important problem. This should be a University-wide initiative, as units across the University expressed strong interest in GIS delivery.	2	This problem is entirely related to the provisions through IT Services. **Action:** **HoS / STO to discuss with IT and request that the technology setup considers the unique requirements of computationally demanding software like geographic information systems (ArcGIS) which cannot function well off a server.**	
Para. 3.14	The decline in administrative and technical support is a concern, particularly in a School where the disciplines are part-laboratory based, and results in under-utilisation of facilities for both research and teaching. The appropriate level of professional and administrative support should be reviewed where there are requirements for studio, IT and off campus work.	3	**Action:** **To ensure that the School retains a Senior Technical Officer position and a Senior Executive Assistant position on a permanent basis and to request an additional Executive Assistant post to support the running and coordination of the undergraduate programmes (the increased numbers in BA Geography, in particular, putting additional pressure and demands).**	B
	TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT			
Para. 4.17	Frustrations were expressed by the school regarding staff shortages in some teaching areas. Of the (small number of) problems	3	The School cannot take direct action on staffing issues because they are ultimately beyond the School's control. However, the School will continue to put forward the case for additional staff to University management to ensure	B

	identified by students in relation to teaching, almost all arose when special circumstances exposed the thin provision of teaching staff, and the solutions were sub-optimal. The Review Group reiterate here our support for recruitment.		the integrity of the various programmes (see above).	
Para. 4.18	The School makes considerable use of post-doctoral and other temporary staff to provide teaching cover. It should ensure that all such staff receive appropriate training and supervision.	1	**Action:** 1. **Within the contractual boundaries encourage new postdoctoral teaching staff to undertake a UCD Teaching and Learning Centre's workshop on small and large group teaching to assist them with preparing and delivering lectures.** 2. **On-going supervision of postdoctoral staff by their mentors, heads of subject and/or programme directors.**	B
Para. 4.19	Feedback to students should be improved, with a clear statement around the nature, quality and timing of this feedback. This is not to suggest that the quantity of feedback should be increased. Feedback needs to be timely, personalised and lead to improvement in student's work. Sometimes less (formative) assessment can lead to better quality feedback.	1	Within current resource constraints and depending on the module nature and level, the School plans to institute arrangements whereby the availability of feedback becomes mandatory across the School. **Action:** **School T&L Committee will look at the best procedures to implement systematic and timely feedback.**	B
Para. 4.20	Consideration should be given to providing students access to greater guidance on the selection of option modules within the undergraduate degree programme,	1	This has already been done. There is a document which guides students on the most appropriate modules to take depending on subject area of interest.	D

	particularly in the final year of the large undergraduate BA Geography degree programme.			
Para. 4.21	There should be a consistent approach to student workloads and assessment to ensure an equitable experience, along with clarification of opportunities for skills acquisition that informs student choice.	1	The School has already begun compiling a database of the range of assessments across the School and intends to bring forward proposals to standardise assessment equivalency across modules that are identical in year and modular credit. **Action:** **School T&L Committee are already working on this and will continue to do so.**	C
	CURRICULUM DEVEMOPMENT AND REVIEW			
Para. 5.13	Curriculum development appears to be operationally driven and not strategic. Again, it would be good for the school to be more forthright over what it is best known for and will be known for in the future, particularly for an international market. Examples might include international cities, sustainable urban design and environmental policy.	1	Programme dependent. Due to staff constrains on the BA Geography Programme, the strategic direction has been somewhat compromised and the programme is operationally driven by necessity. Nevertheless, it is pursued within constraints. At the graduate level, curriculum development is strategic as evidenced by the recent development of new MA degrees in Geopolitics and the Global economy; Urban Studies and the recent development to the MSc Environmental Policy. All of these degrees were developed with the consideration of research interests and expertise of academic staff as well as School's competitiveness in an international market. This has already been implemented.	D

Para. 5.14	The School should look to deploy more effectively staff effort in delivery and assessment without sacrificing the student experience, perhaps through a focus of intensive teaching upon core parts of curriculum and use of teaching assistants as appropriate (with training). This may require some curriculum rationalisation and team-teaching, as currently a huge number and range of modules are offered by a small group of academic staff, which taxes resources, creates timetable difficulties and raises issues over student academic and intellectual development.	1	Further rationalisation is not possible. Several staff have taken part in a UCD T&L HEA funded assessment redesign project. Curriculum rationalisation is not an option as it is already completely pared back to minimum levels. This has been an ongoing project. **Action:** **Undertake a review of programmes during the academic year of 2013/14 to identify if any further efficiencies might be achieved.**	A, B
Para. 5.15	Postgraduate fees and international students are prime sources of non-exchequer income. Other universities have successfully internationalised accredited programmes, and the school should examine this as a first step to greater international recruitment in planning related courses.	1	The School has been attempting to internationalise the graduate programmes for the past two years. Staff and financial resources were devoted toward foreign marketing of the MRUP and MSc EP as well as the MA programmes. This seems to have been successful with a greater diversity in application numbers from non-Irish citizens. The School plans to continue this approach and enhance it in the coming years, finances permitting.	A
Para. 5.16	However, any further expansion of the curriculum, for example in pursuit of international student recruitment, should be carefully costed, taking note of higher resource requirements for postgraduate teaching.	1	The School agrees.	N/A

Para. 5.17	UCD's position as a research-intensive university should be reflected in the undergraduate curriculum, with staff research strengths reflected in the curriculum and opportunities for students to acquire and practice research skills. This has been noted by the School, but challenges are exemplified by summative assessment based on written examination, with limited opportunities for field and practical work. The undergraduate dissertation is an excellent opportunity for students to use and demonstrate research skills, and it could be re-introduced as an option while resources are constrained.	1	**No choice: staff/student ratios limit assessment options and diversity of activities. Staff research is clearly reflected in curriculum but there is a need to ensure core skills also are covered.** **Action:** **The School T&L Committee will lead a review.**	B
Para. 5.18	The diminution of fieldwork is regrettable but understandable. Every effort should be made to include opportunities for practice whether via fieldwork, laboratory teaching or studio work.	1	This has already being implemented.	A
Para. 5.19	The importance of GIS – and its current under-representation in the curriculum – was mentioned repeatedly. There is a need to integrate GIS in the curriculum more broadly, not just as standalone modules, but as an organising framework for coursework. It could be used as a platform to address weaknesses in the curriculum, such as a lack of quantitative analysis taught to	3	This depends on hiring and staffing issues, see 3.9	B

	undergraduate geography students.			
Para. 5.20	Employability of graduating students is important. There are strong links between the curriculum and potential employers for planning programmes but less so for geography. The curriculum should include reference to the development of employability (knowledge, skills, attributes) so that students consider these as they make curriculum choices.	1	**Action:** 1. **Include references to employability and related skills in BA modules.** 2. **Build alumni records (LinkedIn alumni group already established for PEP graduates).** 3. **Specify more clearly the potential employment avenues for students on the MA programmes with future marketing and promotion rounds and brochures.**	A, C
Para. 5.21	Despite its interdisciplinary nature, the School has not yet realised all opportunities for the curriculum to be designed across School and University disciplines. In conversations it was evident that many of the opportunities were understood but faced disincentives around the RAM, budget and load transfer for service teaching. Any disincentives to teaching students across disciplinary boundaries should be investigated and removed where possible.	1	The School already has a significant cross School teaching component as evidenced by the QR report. In addition, there are teaching engagements and exchanges beyond the School (e.g. with SPIRE, Architecture, Engineering, Sociology).	D

RESEARCH ACTIVITY

Para. 6.12	The effort to define the future direction of the School should include the identification of cutting-edge research domains in which the School has competitive advantage. The presentation of three broad-based research clusters has the benefit of inclusivity but at the expense of focus. Being internationally known for a few key research strengths would sharpen the profile of the School within the University, assist in its research interaction with other schools and institutes and help put the School on the map internationally.	1	The School has three broad-based research themes (not research clusters) at present to represent and communicate the breadth and scope of research in the School. **Action:** **Following the recommendation of the QR group, the Research Committee will undertake a review of research output, research income, PhD student activity and research impact to identify areas of research *strengths* with an intention to: a) raise the international profile of the School; and b) 'map out' the competitive advantage of GPEP and the School's distinctive contribution within the College and University. This latter involves mapping School's research strengths to emerging College of Human Sciences research priorities and to UCD's major research institutes, e.g., Geary Institute and Earth Institute.**	B
Para. 6.13	Staff should be encouraged to target high impact journals. The calibre and quality of publication outlets is critically important for a unit attempting to attract international students and funding. The workload model should recognise the differences involved in publishing in high impact and high quality journals vs. other publication outlets. There should also be a clear distinction between peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed publication – the Review Group found this	1	The School agrees that publishing in high impact journals is critical to raising the research profile of GPEP, and the School has a substantial track record of publishing in leading journals across its 3 subject areas. The importance of high ranking journals is also reflected in the University promotion policy for individuals, which requires staff to list impact factors alongside publications. However, in developing the WLM, the School measures 'workload' and its distribution across the School; however, it is not a tool to measure 'quality', either for teaching or research as these are measured through different methods and processes.	B

	distinction somewhat muddled in some of the documents it reviewed.		**Action:** **The School will review the valuation of research in WLM reflective of College and University norms.** *Note:* There was a clear distinction between peer-reviewed and non peer-reviewed publications in School documents that were prepared for the QR. School documents followed the format adopted in the President's Report and the one used in RMS profiles. However, there may have been variation on individual CVs submitted (these were only requested by the QR panel during their visit). **Action:** **Staff will be encouraged to adopt RMS-style categories in their individual CVs.**	
Para. 6.14	The Review Group find the lack of appropriate overhead recovery particularly problematic and counter to the goal of increasing external revenue. The University should provide tangible support related to overhead income generated by grants. There are now financial disincentives related to generating research income and these need to be resolved.	2	This is beyond the control of the School. The School and College have lobbied for this for some time. Since 2008/09, 33% & 5% of overheads earned were distributed via the RSS Schools and College Schemes respectively, to Units in proportion to their research income. Only 5% of the amount disbursed under the School scheme and 10% of the College scheme was allowed as discretionary expenditure. The remainder was allocated to the Schools and Colleges through the RAM. This meant that Schools and Colleges had discretion to spend about 2% of all overheads earned to support research. The BRC approved the following change for 2012/13. From September 2013, 50% of all overheads earned will be distributed to Schools and Colleges and they will be allowed to spend 20% of that allocation in support of the indirect costs of research. A flat sum of €30K will be given to each college to support research with the remainder of the discretionary spend being assigned to the Schools in	A

			proportion to their research income. The non-discretionary overhead will be assigned to the Schools through the RAM, as before.	

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<tr><td colspan="5" align="center">MANAGEMENT OF QUALITY AND ENHANCEMENT</td></tr>
<tr>
<td>Para. 7.8</td>
<td>The external examiners for Geography in their most recent reports requested that the subject area respond in a more formal manner to their feedback. This process should be actioned and applied consistently across the School.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>This is already practiced by the Geography subject group; the other 2 groups (planning and environmental policy) intend to follow suit.

Action:

Ensure that all programme directors, in conjunction with subject heads, respond formally to the external feedback.</td>
<td>A, B</td>
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<td>Para. 7.9</td>
<td>Staff-student committee meetings should handle more substantive matters and should meet more regularly, perhaps two times per semester. In order to get the students to better engage with the process, consideration should be given to giving students a role in setting the agenda for the meeting and taking the subsequent minutes for circulation. It is important that any potential issues should be raised at the level of the module co-ordinator in the first instance and only items not resolved at that level should be escalated up to the staff-student committee. There should also be a process for ensuring that recommendations made by the committee are actioned as</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>This is already practiced but not formalised.

Action:

Ensure that all subject heads respond formally to the feedback and commit to one meeting per semester.</td>
<td>A, B</td>
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	appropriate.			
	SUPPORT SERVICES			
Para. 8.5	General access to GIS software around campus is unsatisfactory. As part of its development of this area, the School should work closely with IT Services to arrange appropriate provision.	2	See 3.13	B
Para. 8.6	In seeking to identify and address opportunities for international recruitment, the school needs particular information and assistance. The current sense is that the International Office is not providing the initial information needed by a school of this size as it seeks to understand and access international markets. The identification of an International Office partner for the college would improve this interface, as should the filling of a marketing position within the College.	2	**Action:** **Connect to the newly hired College marketing staff to initiate a more focused approach to the advertisement of the School's graduate programmes.**	B
Para. 8.7	The School has noted some delays and rigidities arising at the interface with other units, such as HR. These were also noted by external stakeholders, for example in relation to the issuance of contracts and the documentation associated with hosting agreements. There should be frequent two-	2	Communication happens as needed – no need to communicate more frequently if there is no substantive issue to raise.	A

	way communication between schools and support units that allows such problems to be identified and addressed.			
	EXTERNAL RELATIONS			
Para. 9.9	In the Geography subject area in particular the School has limited information on destination and employment of its graduates. The Alumni Office might be leveraged better to gather such information. Such data may provide a useful input into the marketing of the BA in Geography programme in particular, given the dropping of Geography as a compulsory subject in the Junior Certificate.	2	Already done through UCD. Social media such as LinkedIn and Facebook offer potential tools for connecting with programme graduates. LinkedIn is already used to connect interested PEP alumni. **Action:** **The School will continue to work with the Alumni Office to see how to better capture this information.**	C
Para. 9.10	Given the twin effects of the current difficulties in the building and construction industry and also the removal of Geography as a core subject at Junior Certificate level, the School could better leverage its own resources and work closely with the recruitment and admissions staff in the University to engage with secondary schools to profile itself.	1	BA Geography already recruiting very successfully. The School has held a Summer School since 2012 and will continue working with the Student Recruitment Office.	C A
Para. 9.11	The School should seek to enhance its communications with employers e.g. circulating its annual newsletter more	1	This is already being done.	A

widely, informing employers of recent hires and of the key skills and expertise within the school, as well as highlighting potential opportunities for enhancing research collaboration. CPD events, though not necessarily a significant source of revenue, may potentially strengthen employer relationships, e.g. a GIS workshop for the Geography Teachers Association of Ireland. There may also be an opportunity to hold an annual open day showcasing school activities, which could be captured online and placed on the school's website.		

3. Prioritised Resource Requirements

This section should only contain a list, prioritised by the Quality Improvement Committee, of recommendations outlined in the Review Group Report, which require additional resources. The planned action to address each recommendation with an estimate of the cost involved should also be included:

1. Academic staff: Environmental Policy, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and any replacement due to attrition (currently one staff on leave of absence – potential attrition). The cost is based on UCD pay scale at lecturer / senior lecturer level.

2. Support staff: Senior Technical Officer and Senior Executive Assistant – permanent. The cost of those are already included in the School and College accounts.

Note: The Quality Improvement Plan should be used to inform School/Support Unit and College level academic, support service and resource planning activities.