

INSTITUTIONAL QUALITY REVIEW OF UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

EUA REVIEWERS' REPORT

February 2005

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1. Introduction

Irish universities are required under the 1997 Universities Act to establish and implement procedures for quality assurance, and arrange for a review of the effectiveness of these procedures “from time to time and in any case at least every 15 years”. For this purpose, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and all seven Irish universities represented by the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) engaged the European University Association (EUA) to undertake this review with the participation of experts from Europe, the USA and Canada.

The review of all seven Irish universities therefore took place in a coordinated manner during the calendar year 2004 using the EUA institutional review methodology and guidelines. These guidelines were specially fine-tuned to meet the specific requirements of the Irish quality review. The process was designed to ensure that each individual university, the university system as a whole, and its stakeholders gained maximum benefit from comprehensive reviews by teams of experienced international quality assurance experts. This methodology also ensured that the procedures and processes in place in Irish universities were reviewed against best practice internationally.

The EUA has a strong international reputation in quality assurance having conducted institutional reviews of some 135 universities in some 33 countries during the past ten years. The tenth anniversary of the EUA programme was celebrated during 2004.

Under the joint IUQB/HEA commission, the EUA was requested to report on the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures in each university and the implementation of findings arising out of the application of those procedures, in the context of the university’s overall institutional decision making and strategic planning processes.

It was further requested that these key elements should be placed within an institutional analysis, allowing the review teams to comment on institutional obstacles and success factors for an effective internal quality management.

Following a formal request from the President of University College Dublin (UCD), the Steering Committee of the EUA institutional review programme appointed a team for the institutional quality review of UCD. This team was composed of:

- Jarmo Visakorpi, former Rector, University of Tampere, Finland, and former Chair, Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council, as chair;
- Julio Pedrosa, former Rector, University of Aveiro, and former Minister of Education, Portugal;
- Robin Farquhar, Professor Emeritus and former President, Carleton University and former President, the University of Winnipeg, Canada;
- Janet O’Sullivan, executive development officer at the Haute Ecole de Commerce, Paris, France

The team came to UCD for a preliminary visit from 27 to 29 April 2004 and for a main visit from 19 to 22 September 2004. Lewis Purser, Programme Manager at the European University Association, stood in as team secretary for the main visit, Janet O’Sullivan being unfortunately obliged to withdraw for reasons of health.

In accordance with the EUA methodology and guidelines, and in advance of the preliminary visit, University College Dublin sent a 23 page Self-Evaluation Report (SER) to the EUA, analysing the institution’s norms and values as well as the quality assurance/quality improvement and quality

management processes. This SER was accompanied by annexes with detailed data on students, staff, finances, various aspects of quality-related work at UCD, and the SWOT analysis undertaken in preparing the self-evaluation report. The EUA team found the SER to be well articulated, analytical, and easy to read. The team also received further relevant documents during its visits to UCD, including several complete series of QA/QI reports from a variety of units. The process of self-evaluation at UCD appears to have been open and extensive.

During its two visits, the EUA team held detailed discussions with a wide variety of persons, both from inside and outside the university community. These included:

- the President, Vice-Presidents, Registrar, Bursar and Librarian
- representatives of Governing Authority
- representatives of Academic Council
- the Deans
- the self-evaluation group established for the EUA review process
- student leaders
- leaders, staff and students from a wide variety of Faculties and Departments, including some units which had already been through the first round of the QA/QI process
- staff from many support units across the University
- representatives of external stakeholders.

The team would like to thank UCD and its President, Dr. Hugh Brady, for the welcome and hospitality provided during these visits. The visits and meetings were efficiently and pleasantly arranged by Prof. Alan Harrison, Director of Quality Assurance at UCD, who also acted as a very effective liaison person between UCD and EUA. The team would like to put on record the open and fruitful discussions which characterised the team's meetings during these visits.

2. Process

The EUA quality review methodology is guided by four central strategic questions. These questions, which have also been adopted by the IUQB in its Framework for Quality in Irish Universities, are:

- What is the university trying to do?
- How is the university trying to do it?
- How does the university know that it works?
- How does the university change in order to improve?

The EUA team used these questions as its framework when reviewing the quality assurance process at UCD, within the wider institutional strategic setting. This approach was clearly familiar to those the team met during its visits, understandably so since it is very similar to the QA/QI process adopted by UCD for internal use as a pilot project in 1995. This was the first such pilot at an Irish university.

UCD was also the only Irish university which had already undertaken an EUA institutional evaluation. This evaluation, which took place in 1998, was followed-up by a "senior management

review” in 2003, independent of EUA but based on similar lines and building on the original EUA report.

The EUA team therefore concurs with the first sentence of the UCD self-evaluation report, which states that “UCD continues to be a leader in the promotion and operation of Quality Assurance in Irish universities”.

The team was however aware that, given the change of President and other senior leadership at the start of the EUA quality review process in 2004, the timing of this review was not considered optimal for UCD. These changes, combined with the need to put together a new strategic plan and with other external elements such as the OECD review of Irish higher education policy, mean that the university has been going through a special period of intense change.

However, the team believes that this EUA quality review process may also contribute to the future development of policy and strategy at UCD. EUA’s objective is not to produce a blueprint but rather to provide a supportive review of the university’s own strategies and procedures, as identified in the documents provided and in the numerous meetings and discussions held. This does not result in a judgement, and the results are in no way comparative. The review does not focus on any particular field of study or research, nor on any individuals or groups. The EUA methodology is therefore limited in time and scope, but we hope it may prove useful at this crucial moment in UCD’s ongoing development.

3. Mission and vision

UCD’s current mission statement was adopted in 1996 and in the opinion of the EUA team is rather general, as indeed are the mission statements of most traditional universities. The vision presented by the UCD President in his inaugural speech (January 2004) underlines that fact that the university aspires to be a research-led university with excellence also in teaching, truly international in character but with a distinctive Irish flavour.

The EUA team wonders whether this mission statement is still relevant for the first part of the 21st century. This question was also asked during the 2003 senior management review process. We believe that this question should be given serious consideration within the university, especially at a time when the new strategic plan is in preparation and the university is undergoing important changes. The values presented in these mission and vision statements are certainly laudable, but it may be useful to say more about UCD’s specific role in higher education in Ireland and which elements serve to differentiate it from the other Irish universities.

By way of example, not suggestion, the following ideas point to some elements which could be introduced to the vision statement, making it more specific:

- UCD is a comprehensive university covering all major disciplines, but sciences and engineering account for only 18% of the undergraduate students: this would appear to be a rather low figure when looking at the whole higher education sector in Ireland. What is the university’s vision of its disciplinary balance for the future, and what does Ireland expect from UCD in particular?
- The change of demographic structure in Ireland is leading to a significant decrease in traditional third level entrance age cohorts. More than 90% of current UCD students come from these traditional age cohorts. There are, however, large groups of adults in Ireland who

have not yet benefited from tertiary education, or who would benefit by returning to university to upgrade their knowledge and skills in a wide variety of fields. What is UCD's vision in this respect, and what can it do to address some of these important societal needs?

The institution's mission and vision define what the university is trying to do, and are therefore crucial in determining what strategies should be put in place, and how a quality assurance and improvement system should operate. The EUA team would encourage UCD to be proactive regarding these kinds of national issues and to express its views in its vision statement and strategic plan.

4. Student issues

The admission of traditional students is obviously well organised in Ireland through the Central Applications Office (CAO) system. Although the right to choose its own students is one of the main elements of a university's autonomy, it is well recognised that national cooperation in this respect is necessary and often better than full individual autonomy. However, the EUA team considers that the systematic recruitment and admission of mature students needs to be considered carefully by UCD as the context in which it is working continues to evolve.

The EUA team believes that one of the big issues facing Irish universities, not just individually but also nationally, concerns the types of students recruited and educational programmes offered, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. In the opinion of the team, these translate into an increased need at UCD for:

- More taught masters students, aiming at higher levels of specialisation for professional purposes and at the re-orientation of graduates towards new higher-level qualifications and skills, possibly in other fields than their original undergraduate education;
- More research masters and PhD students, aiming at developing the research capacity and outputs at the university, as suggested in the OECD review;
- More adult education, as already mentioned;
- More international students. The present number is already high in Irish terms, and some Faculties, eg Medicine and Commerce, have had great success in this field. However, the possibilities for an English speaking society and university community are excellent regarding both EU and non-EU incoming students, both from well developed countries and from developing countries.

Student services at UCD appeared to be well organised and administered. The Team was pleased to note that student issues and opinions are considered seriously, resulting in the recent establishment of a new position of Vice-President for Students, in the strengthening of student support services at Faculty level, and in due consideration being given to the creation of a student ombudsman.

The EUA team noted however that the overall position of students at UCD appeared to be rather weak and passive. This may be linked to learning methods and attitudes inherited by students from the secondary school system, but the university needs to maintain its efforts, as it has been doing successfully in the past, to develop fully aware, active and critical citizens, as one of its central contributions to society. The role of student clubs and societies is important in this respect. The team noted that student influence and input into the quality assurance process was limited, and will address this issue later in the report.

5. Teaching and learning

The Teaching and Learning Board, chaired by the Registrar, is the major policy-making body in this area at UCD. Its deliberations inform management strategies, such as resource allocation and human resources. Each Faculty has recently appointed an Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning.

UCD offers a wide range of undergraduate educational programmes, which have been developed over the university's 150 year history. The ongoing improvement of these programmes and curricula is the main factor for excellence in teaching and learning. For this continuous improvement to take place, the following are necessary elements:

- Curriculum design and development
- Modern teaching and learning methods
- Course review
- Programme review
- Services, infrastructure and learning contexts.

The curriculum design at UCD is currently undergoing fundamental change through the introduction of a fully modularised, credit-based system. This change, although labour intensive during the introductory phase, will be central in developing more interdisciplinary education and in catering for more diverse groups of students, including non-traditional and international students. It is essential that this modular structure and credit system be coherent across the entire university, so as to allow for more innovative and flexible curriculum design, from both the staff and student perspectives. The traditional structures prevailing at UCD, with large numbers of Faculties and Departments, will however make the effective and strategic use of a modular system rather complicated, and may in fact limit some of the positive benefits which this system can bring, both for students but also in terms of efficient and flexible organisation.

As in most traditional universities the size of UCD, there would appear to be plenty of work still needed to ensure modern teaching and learning practices across the whole institution. Large lectures in auditoria are still too often the norm in many fields, especially during the early undergraduate years. The UCD SER alludes to a generally traditional approach to teaching at the university, although it also makes specific mention of new didactic approaches which are being introduced. The team was also informed of an increased focus on improving the first-year experience at UCD. The introduction of the modular structure will require greater student guidance capacity to ensure young students make the best use of the flexibility this structure can offer.

The team would like to commend the approach taken by the Centre for Teaching and Learning, which offers an integrated range of services aimed at helping staff improve their teaching. These include mandatory induction courses for new staff, teaching portfolio development, curriculum design, course evaluation and the integration of new technologies. The team considers that the Centre should also have a more important research component, to enable UCD to identify and build on best practice. One concrete activity would be to analyse all the QA/QI reports from the various units for teaching and learning issues, and to feed this information into the work of the Centre itself. There would appear to be a general need for greater emphasis on the concept of student learning at UCD, and the Centre for Teaching and Learning can play a key role in helping teachers and administrators rise to this challenge.

At the request of their respective professional bodies, the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and the Medical School are engaged in comprehensive reviews of their curricula and have moved towards

problem-based learning. These developments, both in terms of organisation and didactic approach, will also require close monitoring and the experience gained could prove to be of great use elsewhere in UCD.

However, UCD is itself responsible for the accreditation of most of its own programmes, and the traditional External Examiners system plays an important part in this. This has proved over the years to be an effective external way to review and benchmark courses and programmes, including assessment criteria and standards. This system does however rely on the selection of these examiners being as objective and neutral as possible, and the examiners themselves being leaders in such developments in their field.

The evaluation by students of courses and course delivery would appear to vary widely between faculties: questionnaires and/or other methods of obtaining student feedback are not used systematically, and in many cases not at all. Continuous course evaluation is an important part of quality assurance, and one of the few ways in which large numbers of students can contribute to the QA process. Awareness among students of such processes at universities is generally weak, not just at UCD, but students should at least know that they can provide regular and formal feedback on their courses and that this feedback is used in a systematic way. The EUA team is of the opinion that UCD needs a common approach across the institution for student evaluation of courses, including the way this feedback, once obtained, is analysed and used for the ongoing improvement of the teaching and learning process.

UCD maintains extensive relations with employers and other external stakeholders, including a number of professional organisations which monitor the teaching and learning process in certain fields. Some of these bodies recognise and accredit academic programmes for professional purposes. These accreditation procedures look closely at the content and structure of programmes, and are keenly interested in the professional competences of graduating students. Some of these professional bodies are leading the way in encouraging a greater focus at UCD on student learning outcomes, a focus which the EUA team would specifically like to endorse. As the modular structure is introduced across the university, it is also important to ensure that this is accompanied by a renewed focus on the outcomes of the learning process, not just on the teaching inputs. The EUA team would also encourage greater stakeholder involvement and feedback in other academic programmes as well, not just those of direct relevance to certain professional bodies. The experience of such systematic and strategic stakeholder involvement in other universities has been very positive.

A central element in developing a modern teaching and learning environment is to ensure that this is open to international trends and influences. This can be through both the curriculum content, but also through the critical interaction of staff and students with their colleagues from other countries. Both forms of internationalisation appear to be developing well at UCD, and the EUA team was given data showing that ever increasing numbers of international students are studying at the university. However, the documentation supplied to the EUA team did not appear to state anywhere the numbers of UCD students going abroad for periods of study or work, or the balance between outgoing and incoming students. This is also an important element of internationalisation, although directly involving smaller numbers of students. Related issues such as how well the credits earned in foreign universities are recognised by UCD also need to be monitored to ensure the quality of these exchanges and therefore of the overall learning experience for students.

UCD explicitly recognises the need for talented, motivated and highly trained administrative, technical and support staff. Their crucial role in maintaining and developing the quality of the

academic environment is covered in an important chapter of the SER. This is significant since in many universities this is often not recognised at all. However, the EUA team was informed that improvements are needed in a number of service areas, in order to ensure the continuous improvement of teaching and learning. These include the IT system and the library, two areas where resources and infrastructure are paramount and where, no matter how good, there is always scope for improvement. There may be advantages to be gained in both these fields through closer cooperation with other universities or centres of learning in the Dublin area.

However, the most important factor in creating excellence in teaching depends on the teaching staff. This is the same in all universities: all means by which staff can be influenced to ensure the quality of their work are valuable. Although pedagogical training and development are important in developing excellence in teaching, motivation is even more important. Therefore the recognition and encouragement of good teaching is vital. One such way is the explicit inclusion of teaching performance on the list of promotion criteria. The EUA team would like to support the proposed teaching track promotion scheme as recently proposed by the President. This will need careful planning and implementation, to ensure that this excellent proposal becomes reality. A number of examples exist in other European universities where the idea was widely welcomed and accepted but unfortunately poorly implemented.

6. Research

Although research and scholarly activity could be said to be blossoming at UCD, characterised by richness in diversity, the EUA team was provided with a number of statistics which showed that UCD, given its size and academic diversity, was not as successful as some of the other Irish universities in research outputs and in attracting research funding. The reality today is that for top quality research across a variety of fields to attain critical mass, attract resources and gain visibility, an institutional research strategy is necessary. The UCD SER mentions the need to articulate more clearly the University's policies regarding research and to develop a system for research management. The position of research manager has become increasingly important, and in UCD this responsibility now belongs to the vice-president for research, with the support of the research management office.

The development of top level research in universities is certainly shifting from disciplinary-based research to problem focused, interdisciplinary research. Interdisciplinarity is often expressed and accepted as an intellectual goal in itself, but in reality it needs structural and cultural changes in institutional organisation. The EUA team would like to commend UCD for the policy and strategy aiming at creating leading research institutes in specific interdisciplinary areas, and for taking full advantage of the diversity of funding opportunities for these. The team is of the opinion that this strategy should take into account the specificity of the different research fields at the university, and be very aware of the need for the sustainability of these new ventures. UCD has traditionally been strong in the fields of arts and humanities, which is where undergraduate numbers are concentrated: new research ventures are needed in these fields also. The team furthermore encourages the university to ensure its own strategy in developing these ventures is given priority over the policies of external agencies.

The team encourages UCD to seek out long term strategic partnerships with other institutions in Ireland or elsewhere in the relevant fields. The Dublin Molecular Medicine Centre is a good such example, based on collaboration between two universities. This example appeared to the EUA team as being a potentially fruitful way to develop a world class research institute, making best use of the resources of existing universities in the same medium sized city.

The development of human resources is essential if excellence in research is a goal. A plan for increasing the number of PhD students and the ongoing training of young researchers should go hand in hand with the development of research structures. As mentioned by the UCD leadership, echoing more general comments in the OECD report, the number of PhD students is low, given the size of the university and its research ethos. This will prove a critical issue in ensuring the sustainability of the current research drive across the university, and indeed across Irish society. The role of research management will be crucial in meeting these needs, and specific training may be required in this field also.

It is essential to promote interest and excellence in research, along with a good environment in which creative and innovative work can be done. Success here will partly depend on linking research to the needs of society, as expressed by different types of stakeholders. Here, the EUA team found examples where, despite good intentions, there was certainly scope for better cooperation with the dynamic Irish and international industrial activity in the immediate hinterland of UCD.

The pursuit of interdisciplinary research in strategic directions requires an enabling policy framework. Fortunately, some elements of such a framework are now available in Irish universities, notably a provision for tenure-stream appointments to research-intensive positions and a recent legal provision to supplement, in exceptional cases, the salaries of such appointees by up to 25%.

The creation of interdisciplinary research institutes at UCD poses a set of new and challenging questions concerning their relation to other existing units, such as Faculties and Departments, as well as to the university management. Monitoring and evaluating schemes for these institutes need to be considered within the overall university framework. There would currently appear to be few, if any, links between evaluation initiatives in the institutes and the university-wide QA/QI process.

A further element of the enabling policy framework that the EUA team would recommend is for research units to “purchase” the time of scholars from their academic departments. This is important so that the departments can maintain the functions (especially teaching) of colleagues on secondment to research units.

Given the enthusiasm at UCD for these new ventures, the EUA team also wishes to emphasise that developing interdisciplinary research projects does not always require the establishment of fully-developed institutes. It is often desirable to begin less ambitiously with smaller groupings of research collaborators which may, after a successful period of incubation, evolve into more elaborate establishments, or alternatively, remain smaller and less formal, or even be disbanded after an initial period of operation.

7. Governance and management

The principal governing body at UCD is the Governing Authority (GA). The GA currently has 40 members, including external members. Since the start of 2004, the GA has been chaired by an external member; this role was previously played by the university president.

The EUA team welcomes the existence of a governing authority and the inclusion of external representatives on this. Many European universities are now also moving towards such a structure in an attempt to ensure greater openness and linkages with society; such a structure can also contribute external expertise, experience and strategic advice for use by the university leadership.

However, the team was surprised to learn of the relatively large size of the GA at UCD, together with the fact that several of the “external members” of the GA were in fact employees of the university, although officially representing external constituencies. The historical political representation on the GA was also surprising. The EUA team felt therefore that the current size and composition of the GA were not ideal in terms of offering strategic direction and oversight to the university.

The President is the Chief Executive and Accounting Officer of the University. He reports to the Governing Authority. The Registrar, Bursar and Librarian have statutory management responsibilities. Since his election in January 2004, the President has appointed seven new Vice Presidents. The portfolios are:

- Academic Affairs who is also the Registrar
- Research
- Innovation and Corporate Partnerships
- Students
- Staff Affairs and Administrative Systems
- International Affairs
- Alumni, Communications and External Affairs.

The meaning of leadership is well understood at this executive level. The creation of these positions, as well as developing the role of Dean into that of an executive officer, is seen by the EUA team as putting in place a system to ensure good management at the appropriate levels.

On the other hand some very traditional academic collegial bodies still exist at UCD.

The size of the Academic Council is 255 persons, although the EUA team was informed that only about 70 members usually attend meetings. This says much about the work and position of this Council. It no longer functions as a governance body because strategies cannot be decided or even discussed in this kind of assembly. Therefore, in order to cope with this situation, the number of committees has grown over the years, resulting in too many committees. The EUA team was informed that the President had recently suspended some of these committees. The team is of the opinion that it will not be healthy for the university if on one side the management structures are operating effectively but on the other side the academic governance structures are not. This will shift the power too far from academia to management, and Academic Council will no longer be able to provide an effective and timely academic governance counterbalance to the executive management team.

The same situation exists at the Faculty level, where the system is also changing towards greater executive functions. The creation of “executive deans” is seen by the EUA team as a good step to ensure effective subsidiarity. These deans need to be given greater responsibility for a variety of academic and management issues, including QA and QI across the faculty. One obvious problem is the division of Faculties into disciplinary departments headed, until recently often for lifetime, by a professor of that discipline. The number of departments is thus very large, and such fragmented structures do not permit either effective governance or efficient management. In other European countries with much more conservative university governance than Ireland, the disciplinary department system was changed some time ago. Disciplines will continue to thrive without such departmental structures, and many opportunities for academic innovation will offer themselves in a more open system. The EUA team strongly supports the current proposals for a profound review of the university’s departmental structure.

8. Finances

UCD's funding comes from fee income, grants from government calculated on input and output driven formula, research income and commercialisation activities. Uncertainty with regard to the level of core funding from year to year has impaired the University's capacity to plan strategically.

The University has been moving towards an output resource allocation model since 2001. This new model will be fully operational during the academic year 2004-05, and the EUA team would like to applaud this move. The team was nevertheless surprised to receive all data regarding students expressed primarily in terms of intake rather than output. Having both sets of figures, inputs and outputs, is useful in getting a good idea of the quantitative and qualitative results of the university and of its different units.

The University has a devolved management structure, with 10 Faculties now functioning as cost centres. Faculty Deans, with the Faculty Executives, have responsibility for allocating resources within their respective Faculties and for financial reporting to the Finance Committee of the Governing Authority. Funding is allocated on the basis of student numbers, research output and alignment with the University's strategic objectives. In order to encourage the generation of additional income, Faculties can retain financial surpluses. Faculties are then charged for central university services etc.

While fully supporting the need for devolved financial responsibility and to ensure that Faculties are cost-effective and operate efficiently, the EUA team wondered whether this extensive financial autonomy of the Faculties might make it difficult for the overarching strategic management of the university as an institution. This situation needs to be monitored closely, together with the use of existing funds for university wide strategic management and initiatives, in order to ascertain whether the right balance has been achieved.

9. Quality management

Background

UCD was a pioneer among the Irish universities in developing an internal quality assurance system: it started the Quality Assurance/Quality Improvement (QA/QI) process in 1995, evaluating three academic departments in that first year. In 1997 an Office of Quality Assurance was established, with a senior academic as director. The Conference of Heads of Irish Universities (CHIU) supported these pilot activities.

The 1997 Universities Act now requires all Irish universities to create an internal QA system. This law also gives the framework for this system:

- reviews should be conducted at regular interval and not less than once in 10 years
- all departments and, where appropriate faculties, and any service provided by the university should be reviewed
- teaching, research and the provision of other services should be the subjects of review.

Thus this legal framework is very similar to the system which was already being put in place at UCD. UCD's experience has also been central in developing the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) and its framework for quality in Irish universities, published in 2003.

UCD is now in the process of reviewing the full range of its units, including academic departments, faculties and support services. Due to the high number of such units at UCD, a ten year schedule of reviews was agreed – the longest such schedule possible under legislation. By 2004, about half of the academic units (45), half of the service units and 4 out of 11 faculties had been reviewed, and the university was approximately half-way through the ten year schedule. Furthermore, UCD is in the process of introducing “mini half-term reviews” as follow-up for those units already reviewed at the start of the process.

QA/QI procedures

The Academic Council Quality Standing Committee, chaired by the Registrar, is responsible for the QA/QI process at UCD. It develops the policy and procedures to be implemented. The QA/QI process is supported by the Quality Assurance Office. This three-person office, led by the Director of Quality Assurance, Professor Alan Harrison, is the executive arm of the Academic Council Quality Standing Committee, and sees itself in a facilitating rather than in a policing role. It schedules reviews, identifies reviewers, provides support during the reviews and the production of reports, provides training in QA/QI techniques, drives improvement, liaises with internal and external bodies and is constantly reviewing the process and its procedures.

The Quality Assurance Office has prepared very detailed guidelines for the review, including separate QA/QI booklets for the review of different types of units: academic departments, faculties and service units.

The QA/QI process involves three phases, each ending with a report. These are as follows:

1. Self-Assessment
2. Peer review
3. Quality improvement

When starting the self-assessment phase, the unit appoints a co-ordinating committee representing all internal stakeholders. The QA Office appoints two facilitators from elsewhere in UCD, who are familiar with the process and with the University structure. These facilitators usually also act as chair and secretary of the peer-review group. The self-assessment lasts a year.

The peer review group (PRG) consists of the two UCD facilitators – who usually act as chair and rapporteur of the PRG, two or three external experts in the discipline/area of expertise and one internal member from a cognate area. Members are appointed by the QA Office based on suggestions by the unit. More recently, the QA office has also consulted the faculty deans before appointing team members. The external members so far have usually come from the UK and other Irish universities, with some also from the USA and continental Europe. During the review of service units, external members are not necessarily academic peers but can also represent customers or professional stakeholders.

The PRG makes one site visit and gives an oral report at the end of the visit, followed by a written report. A summary of the written report is sent to the governing authority and then, once approved, published on the Quality Assurance Office website. The peer review reports are more concise than the SER and include lists of suggestions for improvement.

Once the unit has received its PRG report, it must then produce a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP). Usually there is an internal implementation committee for that purpose. Once the Quality Improvement Plan has been approved by the Director of Quality Assurance, the unit is supposed to

implement its recommendations both at the unit and institutional level. The PRG report and QIP are also considered by the faculty dean and Quality Improvement Finance Committee.

Observations on the QA/QI procedures

QA/QI office: The role of the QA office is highly appreciated by all of the units that have gone through the process. Its involvement, mainly as a facilitator and a guide, ensures that the reviews do actually take place and within the anticipated timeframe. However, the follow-up to the QA/QI process also needs to be made more explicit, and there is a clear need for the QA office to be involved here as well.

Self-evaluation: The self-assessment processes are often conducted with enthusiasm and the reports are comprehensive. It should be noted that, up until now, this is the first time that units have participated in this process at UCD. Thus it has offered a first opportunity for a systematic internal examination of the unit and its functions, and for writing down observations and findings. Many of these were certainly known and discussed previously, but may have been so in a less coherent manner, and without necessarily being linked to each other.

The self-assessment reports produced by units and which were seen by the EUA team were usually very large – mostly between 100 and 150 pages, not including annexes, and rather descriptive in nature. There is a tendency for the SERs to be strong on information but weak on analysis. Certainly it is true that for units undergoing the process for the first time, the need to gather information was given more emphasis than would normally be necessary. If less emphasis were to be placed on the gathering of information, the different units could focus more on the analysis, i.e. how are they doing what they say they want to do, and how do they know it works. For this to be possible, UCD will need a greatly improved internal data information system.

Following its experience in the first round of QA/QI, one department expressed concern as to how to involve fully all members of the department. Only a small group of persons is needed to do the core work for the SER. While others can be involved through meeting the PRG and in developing and implementing the quality improvement plan, there was concern that some staff members might feel excluded or that their opinions might not be taken into account, or that others might simply not engage.

The role of students, especially undergraduates, in the process appears to be rather limited, and usually more as customers than stakeholders or partners. Postgraduate students are usually represented in self-assessment and implementation committees. However, wider student awareness of the QA/QI process is very low, and even when student feedback on teaching or other matters is systematically sought, the students do not link this to the wider improvement of quality across the university. It will prove difficult in the long-term to develop QA/QI as an integral part of the university's daily philosophy and actions if one of the major university constituencies – the student body – is largely unaware that this is taking place and of its significance.

Peer review: The input of the peer review visit is perceived by UCD staff to be both interesting and valuable. It is seen as supporting the unit's own findings as expressed in the SER, but also as being important in raising issues that have not been fully identified by the unit.

It is generally easier to assess the quality of research than that of teaching and learning. However, the peer review reports resulting from the QA/QI process do not provide much information about

the quality of research undertaken in the units; this can be found elsewhere, based on well-known research evaluation criteria. The peer review reports can nevertheless be useful in identifying areas of research weakness. However, the quality of research should perhaps not be measured only by the number of publications, as would appear to be the case at the moment in some units, but also by the impact of this research. This would require a different and more in-depth approach by the PRG.

The EUA team would like to express some concern with the method used for putting together the peer review groups. While these groups are constituted by the QA/QI office, they are based on names recommended by the department or unit concerned. To ensure an independent view it might be useful to involve a wider group of external peers, not necessarily persons already known to the unit leaders. In order to help with widening this pool, it might be helpful to establish a common database of reviewers for all Irish universities. While the use of two internal UCD facilitators in each PRG was certainly a helpful element during the early years of the QA/QI process, the continuation of this practice should be open to discussion. Having both the chair and rapporteur of the PRG from within the UCD academic ranks is good from an intra-institutional learning and development perspective: whether this is as necessary and useful in the longer term is questionable, especially if for the second round of the QA/QI process there is greater emphasis on benchmarking and strategic development.

Quality improvement plan and quality improvement: It is essential to highlight from the beginning that the Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) is the most important aspect of the process. Units spend so much time on the SER that they sometimes have little energy or enthusiasm left for the development of this plan. It must be clear that it is not something that is just tagged on at the end.

It appears to be well recognised at UCD that quality improvement is not simply a question of increased resources, and most of the Quality Improvement Plans set reasonable objectives relating to minor works, refurbishment, the replacement of equipment, support staff, etc.

However, a frequently mentioned obstacle to motivating staff to develop and implement the QIP is the lack of funding for the improvements identified in the quality improvement plans. Certain units feel disappointed when recommendations, validated by peer review groups, are not financed. Unfortunately, the State funding received by the University does not take account of these necessities. The university's budget for refurbishment of buildings is currently 0.3%. This is estimated as being eight times lower than needed. UCD often lacks the money to satisfy the justifiable resource requirements listed in the quality improvement plans.

The university does however have a modest Quality Improvement Fund, managed by a Quality Improvement Finance Committee and reporting to the Academic Council Quality Standing Committee, to which units can apply for assistance in meeting some of the resource implications emerging from the units' plans. This fund is however generally viewed as being insufficient (250,000 Euros along with another 100,000 Euros allocated by HEA). Interestingly, the Bursar insists that the funding allocated to the achievement of quality improvement plans be distributed on a matched-funding basis only. For example, in the case of new staff appointments, this money is often given as seed capital for the first three years in order to create some leverage. After three years, the department or faculty is expected to have generated the changes necessary to finance this item from its own budget. This system has the advantage of ensuring that quality improvement requirements coincide with the faculty or department's strategic plan and are not merely wish-lists. The departments and faculties can also bid for the financing of capital projects over 3-5 years.

As part of the new Resource Allocation model, it is proposed to allocate 5% of the UCD core budget to “Strategic Planning and Quality Assurance”. If this proposal is accepted, it would be a very significant strategic step in enabling the university to build on the outcomes of the QA/QI process.

The Quality Assurance office does not have the resources effectively to follow up the implementation of the different quality improvement plans in all departments. If faculties are to assume greater ownership of the follow up and implementation phase, it would be appropriate to have a faculty officer with responsibilities for these, and for closer links between the faculty and the QA office. It is also important to stress that the follow-up phase should be fully owned by the reviewed unit, within a broader faculty structure. The dean therefore has an important role to play in coordinating QIPs and other developments across the faculty and making the best strategic use of available resources. It might also be helpful if the dean reported regularly to the Academic Council Quality Standing Committee on the implementation process.

General observations. The QA/QI process is seen by those interviewed as having a high impact on teaching and learning and on the administrative processes at the university. It is positive in the sense that it allows units to take stock and spend time on reflection and analysis that they might not otherwise make time to do. It also provides an opportunity to focus on things that are currently not being done and to address traditional institutional anomalies. So far it appears to have been seen more as an enabling tool rather than an ordeal. This is most important. The process must be integrated into the functioning of the unit in order to see it as an opportunity for development. Having gone through the QA/QI process, some departments now organise a course review for their programmes every year via questionnaires for students. Those departments engaged in this process highlight the importance of feedback to teachers. This is considered key to the professional development of staff.

The QA/QI process is not just about identifying weaknesses. It also has a role of validating what the department or unit does well. It would be good to highlight these strengths more systematically and share this information and best practice with other departments. It would be useful if the documents were compiled regularly – maybe these types of documents could also feed into other processes within the university or faculty. It would also be of substantial help if units could rely on a centralised information system at university level. The current university information system appears difficult to use. The SER mentions that a software system is being developed to provide Deans with on-line information on students, staff and finance, but during its meetings the EUA team did not get the impression that this new system would be in place in the near future.

In order to achieve further useful synergies and save on energy and time, the various bodies concerned with accreditation, professional reviews and funding which work with the different departments should also be informed fully of the QA/QI process. It would be important to agree on a common way of presenting data, background documentation and other issues. The School of Architecture is already working with its accreditation body in this direction. Such bodies also need to be informed of the timing of the QA/QI process, in order to agree on the appropriate timing of the various processes. It should be possible for one process to feed into another or to work out how both can benefit from each other.

While issues relating to support units and personnel often emerge in departmental or faculty SERs, this link needs to be formalised. For example, the use of the library is an essential element in any departmental self-evaluation, yet it is not necessarily included. To remedy this, the library has prepared a checklist concerning library matters that an academic unit should consider during its

QA/QI process. This list is sent to all of the units under review each year. This model of best practice could also serve for other support units.

It is clear that no one precisely defined QA/QI system will suit all possible needs, and that some units will benefit from the process more than others. Nevertheless, a question arises concerning the distinction between the department and the faculty visits. Should the mechanisms be more different than is currently the case? Some deans wondered if the department review should not concentrate more on functions, while the faculty review would be more strategy-based. Ideally, the department review should feed into the faculty review, although currently some faculties are reviewed before all of the constituent departments have been through the QA process. It might also help if several units in the same faculty could be reviewed over the same period. The faculty review could then build more directly on these and have a greater focus on strategic planning. Eitherway, there is a need to resolve one issue which emerged during the EUA visits – that departments do not feel very involved in the faculty reviews.

Other quality assurance procedures at UCD

In addition to this statutory and cyclic QA/QI process, an important number of other mechanisms exist for promoting quality assurance within the university. Given that all universities have traditionally had their own internal mechanisms to ensure the quality of their work and their continuous development, the EUA team looked to see the links between such mechanisms at UCD and the formal QA/QI process. The team was somewhat surprised to discover that these links were rather weak, even at unit level; formally there appeared to be few, if any, connections. In the SER these other mechanisms were not mentioned in the chapter on QA nor explicitly linked to the QA/QI process.

The team found that the following quality assurance mechanisms exist at UCD, alongside the QA/QI process:

- The Annual President's Teaching Awards, which are based on peer and student evaluation
- Promotion to Senior Lecturer requires applicants to demonstrate their performance as teachers
- The Centre for Teaching and Learning provides a service for staff who wish to improve their own teaching and assessment skills
- The Personnel Office also offers assistance in personal performance evaluation
- Certain departments and faculties undergo external reviews, often by the relevant professional body, for accreditation purposes
- Programmes at UCD also undergo periodic review with a curricula committee; as part of this it is intended to evaluate all academic courses using student questionnaires
- The involvement of external examiners for each programme also helps assure the quality of the programmes both in terms of content and assessment standards
- Monitoring and evaluation of students' performance takes place at different levels, examining e.g. student retention and graduate employment rates
- The Faculty of Agriculture has worked with the Centre for Teaching and Learning, with support from the HEA, on evaluating modes for delivery and assessment
- Some professional bodies are also involved in the evaluation of study programmes, with the focus on improvement. For example, the Irish Medical Council evaluates undergraduate and post-graduate studies. Over the last five years, it has visited each medical school in Ireland twice and has issued two public reports

- Other stakeholders also influence quality; e.g. members of the Institute of Career Guidance Teachers receive a questionnaire from the Admissions officer of UCD to evaluate the quality of the literature the university sends out.

This list, which does not touch on any of the quality assurance mechanisms linked to research activity, is certainly not definitive. It should also be noted that, of the above mechanisms, most if not all of those which are obligatory look at collective performance. Those mechanisms which look at an individual's work tend to be optional. However, widespread and sustainable quality improvement in an organisation is unlikely without the opportunity regularly to review and discuss the quality of performance by individuals. The EUA team was therefore pleased to learn that new legislation in Ireland now provides (in fact, mandates) such an opportunity, and we encourage the UCD leadership to develop a performance management system for this purpose. This should be closely articulated with the QA/QI framework.

10. Strategic management and quality assurance

During its two visits to UCD, the EUA team encountered a general feeling among the university community that this was a time for change. There also appeared to be a relative acceptance of the need for this change. The publicity surrounding the appointments of a new President and a new senior management team has probably sent out the right signals internally and externally, helping to promote an expectation of change.

In terms of the change needed, there is a need to look for a rationalisation of the complicated departmental and faculty structure in order to avoid a lot of the existing overlap, to create synergies and to encourage the collaborative research now supported by the PRTLTI and other sources. The EUA team would like to congratulate the President for his efforts to streamline the functioning of the institution by reducing the number of institutional committees.

The QA/QI process should be seen as a lever to support this change process. It is already serving to reduce the traditional suspicion between departments and to increase transparency within the institution. This is essential in an era when the institution is actively promoting collaboration among departments and faculties in order to attract greater coherence in study programmes and more research funding.

While the QA/QI process is centrally driven, it has not in the past appeared to enjoy the necessary support of senior management and governance bodies to ensure its outcomes are linked to the strategic management and governance of the university. There is no clear evidence regarding how the results of QA/QI have been fed into the wider institutional decision making processes.

While the Governing Authority is informed about the results of the QA process and must formally approve these, the EUA team learned that this is purely a formality and no debate takes place. Apparently the same situation exists at Academic Council and Faculty levels also, resulting so far in no general picture of the overall results of QA/QI, and no strategic follow through of this process. It is physically impossible for any member of the senior executive to read all of the SERs and PRG reports, given the high number of evaluated units and the length of most reports. It is a pity, given all the work that is put into the preparation and the elaboration of these reports, that they are indigestible to those in management.

As a result, the departments and faculties prepare their documents in a type of strategic vacuum. They tend to develop aspirational rather than targeted quality improvement plans. When targets do

exist, they are mapping to department/unit/faculty objectives rather than to the institution's strategic development plan. This situation clearly limits the possibilities of the process to contribute to institution wide quality enhancement.

The challenge facing the institution would therefore seem to be how to link the QA/QI process into the day-to-day management of the university and its strategic development process. This challenge seems to be viewed by the new leadership as an opportunity and even as an instrument for management. There is a clear link to be made between the QA office and the recently created Strategic Planning office. The EUA team suggests that the link to the Centre for Teaching and Learning also needs to be strengthened, as another major tool for change. These three offices could form the nucleus of a much-needed increased capacity in institutional research, providing essential research support for the executive management.

For the outputs of the QA/QI process to be focused and fed in elsewhere across the institution, the aim of the overall process must be clear. While stakeholders and society seem to feel that the university should adopt a strategic focus to its activities, the focus for the university community tends to veer more towards quality improvement and excellence. Departmental representatives voiced their concerns to the EUA team about how to strike a balance in order to satisfy these external and internal demands. These units have been made responsible for quality improvement. Yet they cannot be responsible for institutional change.

11. The future

Many of those interviewed by the EUA team felt that it would be a mistake to organise an excellent review process only once every ten years. The team agrees with this: ten years is too long a period for strategic planning and to gather structured feedback regarding quality across the entire university. The university recognises that it must move towards a culture of permanent and continuous quality. For this reason the concept of a mini-review, five years after the initial review as a mid-term follow-up, has been introduced at UCD.

Instead of introducing this new element in the process, the EUA team would suggest making the regular quality review process itself shorter and lighter, i.e. every five years, with a less onerous information gathering process (relying on a better internal information system), and with a much greater focus on analytical rather than descriptive material. This would permit the university and the respective units to have a more up to date QA system with less intrusive methods on a more regular basis – a basis which would allow units, faculties and the university to build logically from review to review, rather than waiting ten years by which time almost everything will have changed and the previous review will no longer have any relevance. This would allow for those documents (SERs, SWOTs, etc) from the previous review which are still useful to be updated, and for the focus of attention to be those issues previously identified but still unresolved, or new issues which may since have arisen. Faculty deans currently have a three year term of office, but if this changes to five years in the future, this shorter-cycle and lighter review system of both faculties and departments could be a very beneficial opportunity for those assuming this new function.

In the opinion of the EUA team, UCD should urgently consider revising its QA/QI cycle and introducing this lighter touch five-year approach now, rather than waiting until the end of the first round, that is for another four or five years, before thinking of changing. In this scenario, the team would also suggest connecting the reviews of departments to a framework for evaluating faculties, so that a department review can feed into the faculty review. This will also save time and effort, as well as producing more coherent internal processes and external inputs.

As an additional element, the university might consider introducing a specially adapted quality review capacity to respond on an ad hoc basis to specific unit needs at moments in time: for instance for accreditation reviews, executive succession/change of leadership, a particular student concern, etc. Such reviews should be much more flexible in their focus, maybe addressing groups of units grappling with one particular issue, or as part of the restructuring process.

Another possible way to link the QA process closer to institutional strategic planning would be to review university-wide issues, not units. This suggestion was also made in the Senior Management Review in 2003. The university as an institution has already been evaluated twice, not counting the current EUA quality review, and there is also experience of reviewing a university-wide service activity, such as computing. This model could be used more widely, reviewing for instance teaching methods, PhD programmes, internationalisation, etc across the whole university. Such an evaluation could be undertaken whenever there is a strategic need for one, not necessarily at five or ten year intervals.

12. Recommendations

In terms of mission:

- When formulating the new strategic plan, consider carefully how to position UCD for its specific role in Ireland, e.g. taking into consideration the disciplinary balance of the university, the type of higher education to be provided, and shifting the balance from undergraduate to postgraduate, adult and international education;

In terms of teaching and learning:

- Increase the capacity of the Centre for Teaching and Learning in its existing core functions and also in developing a more important research component, to enable UCD to identify and build on best practice;
- Use the recent experience from a number of academic units in undertaking comprehensive curricula reviews and introducing new teaching and learning approaches to foster such activities on a wider basis across the university;
- Encourage a renewed focus on the outcomes of the learning process, not just on the teaching inputs, across all units;
- Ensure that the modular structure and ECTS are introduced rapidly and coherently across the entire university;
- Implement a common approach across the institution for the student evaluation of courses;

In terms of research:

- Articulate UCD's policies regarding research more clearly and develop a coherent research management system;
- Increase the number of research students and fellows;

- Encourage better cooperation with the dynamic Irish and international industrial activity in the immediate hinterland of UCD;
- Link the monitoring and evaluation initiatives for the new research institutes to the university-wide QA/QI process;

In terms of governance:

- Explore options for adapting both the size and composition of the Governing Authority, in order to provide the university with more suitable strategic direction and oversight;
- Ensure an effective and functional Academic Council in order to provide an effective and timely academic governance counterbalance to the executive management team;
- Use the QA/QI process and results, together with an increased institutional research capacity, to support strategic planning and actions;
- Entrust greater responsibility to the deans for a variety of academic and management issues, including QA and QI across each faculty;
- Use both input and output measures when developing a new resource allocation model;
- Monitor student and other mobility not only in terms of incoming persons but also UCD students and staff going abroad for periods of study or work;

In terms of quality assurance and quality improvement

- Examine the potential for linking the QA office, the Strategic Planning office and the Centre for Teaching and Learning as the nucleus of a much-needed increased capacity in institutional research, providing essential research support for the executive management;
- Examine options for giving faculties and deans greater ownership of the QA/QI process, including influencing the choice of peers, and greater responsibility for the follow up and implementation phases;
- Connect the reviews of departments to a framework for evaluating faculties, so that a departmental review can feed into the faculty review;
- Urgently consider options for developing a greatly improved internal data information system, and use it to feed the QA/QI process;
- Consider options for making the regular quality review process shorter and lighter, i.e. every five years, with a less onerous information gathering process (relying on an improved information system), with a much greater focus on analytical rather than descriptive material;
- Establish links between the QA/QI process and the many other QA mechanisms which exist at UCD, and ensure academic and support staff are aware of these in their daily work;

- Ensure reviews of academic units also cover that unit's use of relevant services, such as the library;
- Ensure that regular analysis is made of the results of QA/QI activities in order to obtain an overall view of developments;
- Ensure that the results of QA/QI activities are fed into the wider institutional decision making processes;
- To ensure an independent view, it might be useful to involve a wider group of external peers, not necessarily persons already known to the unit leaders
- Take steps to ensure that the student body becomes progressively more aware of the QA/QI process and contributes to this;
- Develop a performance management system for individual staff members and articulate this closely with the QA/QI framework;
- Explore options for synergies between professional accreditation procedures and the QA/QI process;
- Consider introducing a specially adapted quality review capacity to respond on an ad hoc basis to specific unit needs at moments in time;
- Consider introducing a specially adapted quality review capacity to review university-wide issues, not units.

Envoi

The EUA team wishes to thank the University once again for the excellent arrangements made for its visits and work. It was a pleasure to be in Dublin and to discuss with staff, students, and external stakeholders the strategic challenges now facing UCD and the role of the quality assurance system in meeting these. As noted at the start of this report, the EUA review took place at a rather turbulent time for Irish higher education, especially so for UCD. We hope that the university finds our comments and suggestions helpful, and we wish the university well for the next stage of its development.