



University College Dublin

REVIEW GROUP REPORT

**Periodic Quality Review
UCD Finance Office
February 2022**

Accepted by the UCD Governing Authority at its meeting of 23 June 2022

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Key Findings of the Review Group

The Review Group (RG) has identified a number of key findings in relation to areas of good practice operating within UCD Finance Office, and also areas which the RG would highlight as requiring improvement. The main section of this Report sets out all observations, commendations and recommendations of the RG in more detail. An aggregated list of all commendations and recommendations is set out in Appendix 1.

Examples of Good Practice

The RG identified a number of commendations, in particular:

1. **UCD Finance Office's commitment to the University Strategy of ensuring the University's strong financial position** - UCD Finance Office, adopting a compliance mind-set, has helped to ensure that the University is in a relatively strong financial position as a result of tight budget control over a number of years. This was evidenced by feedback from numerous stakeholders across the University.
2. **Commitment of teams within UCD Finance Office with a strong focus on customer service** - team members are passionate in their commitment to UCD and to supporting those around them. They are hard-working with extensive local knowledge and heavily relied on by those around them. Individual team members, especially those in customer facing roles, apply a helpful, customer focused approach. This was most recently demonstrated during COVID where, despite challenges and disruptions, not a single payment was missed. The commitment and requirement to ensure that payments are made (e.g. Salaries and expenses) was a running theme for panel participants. The culture of commitment and customer service was clearly evident in our meetings with Finance Office team members and is commended.
3. **The role of UCD Finance Office in University Planning** - Feedback from the RG's meetings with staff and stakeholders during the site visit clearly highlighted and emphasised the importance of the Finance Office's role in ensuring strong finances for UCD's future. The Unit has a clear understanding of how the incentive system works and are committed to complying with the financial planning process. The RG were impressed with this approach.
4. **Individual User experience** - The user experience is based on an individual approach. Users with access to local finance supports such as Head of School or experienced Principal Investigators were very complimentary of the services provided.
5. **Professional Staff Expertise** - The knowledge, experience, and professional expertise of individual team members, at all levels, was highly valued by the user groups.

Prioritised Recommendations for Improvement

The full list of recommendations is set out in Appendix 1; however, the RG would suggest that the following be prioritised:

1. **Strategic and Financial Planning Process** - A review of the strategic and financial planning process, including the budgeting model and the investment prioritisation process and pipeline, should be carried out to ensure that processes are fit for purpose and transparent to support the delivery of the University's objectives. (2.9)
2. **Consideration of University Financial Plans by FRAMC** - Finance, Remuneration and Asset Management Committee (FRAMC) should ensure that the University financial plans are considered in the context of the University's performance and strategy. (2.11)
3. **IT Strategy** - the RG recommends the development of a clear IT strategy for Finance to provide more robust systems that leave it less exposed to manual tasks and work-arounds and improve the user experience. (3.14)
4. **Develop a clear HR plan for UCD Finance Office** - each of the four functions should develop its own HR resourcing plan that outlines the drivers of workload and therefore how many staff are needed; appropriate EDI aspirations and how these will be met; approaches to recruitment both internally and externally. This should include a wellbeing survey of all staff. (3.17)
5. **Improve user focus** - The RG recommend UCD Finance Office develop a plan to improve the user experience focus of UCD Finance Office. This would include plotting the Finance User Journey through a comprehensive and structured process-mapping exercise. Identify opportunities to digitise services for the user, introducing online self-service elements and user-friendly finance tools that allow users access their specific financial information. (4.10 & 4.12)
6. **Review of Post-Award Research** - The RG also recommends a user-led review of post-award research supports to include input from the office of the Vice President for Research, Innovation and Impact and UCD HR. (4.11)

1. Introduction and Overview of UCD Finance Office

Introduction

- 1.1 This report presents the findings of a quality review of UCD Finance Office, University College Dublin, which was undertaken on 4 to 8 October 2021. The unit response to the Review Group Report is attached as Appendix 2.

The Review Framework

- 1.2 Irish Universities have collectively agreed a framework for their quality review and quality improvement systems, which is consistent with both the legislative requirements of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, and international good practice (e.g. Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2015). Quality reviews are carried out in academic, administrative and support service units.
- 1.3 The purpose of periodic review is to assist the University to assure itself of the quality of each of its constituent units, and to utilise learning from this developmental process in order to effect improvement, including:
- To monitor the quality of the student experience, and of teaching and learning.
 - To monitor research activity, including: management of research activity; assessing the research performance with regard to: research productivity, research income, and recruiting and supporting doctoral students.
 - To identify, encourage and disseminate good practice, and to identify challenges and how to address these.
 - To provide an opportunity for units to test the effectiveness of their systems and procedures for monitoring and enhancing quality and standards.
 - To encourage the development and enhancement of these systems, in the context of current and emerging provision.
 - To inform the University's strategic planning process.
 - The output report provides robust evidence for external accreditation bodies.
 - The process provides an external benchmark on practice and curriculum.
 - To provide public information on the University's capacity to assure the quality and standards of its awards. The University's implementation of its quality procedures

enables it to demonstrate how it discharges its responsibilities for assuring the quality and standards of its awards, as required by the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012.

The Review Process

1.4 Typically, the review model comprises four major elements:

- Preparation of a self-assessment report (SAR)
- A visit by a RG that includes UCD staff and external experts, both national and international. The site visit normally will take place over a two or three day period
- Preparation of a review group report that is made public
- Agreement of an action plan for improvement (quality improvement plan) based on the RG report's recommendations. The University will also monitor progress against the improvement plan

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

The Review Group

1.5 The composition of the RG for UCD Finance Office was as follows:

- Ms Sinead O'Connor, National University of Ireland, Galway, Chair
- Ms Dipti Pandya, UCD Research and Innovation, Deputy Chair
- Mrs Margaret Monckton, University of Nottingham
- Mr Muir Sanderson, Imperial College London

1.6 The RG conducted a remote site visit of the unit from 4- 8 October 2021 and held meetings with unit staff; other University staff, including the Deputy President/Registrar and representatives from both faculty and professional staff. The site visit schedule is included as Appendix 3. All members of the RG participated in all discussions and meetings.

1.7 In addition to the Self-assessment Report, the RG considered documentation provided by the Unit and the University during the site visit.

1.8 This Report has been read and approved by all members of the RG.

Preparation of the Self-assessment Report (SAR)

- 1.9 Following a briefing from the UCD Quality Office, a Self-assessment Report Coordinating Committee (SARCC) was established by UCD Finance Office.
- 1.10 The SAR was prepared in the period February 2020 – February 2021.
- 1.11 The self-assessment report provided a very comprehensive outline of the functions of the finance unit and the teams that carry out these functions. However, by not carrying out a specific benchmarking exercise the RG noted an opportunity was missed to look at how other organisations operate and to learn from that.
- 1.12 The RG felt that the report was not sufficiently self-reflective and did not contain the type of critical analysis expected of a self-assessment report. The RG understands that members of the self-assessment team provided their section of the report and that no further consultation took place as an overall group. As a consequence the RG were of the opinion that the SAR did not benefit from a cohesive assessment and analysis of an all-Unit review.

The University

- 1.13 University College Dublin (UCD) is a large and diverse university whose origins date back to 1854. The University is situated on a large modern campus about 4 km to the south of the centre of Dublin.
- 1.14 The University Strategic Plan (2020 to 2024) states that the University’s mission is: “to contribute to the flourishing of Dublin, Ireland, Europe and the world through the excellence and impact of our research and scholarship, the quality of our graduates and our global engagement; providing a supportive community in which every member of the University is enabled to achieve their full potential”.

The University is currently organised into six colleges and 37 schools:

- UCD College of Arts and Humanities
 - UCD College of Business
 - UCD College of Engineering and Architecture
 - UCD College of Health and Agricultural Sciences
 - UCD College of Social Sciences and Law
 - UCD College of Science
- 1.15 As one of the largest universities on the island of Ireland, UCD supports a broad, deep and rich academic community in Science, Business, Engineering, Health Sciences, Agriculture, Veterinary Medicine, Arts, Law, Celtic Studies and Human Sciences. There are currently more

than 26,000 students in our UCD campus (approximately 16,300 undergraduates, 7,800 postgraduates and 2,200 Occasional and Adult Education students) registered on over 70 University degree programmes, including over 6,300 international students from more than 121 countries. The University also has over 5,400 students studying UCD degree programmes on campuses overseas.

UCD Finance Office

- 1.16 UCD Finance Office's current mission as outlined in the SAR is to support the teaching, research and other activities of the University through prudent financial management by developing and implementing effective systems and services to improve the financial wellbeing of the University and to ensure that operations are agile and efficient.
- 1.17 UCD Finance Office's vision is to support the University in achieving the objectives of Strategy 2020-2024 by "providing leadership to ensure financial sustainability and minimise financial, reputational and other risks, and to offer a high quality, professional service to our customers".
- 1.18 UCD Finance Office consists of four main units and the Head of each of these reports to the Chief Finance Officer/Bursar. At time of writing, the four areas consist of Financial Management, Financial Planning & Management Accounting, Strategic Planning & Risk Management and Procurement. Each unit has the following sub teams:
- Financial Management: Accounts Payable and Staff Expenses; Capital Projects, Student Residences and Commercial Activities*; Financial Reporting; General Ledger; Payroll; Research Finance, Treasury Management
- Financial Planning & Management Accounting: College/Support Unit Finance Managers/Directors; Finance Systems
- Strategic Planning & Risk Management: Strategic Planning & Risk Management; Institutional Research
- Procurement: Procurement and Purchasing
- *in April 2021 these teams were divided into two separate teams, Capital projects and Commercial & Residential Finance*
- 1.19 In addition to these functions, the Director of Estates Services and the Director of Capital Developments also report directly to the Chief Finance Officer/Bursar, however these two functions were not covered in this QA review.
- 1.20 The SAR notes that the total number of staff FTEs employed in the Finance Office in 2019 has increased by 18% during the period, (87.4 compared to 74 in 2013), while at the same time overall university staff numbers increased during the same period by 28% from 4,165 to 5,312.

- 1.21 The SAR highlights a number of changes since the past quality review, including: the rapid growth in the University's student numbers, commercial activities and capital expenditure and the consequent increase demand on services to support capital projects expenditure programme over the next five years.
- 1.22 The SAR also notes a move to consolidated budgeting and the integration of financial and strategic planning.
- 1.23 Since the last review, there has also been a significant office refurbishment on the first floor of the Tierney Building to create purpose built, open plan office design, with breakout spaces and meeting rooms.
- 1.24 The Research Finance unit has expanded significantly, along with an increase in research activity and responsibilities in supporting the research community in the management of finances for research awards.
- 1.25 Key risks identified in the SAR include the negative impact of COVID, resulting in possible budget deficits, state funding cuts, cost overruns and delays to the capital expenditure programme, as well as short falls in funding the University's large capital expenditure programme.

2. Planning, Organisation, Management and Resources

General Comments and Context

- 2.1 Strategic and Financial planning at UCD includes the preparation of five year strategic and annual financial plans as well as the budget model by which the Schools and Units manage their finances. There is a clear framework in place which is well understood by everyone with the President as Chief Officer providing very strong leadership in the associated decision making.
- 2.2 UCD Finance Office supports this way of working very well. The model has been in place for seven years and as a result the University is in a relatively strong financial position. The RG considered this process and the framework model during the review and in their site visit discussions and would like to make the following observations:
 - 2.2.1 The RG noted from their meetings that individuals were not aware of an investment prioritisation process to deliver the University strategic plan.
 - 2.2.2 There was a lack of clear understanding of the investment prioritisation process possibly caused by its fragmented and formulaic nature. There were differing views as to where the University's financial plan was owned - some said it was owned 'at best' by the Colleges, others said it was owned by the University Management Team (UMT) and another view was that the financial plan was owned by the Finance, Remuneration and Asset Management Committee (FRAMC) bypassing UMT altogether.

- 2.2.3 There was evidence that finance is often the main driver of decisions made within the University:
- Significant parts of UCD Finance Office are focused on compliance above strategic support
 - The School model encourages activity that delivers a profit to the University
 - The Finance unit headcount is fixed regardless of the level of activity
 - There has been a lack of investment in systems putting undue pressure on the teams within the Finance unit
 - The FRAMC has clear oversight of the University budget; however from discussions with the Chair of the committee the RG noted that it does not consider it in the context of delivering the University strategy.
- 2.3 The role of College Finance Managers is a key role in terms of delivering the University strategy. These managers provide a key connection between the Colleges/Schools and the central finance unit and they play a vital role in integrating local and central planning. However, the RG noted it can be challenging to strike the balance between the needs of the College and central financial planning.
- 2.4. Other key changes in reporting lines as noted in the SAR since the last review are the Finance Systems team now report to the Director of Financial Planning and Management Accounts (FPMA) and the Strategic Planning, Risk Management and Institutional Research Unit has now been integrated into UCD Finance Office from the President’s Office to assist in the multi-annual planning process for Schools.

Commendations

- 2.5 The University is in a relatively strong financial position. This is as a result of tight budget control over a number of years.
- 2.6 UCD Finance Office, adopting a compliance mind-set, supports this financial framework model very well. This was evidenced by feedback from numerous stakeholders across the University.
- 2.7 The Heads of School feel empowered within a set framework to manage their budgets. This was obvious from the meeting with the Heads of School who were generally very content with the financial model in place and the support they receive from UCD Finance Office.
- 2.8 Colleges feel very strongly supported by College Finance Managers.

Recommendations

- 2.9 A review of the strategic and financial planning process, including the budgeting model and the investment prioritisation process and pipeline, should be undertaken to ensure that processes are fit for purpose, transparent and support the delivery of the University’s objectives.

- 2.10 In relation to strategic and financial planning, the roles of the UMT and the Heads of Colleges should be reviewed and clarified.
- 2.11 The RG recommends that the FRAMC ensures that the financial plans are considered in the context of the University's performance and strategy.
- 2.12 Responsibility, including reporting lines, for the Strategic Planning, Risk Management and Institutional Research team should be clarified with allocated resourcing of a dedicated budget and appropriate capability put in place.
- 2.13 Consideration should be given on how best to support the Finance Planning and Management Accounting (FPMA) team to fully integrate all members of the team and the FPMA team into the broader Finance team. This will help to balance the local needs of each college with central university planning.
- 2.14 Formalised, structured central meetings and the use of agreed centralised KPIs or other agreed performance indicators would also help to strengthen decision-making.
- 2.15 Risk management should be incorporated into the Finance unit's planning and budgeting with the risk register to be used as a management tool to highlight key risks facing the Unit and, where appropriate, the University.

3. Functions, Activities and Processes

General Comments and Context

- 3.1 During the remote site review visit, the RG met with representatives of staff from all of the Finance activities and functions and spoke with users and providers about how the processes performed.
- 3.2 Clearly the pandemic and particularly long periods of remote working had impacted people's views and perceptions. In general, however, this was to amplify existing strengths and weaknesses which will still be important when the pandemic is finally over.
- 3.3 There was significant consistency across the different Finance functions on the nature of the opportunities and the risks they face, in particular the risks around resourcing and IT systems, though often very different proposed solutions (for instance around UCD Finance Office's mission (see 3.7 below)).
- 3.4 IT Systems/Strategy: This was a subject of considerable debate amongst the RG. Nearly all the interviews mentioned the challenges caused by the IT systems. This was supported by extensive examples in the SAR (e.g. expenses system, production of annual accounts for audit purposes, challenge of making deadline for US GAAP (Generally Accepted Accounting Principles) and a light touch comparison against the systems at the external reviewers' universities. The RG found heavy dependence on manual work-arounds and local knowledge, for example manual sales invoice process, manual work-arounds for residential cancellation

process and significant manual data capture in commercial activities. It also became clear from discussions with the Financial Reporting team that the efinancials system was designed for a specific purpose, the production of the HEA Funding Statement, and is not fit for purpose in producing consolidated financial statements for the purposes of FRS 102 or US GAAP.

- 3.5 The RG raised their concerns on the IT Finance Systems with the CFO during the site visit and received clarification from the SAR Committee Chair where system issues have been raised in the SAR. However, the RG were of the opinion that the relative lack of emphasis and associated risk in the SAR was evident.
- 3.6 Several reasons were put forward for this disconnect: the need to work from home putting increased reliance on systems; the decision by the President to focus on the implementation of Service Now; staff turnover and the relative inexperience of the current Finance Systems team all of whom are new hires on fixed term or secondment contracts.
- 3.7 Each group interviewed during the site visit had a clear view on the mission of the Finance function. It was rare that these views were consistent across groups. Some staff were happy with the direction of the UCD Finance Office and clear how they fitted in; others were very much the opposite. In certain cases we found the views to be focussed on an individual area of operation and not aligned to the overall University objectives. The RG observed that groups were unaware of the role of other teams and the challenges they face.
- 3.8 UCD Finance Office's current mission and vision does not adequately capture the role of all the teams in Finance (for instance the Schools' Finance Managers, Strategic Planning, Capital Projects).
- 3.9 Human Resources and Resourcing of the Unit: In our discussions with Unit teams and staff, the lack of resources was a frequent theme and the underlying rationale on how resourcing allocations were set was not clear to the RG. Concern was also expressed by units such as the Strategic Planning, Risk Management and Institutional Research, the Capital Projects, Student Residences and Commercial Activities team and Research Finance. The provision of greater clarity and transparency for staff in relation to internal budget allocation is required along with allocated budget to the various teams.
- 3.10 There is also clear intent within the SAR to limit growth in staff numbers by the smarter use of technology and review of processes.
- 3.11 The RG noted a strong preference for promoting within the Unit to address succession planning. While the RG acknowledges the many benefits of this approach, it can present challenges in terms of diversity, bringing fresh thinking to the team and relying too much on key individuals. In general, the RG noted that the Unit would benefit from incorporation of the University's EDI policy into the activity of the Unit.

Commendations

- 3.12 Strongly committed local teams. All the teams we spoke to are passionate in their commitment to UCD and to supporting those around them. They are clearly hard-working with extensive local knowledge and often relied upon heavily by those around them. They are a credit to the University.

- 3.13 Very clear emphasis on the importance of Finance. Everyone we spoke to was clear on the importance of strong finances for UCD's future and supporting the University strategy. They understand how the current incentive system works and are committed to complying with the financial planning process. This was impressive. Not many universities are like this.

Recommendations

- 3.14 In the context of the *Digital Transformation* strand of the University Strategy 2020-2024, and the outputs of the *Uniforum* benchmarking exercise, the RG recommends the development of a clear IT strategy for Finance to provide more robust systems that leave it less exposed to manual tasks and work-arounds and improve the user experience. The introduction of an online expense claims system and improved integration of existing systems to produce consolidated accounts must be prioritised. IT systems must be raised as a key risk on the Unit's Risk Register and monitored closely until such time as the risk levels are reduced to an acceptable level.
- 3.15 Work together on a new shared mission and vision for the Finance Unit reflecting all areas within the Unit. The Unit would benefit from a collective meeting to consider the current mission and vision and whether it still reflects the shared mission and vision of UCD Finance Office and if not, what needs to change. This opportunity should also be used to discuss the collective challenges the Finance Office faces and how the teams within the Unit can support each other better to live this new vision.
- 3.16 The Units within UCD Finance Office should be appropriately resourced with allocated budgets.
- 3.17 Following on from the above, UCD Finance Office should develop a clear HR plan for each of the four functions within the Unit. The RG recommend that each function develop its own HR resourcing plan, including staff development, that outlines the drivers of workload and therefore how many staff are needed; appropriate EDI aspirations and how these will be met; approaches to recruitment both internally and externally. This should include a wellbeing survey for all staff.

4. User Perspective

General Comments and Context

- 4.1 The RG met with a wide cross-section of university stakeholders. Open discussions served to build on the information provided in the SAR and provided important context and real life experience. The RG noted the outcomes of surveys as outlined in the SAR and in particular that internal customers did not feel that their workloads had reduced as end users, following changes made by the UCD Finance Office.
- 4.2 The meetings with the support services, at both a central and local level, and users of the finance service were wide-ranging and very open. They paint a picture of a service, which whilst individually performing well, has been significantly hampered in its service delivery by

inefficient systems. This has contributed to a diminished user experience. The user experience has been further impacted by finance staff absences and remote working necessitated by COVID.

- 4.3 Finance User Journey: A number of challenges were highlighted for the non-finance user, including an inability to access budget information to operate on a self-service basis. This was clearly evident in the marked difference in the Heads of School experience, with access to local financial supports and the experience of the College Finance Managers and School Managers.
- 4.4 Service Design and systems: The RG noted the significant service enhancements introduced in recent years as highlighted in the SAR including development of Fee Census Report Packs, Quarterly Management Packs, handbooks, online resources and the imminent introduction of a procurement contract management system. However, easy-to-access online services including self-service elements and user friendly finance tools that allow users access specific financial information are not always enabled by the current system. This requirement has become more pronounced with the University achieving significant growth in areas such as research project funding. The example of generating Cost Statement Reports is highlighted in the SAR as a process that would benefit from an increased use of technology, improved report and workflow to simplify the generation and approval of cost statements for funding agencies.
- 4.5 Post-award research support: An area of concern identified by the RG during meetings was limited post-award research service that supports the research community, including Principal Investigators (PIs) and research office staff, as well as external stakeholders such as funding agencies. From discussions with PIs there is a greater need for training for PIs, a review of the information provided on Infohub to make sure it is up to date, improved response times to address queries and budget amendments and an alerts system for grant under and overspends. Improvements in these areas would help manage the post award process.
- 4.6 Any further system development and rollout of services from UCD Finance Office should include a requirement to focus and consult on the user perspective. The RG notes that it has been identified in the SAR that a mechanism is needed which will allow both internal and external customers ease of access to contacts and query resolution. To address this, the UCD Finance Office will consider investigating options, from the traditional to the virtual, such as including functional organisation charts on the Finance Office webpage to incorporating virtual helpdesk functions e.g. MyLiveChat with prewritten responses to facilitate a self-help process.

Commendations

- 4.7 Team Commitment to Customer Service: It was clear that individual team members, especially those in customer facing roles, apply a helpful, customer focused approach. This was most recently demonstrated during COVID where, despite challenges and disruptions, not a single payment was missed. The commitment and requirement to ensure that payments are made (e.g. Salaries and expenses) was a running theme for panel participants. The culture of commitment and customer service was clearly evident in our meetings with Finance team

members and is commended. It was also evidenced in the surveys issued to staff, Irish based Research Agencies and University suppliers as part of the Quality Review. The over-arching response referenced the skillset and dedication of the UCD Finance Office staff.

- 4.8 Individual experience: The user experience was based on an individual approach and those that have access to local finance supports such as Head of School or experienced PIs (e.g. Research Centres) were very complimentary of the services provided. The services include professional financial guidance provided directly to Colleges and Support Units including staff planning, business cases for new revenue generating initiatives, risk management and financial management.
- 4.9 Professional Expertise: The knowledge, experience, and professional expertise of individual team members, at all levels, was highly valued by the user groups.

Recommendations

- 4.10 Plot the Finance User Journey: Develop a plan to improve the user focus of the UCD Finance Office. This will include plotting the Finance User Journey through a comprehensive and structured process mapping exercise that will help UCD Finance Office better understand the user experience. Such a “360” approach would further contextualise the considerable ‘pain points’ that were identified by users. The mapping process requires a revised definition of who the users are as distinct from the stakeholders (including internal and external stakeholders). Further benefits will be derived from ongoing monitoring of the user experience.
- 4.11 The RG also recommends a user-led review of post-award research supports to include input from the office of the Vice President for Research, Innovation, and Impact and UCD HR. Consideration should be given to the need for clearer signposting to available resources and personnel for research end users, the provision of training for early career researchers, the provision of real time info on Infohub, an effective alerts system for grant under and overspends, clearly documented processes for the end of grant phase of research funding.
- 4.12 Service Design and Systems: Using the mapping process, identify opportunities to digitise services for the user, including introducing online self-service elements and user-friendly finance tools that allow users access their specific financial information. This will reduce demand for individual user requests on the Finance team members and help address the tension between the commitment to provide excellent customer service by the UCD Finance Office and the inability of the system to accommodate the desired service standards. As highlighted and considered in the SAR the UCD Finance Office should investigate options such as including functional organisation charts on the Finance Office webpage to incorporating virtual helpdesk functions e.g. MyLiveChat with prewritten responses to facilitate a self-help process. The integration of existing systems must also be considered in the context of Digital Transformation to help improve the user experience. For example it is important that the PBCS (Planning and Budgeting Cloud Services) budgeting system, Tableau and Infohub be integrated for reporting purposes.

UCD Finance Office Full List of Commendations and Recommendations

This Appendix contains a full list of commendations and recommendations made by the Review Group for the UCD Finance Office and should be read in conjunction with the specific chapter above. *(Please note that the paragraph references below refer to the relevant paragraphs in the report text)*

2. Planning, Organisation, Management and Resources

Commendations

- 2.5 The University is in a relatively strong financial position. This is as a result of tight budget control over a number of years.
- 2.6 UCD Finance Office, adopting a compliance mind-set, supports this financial framework model very well. This was evidenced by feedback from numerous stakeholders across the University.
- 2.7 The Heads of School feel empowered within a set framework to manage their budgets. This was obvious from the meeting with the Heads of School who were generally very content with the financial model in place and the support they receive from UCD Finance Office.
- 2.8 Colleges feel very strongly supported by College Finance Managers.

Recommendations

- 2.9 A review of the strategic and financial planning process, including the budgeting model and the investment prioritisation process and pipeline, should be undertaken to ensure that processes are fit for purpose, transparent and support the delivery of the University's objectives.
- 2.10 In relation to strategic and financial planning, the roles of the UMT and the Heads of Colleges should be reviewed and clarified.
- 2.11 The RG recommends that the FRAMC ensures that the financial plans are considered in the context of the University's performance and strategy.
- 2.12 Responsibility, including reporting lines, for the Strategic Planning, Risk Management and Institutional Research team should be clarified with allocated resourcing of a dedicated budget and appropriate capability put in place.

- 2.13 Consideration should be given on how best to support the Finance Planning and Management Accounting (FPMA) team to fully integrate all members of the team and the FPMA team into the broader Finance team. This will help to balance the local needs of each college with central university planning.
- 2.14 Formalised, structured central meetings and the use of agreed centralised KPIs or other agreed performance indicators would also help to strengthen decision-making.
- 2.15 Risk management should be incorporated into the Finance unit's planning and budgeting with the risk register to be used as a management tool to highlight key risks facing the Unit and, where appropriate, the University.

3. Functions, Activities and Processes

Commendations

- 3.12 Strongly committed local teams. All the teams we spoke to are passionate in their commitment to UCD and to supporting those around them. They are clearly hard-working with extensive local knowledge and often relied upon heavily by those around them. They are a credit to the University.
- 3.13 Very clear emphasis on the importance of Finance. Everyone we spoke to was clear on the importance of strong finances for UCD's future and supporting the University strategy. They understand how the current incentive system works and are committed to complying with the financial planning process. This was impressive. Not many universities are like this.

Recommendations

- 3.14 In the context of the *Digital Transformation* strand of the University Strategy 2020-2024, and the outputs of the *Uniforum* benchmarking exercise, the RG recommends the development of a clear IT strategy for Finance to provide more robust systems that leave it less exposed to manual tasks and work-arounds and improve the user experience. The introduction of an online expense claims system and improved integration of existing systems to produce consolidated accounts must be prioritised. IT systems must be raised as a key risk on the Unit's Risk Register and monitored closely until such time as the risk levels are reduced to an acceptable level.
- 3.15 Work together on a new shared mission and vision for the Finance Unit reflecting all areas within the Unit. The Unit would benefit from a collective meeting to consider the current mission and vision and whether it still reflects the shared mission and vision of UCD Finance Office and if not, what needs to change. This opportunity should also be used to discuss the collective challenges the Finance Office faces and how the teams within the Unit can support each other better to live this new vision.

- 3.16 The Units within UCD Finance Office should be appropriately resourced with allocated budgets.
- 3.17 Following on from the above, UCD Finance Office should develop a clear HR plan for each of the four functions within the Unit. The RG recommend that each function develop its own HR resourcing plan, including staff development, that outlines the drivers of workload and therefore how many staff are needed; appropriate EDI aspirations and how these will be met; approaches to recruitment both internally and externally. This should include a wellbeing survey for all staff.

4. User Perspective

Commendations

- 4.7 **Team Commitment to Customer Service:** It was clear that individual team members, especially those in customer facing roles, apply a helpful, customer focused approach. This was most recently demonstrated during COVID where, despite challenges and disruptions, not a single payment was missed. The commitment and requirement to ensure that payments are made (e.g. Salaries and expenses) was a running theme for panel participants. The culture of commitment and customer service was clearly evident in our meetings with Finance team members and is commended. It was also evidenced in the surveys issued to staff, Irish based Research Agencies and University suppliers as part of the Quality Review. The over-arching response referenced the skillset and dedication of the UCD Finance Office staff.
- 4.8 **Individual experience:** The user experience was based on an individual approach and those that have access to local finance supports such as Head of School or experienced PIs (e.g. Research Centres) were very complimentary of the services provided. The services include professional financial guidance provided directly to Colleges and Support Units including staff planning, business cases for new revenue generating initiatives, risk management and financial management.
- 4.9 **Professional Expertise:** The knowledge, experience, and professional expertise of individual team members, at all levels, was highly valued by the user groups.

Recommendations

- 4.10 **Plot the Finance User Journey:** Develop a plan to improve the user focus of the UCD Finance Office. This will include plotting the Finance User Journey through a comprehensive and structured process mapping exercise that will help UCD Finance Office better understand the user experience. Such a “360” approach would further contextualise the considerable ‘pain points’ that were identified by users. The mapping process requires a revised definition of who the users are as distinct from the stakeholders (including internal and external stakeholders). Further benefits will be derived from ongoing monitoring of the user experience.

- 4.11 The RG also recommends a user-led review of post-award research supports to include input from the office of the Vice President for Research, Innovation, and Impact and UCD HR. Consideration should be given to the need for clearer signposting to available resources and personnel for research end users, the provision of training for early career researchers, the provision of real time info on Infohub, an effective alerts system for grant under and overspends, clearly documented processes for the end of grant phase of research funding.
- 4.12 Service Design and Systems: Using the mapping process, identify opportunities to digitise services for the user, including introducing online self-service elements and user-friendly finance tools that allow users access their specific financial information. This will reduce demand for individual user requests on the Finance team members and help address the tension between the commitment to provide excellent customer service by the UCD Finance Office and the inability of the system to accommodate the desired service standards. As highlighted and considered in the SAR the UCD Finance Office should investigate options such as including functional organisation charts on the Finance Office webpage to incorporating virtual helpdesk functions e.g. MyLiveChat with prewritten responses to facilitate a self-help process. The integration of existing systems must also be considered in the context of Digital Transformation to help improve the user experience. For example it is important that the PBCS (Planning and Budgeting Cloud Services) budgeting system, Tableau and Infohub be integrated for reporting purposes.

UCD Finance – Initial Response to the Review group Report

Introduction

The Finance Office would like to thank the Review Group and the UCD Quality Office for their time and engagement during the quality review process.

The review was conducted at a particularly challenging time due to the Covid 19 pandemic and overall we found the quality assurance process very helpful and constructive and believe that it provided very useful guidance in developing and enhancing our services to the University community.

The preparation of the self-assessment report which was written at a time of unprecedented social upheaval as a result of the global coronavirus pandemic gave the Finance Office the opportunity to provide a comprehensive outline of all its functions.

The Review Group (RG) concluded that the Finance Office demonstrates a clear commitment to improving the quality of the customer experience and the RG was particularly impressed by the professionalism and dedication of the finance staff. We are particularly heartened by the RG's recognition of examples of good practice that are listed in the report.

While the review process demonstrated a number of key strengths of the Finance Office, it also highlighted and confirmed the Finance Office's own awareness of areas requiring improvement.

Key Recommendations from the Review Group Report

Recommendation 1. Strategic and Financial Planning Process

A review of the strategic and financial planning process, including the budgeting model and the investment prioritisation process and pipeline, should be carried out to ensure that processes are fit for purpose and transparent to support the delivery of the University's objectives (2.9)

Proposal/Comment:

Under the leadership of the Chief Financial Officer/Bursar, the Finance Office will engage with relevant stakeholders in a review of its role in supporting the University's strategic and financial planning processes.

This will ensure that the budget model, investment prioritisation process and financial plans support, drive and reflect the ambition of the University's Strategy and provide transparency to all stakeholders.

Recommendation 2. Consideration of University Financial Plans by FRAMC

The Finance, Remuneration and Asset Management Committee (FRAMC) should ensure that the University financial plans are considered in the context of the University's performance and strategy (2.11)

Proposal/Comment:

The President with the support of the University Management Team sets the strategic objectives for the University which are supported by the budgeting and financial planning processes.

The FRAMC reviews and assesses the annual budget and financial plans before recommending them for approval by the Governing Authority.

The Finance Office will work with the FRAMC in addressing this recommendation in the Quality Improvement Plan.

Recommendation No 3. IT Strategy

The Review Group recommends the development of a clear IT strategy for Finance to provide more robust systems that leave it less exposed to manual tasks and work-arounds and improve the user experience (3.14)

Proposal/Comment:

The Finance Office has put forward a proposal to the President for the replacement of the existing eFinancials system following the launch by the President of a University wide strategy titled ***Transforming through Digital Technology.***

Currently at proof of concept phase, the “ServiceNow” model will modernise workflow operations using a single platform for IT and will enable UCD to improve operational efficiencies by streamlining and automating routine work tasks and this enhanced level of automation will significantly reduce manual financial operations and enhance user experience.

Recommendation No 4. Develop a clear HR plan for the UCD Finance Office

Each of the four functions should develop its own HR resourcing plan that outlines the drivers of workload and therefore how many staff are needed; appropriate EDI aspirations and how these will be met; approaches to recruitment both internally and externally. This should include a wellbeing survey of all staff (3.17)

Proposal/Comment:

We will engage with our HR Partner to address this recommendation.

The Finance Office is committed to creating an environment that promotes EDI values, which are aligned to the University’s EDI objectives.

The Unit acknowledges the need to address current staff resourcing and to limit the over reliance on key staff members.

Recommendation No 5. Improve user focus

The Review Group recommends the UCD Finance Office develops a plan to improve the user experience focus of the UCD Finance Office. This would include plotting the Finance User Journey through a comprehensive and structured process-mapping exercise. Identify opportunities to digitise services for the user, introducing online self-service elements and user- friendly finance tools that allow users access their specific financial information (4.10 & 4.12)

Proposal/Comment:

We acknowledge that the user experience of finance systems and reporting needs to be enhanced as well as the need for additional support and training.

We will work with users to identify options such as functional organisational charts on the Finance Office website to incorporating virtual helpdesk functions to facilitate a user self-help process, as part of Enabler 4 Digital Transformation.

Recommendation No 6. Review of Post-Award Research

The Review Group also recommends a user-led review of post-award research supports to include input from the Office of the Vice President for Research, Innovation and Impact (VPRII) and UCD HR (4.11)

Proposal/Comment:

We endorse this recommendation and the findings of the Review Group to implement a user-led review of all post award research support services to include the VPRII Office and UCD HR, particularly the provision of training for early career researchers and the need to provide clearly documented processes for the end of grant phase of research funding.

The Finance Office accepts that there is an urgent need to enhance the services provided by the post-award research unit, given the huge growth in research awards to the University in recent years.

Quality Review Process

The Finance Office will address all of the Review Group's recommendations in the Quality Improvement Plan.



UCD Finance Office

Quality Review Remote Site Visit: 4-8 October 2021

TIMETABLE

SESSION 1

Planning Meeting & Welcome Session Tuesday 28 September 2021		
12.45-	Virtual Room opened - UCD Quality Office Lead	
13.00-15.00	1.1 Attendees: Review Group & UCD Quality Office Lead Session lead by the Review Group Chair	
Welcome & University Perspective Thursday 30 September 2021		
09.30-10.30	1.2 Registrar & Deputy President, Review Group & UCD Quality Office Lead	

SESSION 2

Organisation/Management of Resources/Strategy/ Section Heads Monday 4 October 2021		
08.45-	Virtual Room opened - UCD Quality Office Lead	
09.00-10.00	Private meeting of Review Group (RG)	
10.00-11.00	2.1 Chief Finance Officer/Bursar	
11.00-12.00	Key observations and break	
12.00-12.30	2.2 Sar Committee Members	
12.30-13.15	Key observations and break	
13.15-14.00	2.3 Section Head - Financial Management (incoming and outgoing)	
14.00-14.30	Key observations and break	
14.30-15.15	2.4 Section Head - Financial Planning and Management Accounting	
15.15-15.30	Key observations and wrap up	

SESSION 3

Section Heads/Stakeholders		
Tuesday 5 October 2021		
09.00-	Virtual Room opened - UCD Quality Office Lead <i>opportunity for RG /QO to check in</i>	
09.15-10.00	Private meeting of Review Group (RG)	
10.00-10.30	3.1 Section Head - Procurement & Buying	
10.30-11.00	Key observations and break	
11.00-11.30	3.2 Section Head - Strategic Planning and Risk	
11.30-12.00	Key observations and break	
12.00-12.45	3.3 UCD Audit / Governance Representatives:	
	Finance, Remuneration and Asset Management Committee	
	Audit and Risk Management Committee - external organisation representative	
12.45-13.45	Key observations and break for Lunch	
13.45-14.15 New Slot	College Principal, College of Social Sciences and Law, Vice-President for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion	
14.15-15.00	3.4 Representative Academic areas supported by the Unit (Heads Of School)	
14.45-15.15	Key observations and break	
15.15-15.45	3.5 University Support Units that are supported by the Unit (School Managers)	
15.45-16.15	Key observations and wrap up	

SESSION 4

Stakeholders /Core Activities		
Wednesday 6 October 2021		
09.00	Virtual Room opened - UCD Quality Office Lead <i>opportunity for RG /QO to check in</i>	
09.15-10.00	Private meeting of Review Group	
10.00-10.30	4.1 Representative Research PIs supported by the unit	
10.30-11.00	Key observations and break	
11.00-11.30	4.2 Service Areas supported by the Unit	
11.30-12.00	Key observations and break	
12.00-12.45	4.3 University Support Units that provide support to the Unit	
12.45-13.45	Key observations and break for lunch	
13.45-14.00	Prep for afternoon	
14.00-14.45	4.4 Financial Planning and Management Accounting area	
14.45-15.00	Key observations and break	
15.00-15.30	4.5 Financial Reporting	
15.30-15.45	Key observations and break	
15.45-16.15	4.6 Research Finance	
16.15-16.45	Key observations and wrap up	

SESSION 5

Core Activities Thursday 7 October 2021		
07.30-	Virtual Room opened - UCD Quality Office Lead <i>opportunity for RG /QO to check in</i>	
07.45-08.00	Private meeting of Review Group (RG)	
08.00-09.00	Registrar & CFO- additional session	
09.00-09.15	Key observations and break	
09.15-09.45	Meeting with CFO- Initial Feedback	
09.45-10.00	Key observations and break	
10.00-10.30	5.1 Capital Projects, Student Residences and Commercial Activities	
10.30-11.00	Key observations and break	
11.00-11.30	5.2 Finance Systems	
11.30-12.00	Key observations and break	
12.00-12.30	5.3 Accounts Payable and Staff Expenses	
12.30-13.00	Key observations and break	
13.00-13.30	5.4 Strategic Planning, Risk Management & Institutional Research	
13.30-14.15	Key observations and break for lunch	
14.15-14.45	5.5 Payroll	
14.45-15.00	Key observations and break	
15.00-15.30	5.6 General Ledger (incl. Treasury Management)	
15.30-15.45	Key observations and break	
15.45-16.15	5.7 Procurement and Buying	
16.15-16.30	Key observations and Wrap up	

SESSION 6

Review Group Initial Key Findings Friday 8 October 2021		
08.45-	Virtual Room opened - UCD Quality Office Lead <i>opportunity for RG /QO to check in</i>	
09.00-12.30	Review Group prepare first draft of Review Group Report and extract key points of commendation and recommendations for improvement for exit presentation	
12.30-13.15	Break	
13.15-14.15	Review Group continue to prepare first draft of Review Group Report and extract key points of commendation and recommendations for improvement for exit presentation	
14.15-14.30	Break	
14.30-14.50	6.1 Review Group feedback initial outline commendations and findings to Chief Finance Officer/Bursar , Section Head - Financial Management (incoming and outgoing)	
14.50-15.15	Final Prep before presentation	
15.15-15.30	Break/Transition to presentation	
15.30-16.00	6.2 All Finance staff, UCD Quality Office Representatives Exit Presentation	
15.30-16.00	Wrap up - site visit close out	