



Ollscoil Chathair
Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

External Quality Review Process

Background and Guidelines for Reviewers

**Quality And Institutional Insights Office
Dublin City University**

<https://www.dcu.ie/qio>

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Overview of External Quality Review Processes at DCU.....	3
2.1 The DCU Quality Framework.....	3
2.2 The DCU Quality and Institutional Insights Office	4
2.3 Quality Assurance and DCU Leadership and Governance Structures.....	4
3. Quality Review Process for Academic and Support Units at DCU	5
3.1 Structure of the DCU Quality Review Process	5
3.2 Benefits of the Quality Review Process at DCU	5
4 Self-Assessment	6
4.1 The Quality Committee and Area Self-Assessment	6
4.2 The Self-Assessment Report (SAR).....	6
5 The Peer Review Group (PRG).....	7
5.1 The Peer Review Group Members	7
5.2 Peer Review Group Objectives.....	7
5.3 Peer Review Group Activities.....	7
5.4 Specific Peer Review Group Roles.....	8
6 Peer Review Group Visit.....	8
6.1 Before the Review Visit.....	8
6.2 The Review Visit Timetable.....	9
7 The PRG Report	9
8 Improvement Planning and Follow-Up	10
8.1 Development of the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP)	10
9 Review by Governing Authority and Publication of Review Outputs	11

List of Acronyms

APR	Annual Programme Review
DCU	Dublin City University
DCUBS	DCU Business School
ESG	European Standards and Guidelines
EUA	European University Association
GA	Governing Authority
HEA	Higher Education Authority (An tÚdarás)
IUA	The Irish Universities Association
IUAQC	Irish Universities Association Quality Committee
IUQB	Irish Universities Quality Board
NCSR	National Centre for Sensor Research
OVPLI	Office of the Vice President for Learning Innovation
OVPR	Office of the Vice President for Research
PPR	Periodic Programme Review
PRG	Peer Review Group
QA	Quality Assurance
QI	Quality Improvement
QPC	Quality Promotion Committee
QIO	Quality And Institutional Insights Office
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
QuEP	Quality Enhancement Plan
SAR	Self Assessment Report
SMG	Senior Management Group
SS&D	Student Support & Development

1. Introduction

Dublin City University (DCU) is dedicated to fostering a culture of quality as part of its comprehensive quality assurance and enhancement framework. The framework is rooted in the principles of Quality Assurance and Quality Improvement outlined in the Universities Act (1997), the legislative foundation for maintaining quality standards in the Irish University Sector (Figure 1). Additionally, the framework aligns with the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act (2012) (amended 2019).

DCU's quality review procedures are aligned with the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)¹ and the published guidelines of Qualifications and Quality Ireland (QQI)².

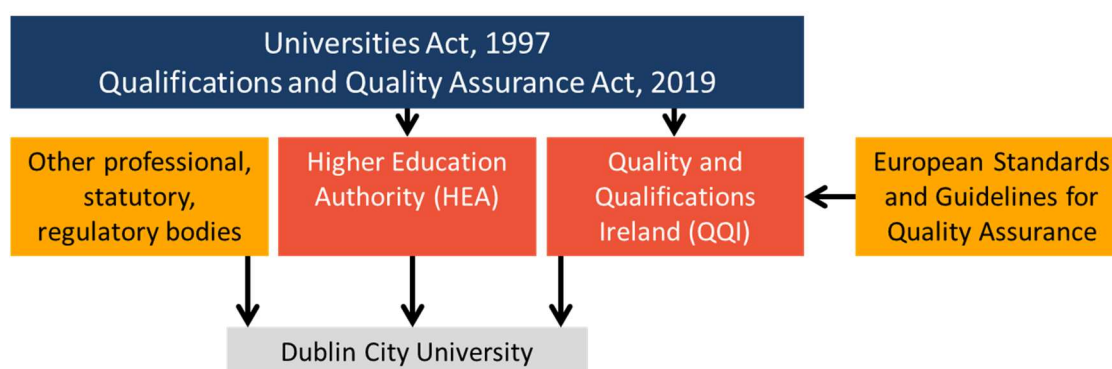


Figure 1: Statutory and Legislative Basis of Quality Assurance within Irish Higher Education

This document is designed to support members of the Peer Review Group (PRG) in conducting externally led quality reviews of academic and professional support units at DCU. The document outlines the background and purpose of quality reviews at DCU and provides general information on the key stages of the process.

2. Overview of External Quality Review Processes at DCU

2.1 The DCU Quality Framework

The externally led quality reviews of DCU academic and professional support areas at DCU are a core aspect of a broader quality assurance and enhancement structure at DCU. Areas reviews are conducted on a cyclical basis, typically once every seven years. For academic units in particular, cyclical reviews of academic are built upon more regular reviews of academic programmes at DCU, including Annual and Periodic Programme Review. The quality

¹ http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf

² <http://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Core%20Statutory%20QA%20Guidelines.pdf>

framework, describing how Annual and Periodic Programme Review align to Area level reviews is outlined in Figure 2.

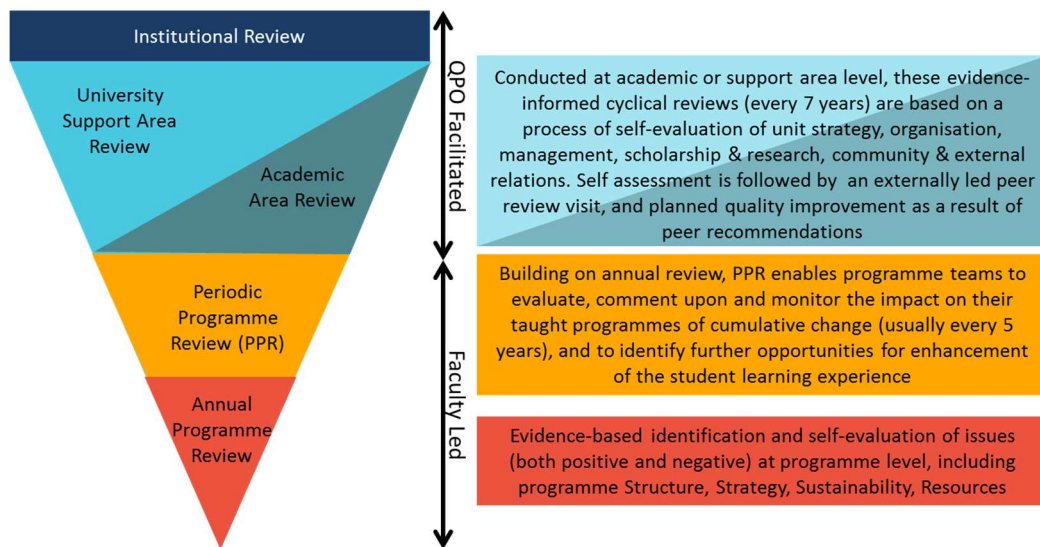


Figure 2: Quality Framework at DCU

2.2 The DCU Quality and Institutional Insights Office

The DCU Quality and Institutional Insights Office (QIO) promotes, supports and facilitates quality improvement activities across academic and administrative units throughout the University. This is undertaken principally through the management of the University's Quality Review process for Faculties and Professional Support units. QIO members provide assistance and advise to areas under review, liaise with the PRG and track implementation of recommendations arising from the review process.

2.3 Quality Assurance and DCU Leadership and Governance Structures

Procedures for external quality review at DCU are strongly embedded within the leadership and governance structures at the University, and all outputs from Quality Reviews are considered at the University's Quality Promotion Committee, Executive Committee and Governing Authority.

The Quality Promotion Committee (QPC), a sub-committee of the University's Executive Committee, is tasked with promoting an ethos of self-evaluation and continuous quality improvement within DCU. QPC reviews quality review outputs and makes recommendations to DCU Senior Management, Executive and Academic Council on policies for quality assurance and improvement. QPC is chaired by the President, or his/her nominee.

The University's Senior Management Group (SMG) is included at a number of stages of the quality review process. Upon completion of an Area's Self-Assessment Report (SAR), SMG

receives a copy of this report. A meeting with SMG is a core element of the Review Visit. SMG also provides to the University's response to recommendations of the PRG.

3. Quality Review Process for Academic and Support Units at DCU

3.1 Structure of the DCU Quality Review Process

The DCU quality review process includes four key stages,

- 1) A period of **self-assessment**, involving all staff within an Area under review, which aims to critically assess the activities of the Area. The outputs of this self-reflection are summarised in the development of a Self-Assessment Report (SAR), which forms the basis of the evaluation of the Peer Review Group.
- 2) A **visit by an externally led Peer Review Group (PRG)**, to verify and evaluate the SAR, and meet with staff, students, and other stakeholders to discuss key issues identified. The visit is followed by the completion a PRG Report, which summarises their findings and makes commendations and recommendations for future quality enhancement within the Area.
- 3) The development of Area led **Quality Enhancement Plan (QuEP)** in light of the PRG recommendations. This involves both an Area, and University level response to the PRG recommendations. The QuEP is discussed and agreed at a follow-up meeting, attended by at least one external member of the PRG.
- 4) The consideration of the PRG Report and QuEP by QPC, University Executive and Governing Authority ahead of **publication on the DCU website**.

3.2 Benefits of the Quality Review Process at DCU

In addition to satisfying the statutory requirements (Universities Act, 1997, QQI Act, 2019), the quality process is considered valuable for the following reasons:

- It presents detailed information about the Area and the collective perception of staff and students of its role in the university.
- It presents a succinct and comprehensive statement of the Area's view of its strategic objectives and for a school, of its teaching, learning and research.
- It provides a reflective and self-critical analysis of the activities of the Area.
- It shows the quality systems and processes which are already in place in the Area and permits an assessment of their effectiveness.
- It helps the Area to identify and analyse its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and allows it to suggest appropriate remedies where necessary.
- It identifies those weaknesses, if any, in academic, organisational and other matters which are under the control of the Area and which can be remedied by Area-based action.

- It identifies shortfalls in resources and provides an externally validated case for increased resource allocation.
- It provides a framework within which the Area can continue to work in the future towards quality improvement.

4 Self-Assessment

4.1 The Quality Committee and Area Self-Assessment

The Self-Assessment phase of quality review is led by a Area Quality Review Committee, whose membership should be reflective of all staff within the area. The Committee lead coordinates self-assessment activities, including the use of evidence-informed approaches to self-reflection and assessment, leading to the development of a Self-Assessment Report (SAR).

4.2 The Self-Assessment Report (SAR)

The purpose of the SAR is to provide a succinct, but comprehensive and reflective statement of the school’s activities, and will discuss and analyse the Area’s activities in the following areas:

Academic SAR	Professional/ Administrative SAR
1. Introduction and Context	1. Introduction and Context
2. Approach to Self-Assessment	2. Approach to Self-Assessment
3. Progress report since last Review	3. Progress report since last Review
4. Self-Assessment Analysis	4. Self-Assessment Analysis
a) Planning and Overall Strategic Direction of the Area	a) Planning and Overall Strategic Direction of the Area
b) Effective Management of Resources	b) Effective Management of Resources
c) Overall Approach to Teaching and Learning	c) Effectiveness of Activities and Processes
d) Research and Scholarship	d) Communication and Provision of Information
e) University Service and External Engagement	e) Ongoing Quality Enhancement
f) Communications and Provision of Information	f) External Perspectives
g) External Perspectives	5. SWOC Analysis
5. SWOC Analysis	6. Areas for Enhancement
6. Areas for Enhancement	

Figure 3: Themes of Self-Assessment contained in the Self-Assessment Report

In line with good international practice and in agreement with sectoral policy, the University does not make the self-assessment report publicly available. Retaining the confidentiality of the self-assessment report to the PRG and University management enables and supports the aims of self-assessment in identifying of difficult issues and allows for greater openness and candour in Area self- reflection.

5 The Peer Review Group (PRG)

5.1 The Peer Review Group Members

The PRG is selected by QPC. The PRG composition will reflect the size, character and structure of the Area or theme under review and will include internal and external members and a student reviewer. Internal members will include a member of QPC and a senior member of staff who is not directly involved with the area under review. External members will be drawn from senior leaders in relevant academic disciplines or areas nationally and internationally, as well as a senior member from outside Higher Education.

5.2 Peer Review Group Objectives

The objectives of the Peer Review Group will be to:

- Clarify and verify the information contained within in the self-assessment report.
- Make judgements on how well the aims and objectives of the Area are fulfilled, having regard to the available resources.
- Confirm the Area's strength, weaknesses, opportunities and threats as outlined in the self-assessment report.
- Discuss any perceived strengths, weaknesses not identified in the self-assessment report.
- Check the suitability of the teaching, learning and research environment (where applicable).
- Draw conclusions on the quality and standards achieved within the area and make commendations and recommendations for future quality improvements.

5.3 Peer Review Group Activities

The Peer Review Group will:

- Study the Area SAR and accompanying documentation.
- Visit the Area to gather, clarify, test and verify the information collected as part of the self-assessment process.
- Review the effectiveness of activities of the Area in the light of the self-assessment report.
- Prepare a draft report and present the main findings by the end of the visit.
- Write the peer review report, including finalised commendations and recommendations for future quality improvement.
- Two members (one internal, one external usually the Chair) will assist in finalising the QuEP at a follow-up meeting.

5.4 Specific Peer Review Group Roles

All PRG members are considered full reviewers during a quality review, and all members will participate fully in PRG visit meetings and contribute to the completion of the PRG report. There are several defined roles within the Peer Review Group that are worth noting.

Review Group Chair

The PRG will elect, from among its own membership, a chairperson at the start of the quality review visit. The Chair will always be external to DCU. The key functions of the Review Chair are:

- Ensure that all PRG members are allocated themes/areas of focus, for discussion at the review visit.
- Preside over meetings during the review visit and ensure the review process is conducted in a spirit of cooperation and constructive dialogue.
- Deliver the PRG's high-level findings at an Exit Presentation at the close of the review visit.
- Sign-off on the draft and final PRG reports, in collaboration with the coordinating reviewer

Coordinating Reviewer

The coordinating reviewer is a member of QPC and has several specific responsibilities in relation to the review. During the visit, the coordinating reviewer is the key point of contact between the PRG group and the Quality and Institutional Insights Office. This may include making requests on behalf of the PRG for additional material or documentation or requesting to meet additional staff or other stakeholders during the visit. The Coordinating Review is also responsible for coordinating the writing of the report. This means that they will collate the contributions of all PRG members, prior to finalisation the draft PRG report.

6 Peer Review Group Visit

6.1 Before the Review Visit

You will receive a soft copy of the Area's SAR and any relevant appendices no later than 3 weeks before the review visit. At that time, you will also receive an "initial comments" template. We ask that prior to the review visit, you review the SAR, and use the template to note down any initial impressions on each section, including where there are issues that you would like to explore further during the review. This template should be submitted on the Friday before the review visit, and a collation of all PRG member comments will be provided to PRG members on the following Monday. Please note that these initial comments are considered confidential to the PRG, and do not constitute a finding or conclusion by any member and can be captured simply as draft bullet points.

6.2 The Review Visit Timetable

The PRG will visit the Area under review over two to four days, depending on the size of the area under review. A draft schedule is circulated well in advance of the visit, and the finalised schedule is provided on the week of the visit.

It is envisaged that the visit will normally take place during the weeks of the first or second semester so that students can participate. To facilitate personal schedules, the membership of the PRG will normally be decided at least six months in advance and the days for the visit fixed. All contact with the PRG in organising the visit are carried out by the QIO. Every Quality Review visit starts with a briefing session from the Director of Quality and Institutional Insights, who will provide further information on DCU's approach to Quality Reviews and what to expect during the visit. This session also provides an opportunity for Peer Reviewers to ask questions or seek clarification on the process.

The Peer Review visit usually includes a number of core elements, which usually include meeting with:

- The Head of the Area under review
- The Quality Review Committee
- The Area Management Team, where relevant
- A wide representative group (or all staff) within the Area under review
- Staff from other areas, e.g., administrative offices, research centres, academic units
- Student representatives
- Key external stakeholders, which may include recent graduates
- University Senior Management Group (SMG)
- The SMG member with responsibility for the Area

By the end of the visit, the PRG will have completed an initial draft of their Peer Review Group report, which will include their commendations and recommendations. The visit will conclude the visit with an PRG Exit Presentation to the staff of the Area, where the Chairperson will present an overview of the broad themes that emerged. The exit presentation will not involve discussion with the staff of the unit.

7 The PRG Report

The PRG Report contains the findings of PRG, based on their analysis of the SAR and findings from the Quality Review Visit. The PRG Report will identify and commend areas of good practice within an Area and will make recommendations on opportunities for further Quality Enhancement within the Area.

The PRG Report will be submitted to the Director of Quality and Institutional Insights within 4 weeks of the Review visit. The Director will then send a copy to the Head of the Area, who is responsible for circulating a copy to the Area under review.

Once finalised, based on a review by the Area of factual errors which may be in the report, a copy of the final report will be sent to the President, and other members of the Senior Management Group, and all staff in the Area under review. The report is also included on the agenda of the next QPC meeting.

8 Improvement Planning and Follow-Up

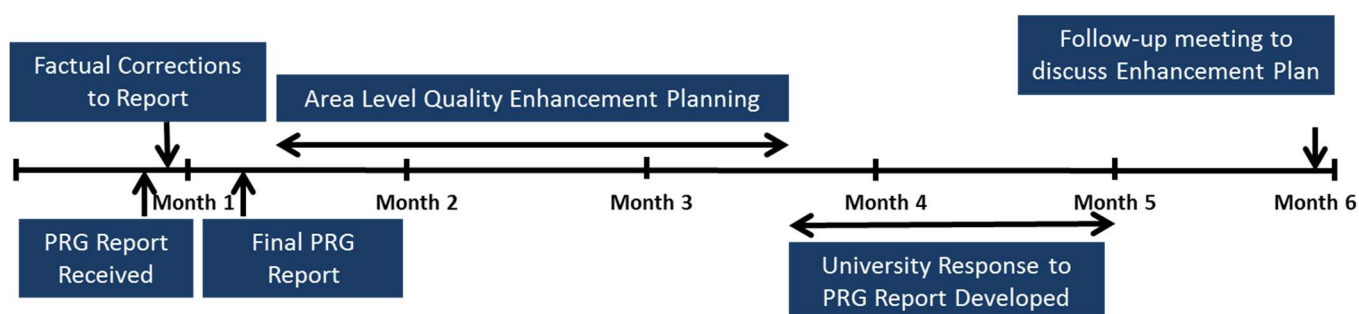


Figure 4: Timeline for the Development of the Quality Enhancement Plan

8.1 Development of the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP)

Quality Enhancement Planning, which follows the finalisation of the PRG Report, is a crucial aspect of the overall quality process. Both the Universities Act (1997) and the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act (2019) note the responsibilities of the university to implement each of the recommendations of the PRG Report, unless it would be impractical or unreasonable to do so. The decisions on improvement made in the follow-up process provide a framework within which each Area can continue to work towards the goal of developing and fostering a quality culture in the University.

Typically, the process of Quality Enhancement Planning will be led by the Head of the Area under review and will include broad consultation across the Area. The QuEP will address all the recommendations in the PRG report, and develop and action plan for quality improvement, including a timeframe for implementation. A draft QuEP is usually developed within 3 months of the Peer Review visit and should include both:

- A list of goals which can realistically be achieved in the following year.
- A list of longer-term goals to be achieved over three years.

In addition to the Area response to the PRG Report, the university leadership also submit an agreed SMG Response to relevant aspects of the PRG report.

9 Review by Governing Authority and Publication of Review Outputs

The DCU Governing Authority will receive documentation relevant to the review, including a summary of the report by the PRG and a summary of the agreed QuEP. In addition, a summary of any common themes and recommendations relating to all area reviews are presented in an annual summary report to Governing Authority. In accordance with the Universities Act (1997), the Governing Authority shall:

- (a) Implement any findings arising out of an evaluation carried out in accordance with the quality review procedures unless, having regard to the resources available to the university or for any other reason, it would, in the opinion of the governing authority, be impractical or unreasonable to do so.
- (b) Shall provide for the publication in such form and manner as the governing authority thinks fit of findings arising out of the application of the quality assurance procedures.

Following discussion and approval by Governing Authority, the University has agreed that the following will be published³:

- Full text of the Peer Review Group Report
- Full text of the agreed Quality Enhancement Plan
- Full text of the Summary of the Quality Reviews presented to and approved by the Governing Authority

³ <https://www.dcu.ie/gpo/published-quality-review-reports>