

Academic Framework for Innovation (AFI)

Proposals to Academic Council (25 June 2007)

Prepared by the Associate Deans for Teaching and Learning

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1. Introduction

Following discussion at Executive, Academic Council and the Academic Strategy Committee, the recommendations from the Working Group on Modularisation were referred by the VPLI and Registrar for detailed consideration to the Associate Deans for T&L, the Director of the Registry, the Head of the LIU and the Education Officer of the SU. A summary report, incorporating key elements contained in a detailed paper prepared by the Associate Deans, was presented to Executive on 28 November 2006. A more detailed paper was then discussed by faculties, prior to further discussion by Academic Strategy Committee and Academic Council on 14 February 2007. An Academic Framework for Innovation was then proposed, which would assist in the delivery of the Learning Innovation element of the Strategic Plan by:

- placing DCU in the forefront of educational thinking
- building upon existing strengths
- enabling interdisciplinarity
- rectifying current anomalies
- fostering flexible approaches to programme development
- widening student choice - both in terms of curriculum and mode of study
- supporting retention

Following an extensive consultation with all staff, the initial document was restructured and reworded. While the core ideas presented at Academic Council on 14th February remain, they have been clarified. Colleagues' comments, questions and concerns are addressed as much as possible in the present document, which

now includes additional details on the rationale and implications of each core principle (now called *precepts*). We have also included a FAQ section.

The proposals outlined in this document set out the blue print for a new academic framework, which will direct the review of existing programmes and awards and the design of new ones as well as their overall management. They do *not* constitute a step-by-step set of procedures, nor do they intend to impose rigid constraints on the day-to-day management of programmes. Rather, the adoption of these proposals will guarantee the University stakeholders that, irrespective of the exact form of the final framework, the University will be able to maintain and to ensure the sustainable development of its portfolio of diverse, flexible and innovative programmes.

These proposals are now put to Academic Council for consideration and adoption.

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2. Proposals for the design and implementation of a new Academic Framework for Innovation (AFI)

Proposal 1: Guiding principles

The following principles will guide any new academic framework adopted and implemented by the university:

1.1 The University is committed to meeting Bologna requirements, to complying with EU and national standards and to enhancing the quality of students' learning experience and outcomes;

1.2 The University is committed to guaranteeing fair and equitable assessment for all students;

1.3 The University is committed to taking cognisance of changes in study and work patterns, and to accommodating non-traditional students.

Proposal 2: Supporting the framework

Implementation of proposals 3 & 4 is conditional on the availability of appropriate support and resources.

Proposal 3: AFI precepts

The DCU Academic Framework for Innovation will be characterised by the following precepts:

3.1 The DCU portfolio of programme and awards will be compliant with the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

3.2 Flexible learning pathways and programme access will be supported. In particular, annual progression will no longer be a universal requirement.

3.3 Registration for a module will last for one academic year only. Any resit opportunities must take place within this registration period.

3.4 New operations and procedures surrounding the allocation of marks and degree classification will be established:

(i) *Module Boards* will agree marks;

(ii) *Award Boards* will validate students' results, monitor and record their progress, and agree award grades.

(See detailed information and analysis in Section 3.)

Proposal 4: Implementation schedule

The Academic Framework for Innovation will be designed and implemented according to the following schedule. The timing of the implementation phase is contingent on the adoption by the HEA of a module-based funding model to replace the programme based funding model currently used. Here we assume a start date of the 2010-2011 academic year for full implementation.

	Sep-2007	Feb-2008	Aug-2008	Sep-2008	Feb-2009	Aug-2009	Sep-2009	Feb-2010	Aug-2010	Sep-2010	Feb-2011	Aug-2011
Implementation of NFQ for Bologna compliance												
Information and training sessions on NFQ and Learning Outcomes												
Preparation of new Marks and Standards, validation and accreditation templates, etc.												
Re-design of awards, modules and programmes in line with NFQ Learning Outcomes model												
Development of new Academic Framework and piloting												
Setting up of new structures and procedures for Module and Award Boards												
Design, development and testing of integrated Registration/Timetabling/ITS System,												
Gaming/simulation of implementation of AFI												
AFI piloting in Faculties (self-selected programmes/awards)												
Review of operation and subsequent revision of procedures, infrastructure, etc.												
Implementation Phase												
All new programmes under AFI												
Full implementation of new structures in integrated ITS (<i>old and new</i> programmes)												
Full implementation of AFI												

3. Proposal 3: Background and explanatory notes

Proposals	Rationale/underlying principles	Suggested implementation process	Anticipated additional benefits and outcomes	Requirements (some requiring substantial funding)
<p>3.1 The DCU portfolio of programme and awards will be compliant with the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).</p>	<p>To meet Bologna requirements;</p> <p>To facilitate compliance with national/EU standards and quality enhancement of students' learning experience and outcomes.</p>	<p><i>Programme Review and (re-)validation</i> incl. adoption of a Learning Outcomes (LO) model for awards, modules and assessment;</p> <p>In-depth study of assessment for LO-based curriculum and application to existing and new programme and modules;</p> <p>Development and integration of a Quality Enhancement and Assurance</p> <p>Action: USC, ASC, OVPLI, LIU, Faculties, Programme Boards, Quality Promotion Unit</p>	<p>Alignment with formal European and national quality assurance procedures;</p> <p>Improved student mobility.</p>	<p>Training and support programme for staff;</p> <p>Staff release (academic and admin) in faculties, Registry, CSD & Ed. Services, Finance, etc.)</p> <p>Appropriate templates for module/programme reviews;</p> <p>New module descriptors;</p> <p>New validation and accreditation templates, documentation and procedures;</p> <p>Action: Executive, HR, USC, ASC, Finance Office, Budget Committee</p>

Proposals	Rationale/underlying principles	Suggested implementation process	Anticipated additional benefits and outcomes	Requirements (some requiring substantial funding)
<p>3.2 Flexible learning pathways and programme access will be supported. In particular, annual progression will no longer be a universal requirement.</p>	<p>To adapt to changes in student lifestyle and to reality of study/work patterns;</p> <p>To accommodate non-traditional students;</p> <p>To support retention.</p>	<p>Provision of <i>teaching resource requirements</i> (rooms and facilities/equipment, working day/week, academic calendar, learning technologies, etc.);</p> <p>Provision of services outside normal hours (e.g. library, registry opening hours, etc.)</p> <p>Clear definition of <i>pre-requisites and co-requisites</i> for modules contributing to DCU awards, inc. 'shelf-life' of accumulated credits;</p> <p>Specification of award requirements;</p> <p>Deployment of a <i>robust information management infrastructure</i>, incl. integrated timetabling, registration and student records;</p> <p><i>Pilot</i> in Faculties.</p> <p>Action: Registry, CSD, Estates, Faculties</p>	<p>Match the challenge to student's circumstances;</p> <p>Student-centred framework (e.g. facilitating either part-time or accelerated study);</p> <p>Standards maintained/enhanced (e.g. students may elect to focus on selected areas to ensure in-depth learning).</p>	<p>Clarify HEA funding model in relation to part-time students;</p> <p>Check local authorities' regulation re: tuition and maintenance grants (and lobby if necessary);</p> <p>Clarity on potential HR issues;</p> <p>Action: Senior Management, OVPLI, HR, Finance Office</p>

Proposals	Rationale/underlying principles	Suggested implementation process	Anticipated additional benefits and outcomes	Requirements (some requiring substantial funding)
<p>3.3 Registration for a module will last for one academic year only. Any resit opportunities must take place within this registration period.</p>	<p>To guarantee fair and equitable assessment for all students;</p> <p>To provide stimulus to improve standards of achievement;</p> <p>To facilitate the change/ development of modules and/or assessment methods;</p> <p>To better manage modules with large component of CA or large component of teamwork;</p> <p>To guarantee achievement of Learning Outcomes.</p>	<p>Development of a suitable <i>registration process and systems</i></p> <p><u>Action:</u> Registry, CSD, Faculties</p>	<p>Standards enhanced (e.g. guaranteed achievement of specified learning outcomes);</p> <p>Allows more choice to students;</p> <p>Simplified administration procedures and better/easier/ more reliable record keeping – everybody treated the same way.</p> <p>No complication of different types of modules and different types of registration (such as attendance or exam only);</p> <p>Facilitates change of lecturer for module.</p>	<p>Clarity and transparency regarding fees for modules/exams.</p> <p><u>Action:</u> Executive/Finance</p>

Proposals	Rationale/underlying principles	Suggested implementation process	Anticipated additional benefits and outcomes	Requirements (some requiring substantial funding)
<p>3.4 New operations and procedures surrounding the allocation of marks and degree classification will be established:</p> <p>(i) <i>Module Boards</i> will agree <u>marks</u>;</p> <p>(ii) <i>Award Boards</i> will validate students' results, monitor and record their progress, and agree <u>award grades</u>.</p>	<p>To guarantee fair and equitable assessment for all students; (full or part time, etc);</p> <p>To eliminate differential decision-making for same modules on different programmes;</p> <p>To accommodate individualised pathways;</p> <p>To properly/fully implement Learning Outcomes model.</p>	<p>Replace current PBERCs and PABs by Module Boards (MBs) and Awards Boards (ABs);</p> <p>Define <i>role and membership</i> of MBs and ABs, including role and membership of <i>external examiners</i>;</p> <p>Academic Council to <i>approve membership</i> of MBs and ABs;</p> <p>Redefine role and membership of <i>programme boards</i> (or school teaching committees, course teams, etc.);</p> <p>Establish reporting mechanisms between Programme Boards and MBs/Abs (e.g. as relevant statistical information to be passed on to Award Board).</p> <p><u>Action:</u> Registrar, Academic Council, USC, Faculties, Schools</p>	<p>Module marks agreed on the basis of achievement and separate from implications for individual student's award;</p> <p>Module marks can only be changed at the relevant Module Board, which includes the external examiner(s);</p> <p>Award Board to maintain "gold standard" system of H1, H2.1, etc...;</p> <p>Students full record provided to new AB;</p> <p>Full individual student's record to be available in addition to broadsheet (longsheet);</p>	<p>New <i>Marks and Standards</i> for LO model</p> <p><u>Action:</u> Registry, USC.</p>

4. Appendix - Frequently Asked Questions

4.1. Could you be more specific about the kind of support that is envisaged?

There is no doubt that reforming our academic framework along the lines proposed here will be a costly, complex, and time consuming endeavour. However, this should be seen as an investment, which will benefit the whole university in the medium and longer term.

Adequate staff support and training in reviewing programmes and modules in the light of the NFQ is absolutely essential if our portfolio of programmes is to be enhanced. Furthermore, we believe that a number of colleagues from each faculty, both academic and non-academic, should be released from some of their normal duties in order to champion and co-ordinate the review of programmes and modules, and to design and test new programme management structures and administrative procedures in collaboration with Registry, CSD and any other relevant unit.

Robust, reliable and user-friendly information and data management systems are equally essential if the implementation of the AFI is to be successful. A fully integrated registration/timetabling/ITS system is required and will have to be properly tested before full implementation occurs.

Gaming or simulating the implementation of the AFI will indeed be a fundamental stepping stone in our move towards the new framework. The results of such a simulation should enable us to identify areas that may require revisions as well as the limitations imposed by our staffing and physical resources, such as the number and type of classrooms that will be required, teaching and learning facilities and equipment, etc.

4.2. There is no mention of modularisation in the proposals...

Modularisation is about giving students significant control over their educational experience. By definition, this control is exercised through the choice of modules. On the other hand, learning in DCU has been characterised over the last 25 years by denominated programmes with whatever choice there is usually being strongly circumscribed. The aim of the Academic Framework for Innovation is not to impose full modularisation on all DCU Awards. Rather it is to enable the definition of awards

that are achieved through modularised pathways, as well as accommodating awards where the set of modules required is more tightly defined (such as in the case of awards accredited by national professional bodies).

4.3. What are NQAI and NFQ?

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) was set up by legislation to introduce a qualifications framework for all qualifications at all levels in Ireland, including awards made by professional bodies. This framework (the National Qualifications Framework – NFQ) is binding on the FETAC and HETAC sectors. It is not strictly speaking binding on the Universities, but the IUA have agreed to align their major and minor awards with it. The NFQ has now also been aligned with the two cycles of the Bologna process. Internationally, the Irish NFQ is seen as a fundamental element in the development of an overarching European Qualifications Framework, the purpose of which is to provide a tool for the mobility, transfer and progression of students and graduates across Europe.

The NFQ is thus a Bologna compliant, Irish system of ten levels. It is designed to provide appropriate awards for the students' level of learning, wherever obtained. It puts the focus on learning outcomes, at both programme and module level. The NFQ emphasises breadth and depth of knowledge as well as professional skills and competencies. Accordingly, learning outcomes and their associated assessment methods drive learning activities and student engagement. The NFQ also supports the national objective of moving towards a lifelong learning society.

The NFQ framework has been adopted by the second level system, and many professional bodies in Ireland. As a result, the language of the NFQ has become the main language of the majority of the third level sector stakeholders including FETAC and HETAC.

4.4. What is a module in the context of the NFQ? How does it differ from current DCU modules?

Under the proposed AFI, modules need to be characterised by their academic level, the amount of student activity involved as indicated by the number of ECTS credits, when and how they are delivered, and possibly in certain cases by a “shelf-life” or expiry date. We focus here just on the academic level aspect.

DCU currently has five different module levels, corresponding roughly to academic years. In the NFQ system, the term “level” is applied to awards and there are level

descriptors associated with each level of award. Of the post-leaving certificate awards, DCU is primarily concerned with NFQ Level 8 (Honours Bachelor), NFQ Level 9 (Masters) and NFQ Level 10 (Doctorate).

There is to an extent an academic progression in the post leaving cert NFQ levels 6-10, but it is by no means the only distinguishing characteristic – primarily these award levels are about fitness for purpose. It does not seem to be simple or useful to equate the progress of a DCU student from entry into the University towards an Honours Bachelor award with the NFQ level 6, 7 and 8 progression. Consequently, we could use here the term *stage* to refer to this progress from ab initio entry towards a Level 8 or Level 9 award. The most natural and most useful categorisation of this progress seems to be in terms of three stages to an Honours Bachelor plus one further stage for the taught Masters level. For example, the following categorisation could be adopted:

- *Introductory Stage* (DCU existing Level 1, probably about 60 credits maximum for any award);
- *Intermediate Stage* (DCU existing Levels 2 and 3 on a four year degree; Level 2 on a three year degree, probably 60 -120 credits);
- *Advanced, or Honours Bachelor Stage* (DCU existing level 4 on a four year degree; Level 3 on a three year degree, probably about 60 credits);
- *Expert, or Graduate/Masters/Doctorate Stage* (DCU existing level 5).

Stage descriptors analogous to the NFQ level descriptors will need to be defined in order to act as a meta-framework for the writing of module Learning Outcomes, so that these are consistent across the University. Because Learning Outcomes are intimately connected with the assessment, another way of putting this would be to decide that, as Dr D.G.A. Scurry puts it in his report to the DCU Working Group on Modularisation in 2004, “University-wide assessment criteria will need to be developed to ensure that modules taught at the same [stage] are assessed to similar standards.”

4.5. Where are the “Programmes”? And the Programme Boards?

In DCU terminology, the term “programme” refers to a defined set of modules and stages that students are required to complete successfully in order to be awarded a denominated degree. Under the AFI, programmes still exist but they are likely to be

more flexible and individualised than is currently the case. A programme may thus refer to the learning pathways or trajectory (i.e. the suite of modules, with their pre- and co-requisites) taken by an individual student registered for an award. The range of learning pathways that students can choose will be specified by the Award requirements as defined by validation and accreditation.

Programme Boards/School & Faculty Teaching Committees will still exist and may be responsible for more than one award. However, their terms of reference and membership may need to be reviewed and harmonised within and between Faculties. In any case, Programme Chairs and/or Course Directors will continue to play a key role in the development, management, operations and monitoring/evaluation of programmes and awards. For example, Programme Boards functions are likely to include Quality Assurance procedures. Robust communication channels and reporting mechanisms between Programme Boards, Module Boards and Award Boards will also need to be put in place.

4.6. What will be the composition of Module Examination Boards (MB) and Award Boards (AB)?

At this stage, it is envisaged that Module Boards will have responsibility for more than one module. Given the differences between and within Faculties, Schools and/or disciplines will determine the required number of Module Boards for which they are responsible. The specific modules falling under the remit of a Module Board may be determined according to established discipline boundaries (e.g. inorganic chemistry, organic chemistry, French language, accounting, etc.) or according to any coherent set of criteria deemed as most appropriate. Each Module Board must have at least one external examiner (in this case, the MB may be responsible for all modules sharing the same external examiner), but may have more. All internal examiners/assessors would normally be members of the relevant Module Board(s).

By contrast, only selected representatives from the MBs involved in an award/programme would be members of the corresponding Award Board. The number of representatives would reflect the number of credits from the MB that contribute to the award. Award External Examiners (as distinct from Module Board External Examiners) and Chairs of Programme Boards/Course directors will be key members of the Award Board, which may be chaired by the Dean of the Faculty or his/her nominee.

The membership of Module Boards and Award Boards will be approved by Academic Council/University Standard Committee.

4.7. What kind of 'information infrastructure' will be put in place?

An Information Infrastructure that combines information on registration, current student module completion status, module learning outcomes, award requirements and timetabled contact events, will need to be introduced. The infrastructure should allow a student and/or an academic mentor to explore what options are available for proceeding, given the student's current status. Fixed and centralised timetables with coherent or coordinated treatment of different categories of student contact such as lectures, seminars, tutorials, labs, etc., are a feature of modularised systems generally. These would need to be introduced in DCU.