

EUA Institutional Quality Review of Dublin City University

Response by Dublin City University

April 2005

Introduction

Dublin City University acknowledges the very comprehensive nature of the institutional quality review undertaken by the EUA and wishes to express its appreciation of the very large amount of work done by the members of the review group and for their very thorough and constructive engagement with the university and its staff throughout the process. The university is naturally pleased that the report is positive about its activities and how they are carried out. It has considered the recommendations of the reviewers and plans to incorporate them into the implementation process arising from its currently-developing strategic plan.

Mission & Vision

DCU is pleased that the review group has so strongly endorsed its choice of six academic themes for prioritised development as key planks in its strategic development. These will be further built upon in the university's next strategic plan, currently under active development, and continuing the university's commitment to interdisciplinarity.

There is a strong synergy between DCU's work as a university operating both at an international level and contributing to its local region. The roles are compatible since, to achieve the latter by engaging in appropriately advanced technology transfer, it must have developed the appropriate high-level expertise in its chosen niches. It sees distinct complementarity between its research successes and regional needs.

Student Issues

DCU will continue to improve its approach to the systematic recruitment and admission of non-traditional, mature, international and Access students. This is currently under way, the International Office having been reorganised and improvements in the student recruitment process having been made recently.

The university agrees, as advocated in both the EUA and OECD reports, that it is necessary to increase research capacity significantly. However achievement of this goal will necessarily depend on significant additional national investment in support funding for research students and infrastructure generally. The current small number of PhD students in Irish universities is a consequence of current low levels of resourcing generally. DCU, uniquely among Irish universities, requires virtually all research students to register initially for a Master's (by research) degree. Though nominally registered as Master's students, most are actually on a PhD track, transfer to which occurs following successful research progress assessment after one to two years. This process leads to a significant under-estimate of the number of PhD track students at DCU. Its output of PhD graduates has doubled in the period 2000-2003 and its per capita research income was highest in the country in 2003.

Teaching and Learning

The review group has acknowledged the seriousness with which DCU takes its teaching and learning responsibilities and the university is pleased by this acknowledgement of its strong teaching and learning ethos and the associated support, monitoring and quality

assurance structures. DCU has been ECTS compliant for many years in the operation of its teaching programmes and will ensure that its drive to become a research-intensive university will not be at the expense of its teaching and learning commitments.

However the university acknowledges that, in addition to current inputs to its quality review process, there are a number of relevant quality of Teaching and Learning aspects which are not currently integrated. These include, for example, external examiner reports for taught programmes and for research thesis evaluation, and the inputs from external expert involvement in the rigorous accreditation process to which all new DCU programmes are subject. The university will work to ensure their better integration in future.

The Performance Management and Development Scheme which is currently being introduced within the university will contribute significantly to the appraisal of individual teachers and in the setting of goals and their management. In parallel, the university is developing a more rigorously systematic approach to the objective assessment of teaching performance for promotion purposes.

It is recognised that the T&L requirements of students have changed, with many now working almost full-time. As a consequence, the ways in which the university engages with the student body need attention. The necessary educational changes are receiving active consideration from the Associate Deans of Teaching and Learning and the other groups involved in updating the modularisation system, which has operated since 1996.

The university has a system for obtaining feedback from students on their opinions of individual modules, and many staff use these to help improve the effectiveness of their teaching. In addition the university administers questionnaires to student year groups to obtain feedback on individual programmes and support facilities. It plans to improve the collection of systematic feedback from students and to involve the new Institutional Research Officer in the development of improved feedback systems. A coordinating group will oversee this and the outcomes, including their more effective feedback to students, will be incorporated into the quality review system.

DCU is aware that postgraduate students require improved support and is considering the introduction of a Dean of Graduate Studies function for this purpose. It also recognises the distinctive needs of mature students in general and is considering how to meet them more effectively.

The university recognises that refinements and improvements are necessary within the development of the Faculties to enhance the Executive Dean function.

DCU is conscious that continued excellence in Teaching and Learning relies on state-of-the-art facilities, equipment and materials and that is vital to ensure that, as pointed out by the review group, teaching infrastructure is continually upgraded. The university will continue to do so within prevailing budget constraints.

Research and Commercialisation

The university is pleased that the review group has recognised the impressive research outcomes of the past five years. Its strategy of creating critical mass in selected areas through its University Designated Research Centres programme has played a critical role in this success, having underpinned the university's PRTLTI successes and the creation of its National Research Centres.

The review group points to the importance of adequate research overheads, as an integral part of research funding, in sustaining university research infrastructure. The university also sees the research overheads issue as critical to the realisation of its research plans.

Governance and Management

The university is currently in the process of reviewing comprehensively its committee structure. The intent is to devolve decision-making to the lowest level possible, and to simplify the processes so that decisions on any one topic can be made by involving no more than two levels.

The new Faculty structure, involving four Faculties and with greater devolution of powers to the Executive Deans, is now in place and the Faculty planning processes are under way and will inform the developing university strategic plan.

Finances

The university recognises that state funding is inadequate and continues the process of diversifying its revenues to ensure that it maximises income from non-state sources.

Quality Assurance

The university agrees with the advice of the review group that self-evaluation reports should be kept within a maximum length of 25-30 pages.

The university is aware of the issues surrounding the composition of the Peer Review Group panels and has already moved to a system which allows for more flexibility in their composition. DCU will continue to involve internal members, as it sees this as an integral part of the ongoing sensitisation of all areas within the university to quality issues and of the dissemination of quality information and higher standards throughout the university. We have been encouraging of the involvement of high-quality external reviewers who will be constructively critical of DCU's Schools and Units. This has become a regular feature of the review process; it has been found to be effective, is much appreciated by staff and is particularly fruitful in promoting quality improvement.

DCU's cycle of reviews will be one of 5 years.

There appears to be confusion about the actual timescale involved in a review process. For practical reasons, to ensure that it will be possible to obtain a commitment from very busy potential external reviewers, the invitation process has to be implemented very many months in advance of the review visit. The actual internal preparation process is much shorter, the self-assessment phase typically being completed within the September to December period prior to the visit.

Staff disappointment at the generally very modest additional resource allocations following the review process is understandable and is a consequence of the current very difficult budgetary situation. Review panels are aware of the financial constraints currently applying and, since their recommendations can only be implemented if budgets permit, they tend to be tempered in their recommendations. However there are significant generic shortfalls being identified and these will inevitably involve larger scale investment for the future.

The scale of the process involved in consideration of the outcomes and recommendations from the number of reviews each year is such that it imposes a significant burden on the Executive and Senior Management Groups and it is recognised that the responses have not always been sufficiently comprehensive. However the university has recently restructured its Quality Promotion Committee and it is now tasked with undertaking the necessary detailed scrutiny and regular analysis, allowing it to make recommendations which inform senior management's responses and subsequent actions in a way not previously possible.

The university agrees with the suggestion that succeeding review rounds should use the reports from the previous round as their starting point. It is intended that systems will be developed so that the Institutional Analysis Office will have all the necessary statistical data available in advance of its requirement by the School/Unit and that the role of School/Unit will be to concentrate on producing its own self-assessment report. This should contribute significantly to shortening the overall preparatory period. The peer review reports resulting from the review process will continue to go to the Dean, who discusses it with the Faculty Executive Board and integrates it into the Faculty plan for implementation.

Strategic Planning and Quality Review

The university is currently engaged in developing its next strategic plan and, as an input to this, is giving detailed consideration to the recommendations made by the EUA review group. The intention is to incorporate them into a focussed strategy implementation process to ensure proper alignment of university strategy with the EUA recommendations. The new plan will be different in structure and methodology from "Leading Change", but will flow naturally from it in terms of content. It will place a greater emphasis on identifying a small number of prioritised goals and deliverables and be subject to a strict implementation timetable.

The suggestion by the review group that, in addition to the normal School/Unit reviews, specific university-wide issues be identified for review is a good one and will be taken on board.

Issues relating to the continual improvement of the many quality assurance processes which are ongoing in the university but which currently fall outside the quality review process are being considered and will be incorporated into the implementation phase of the university's next strategic plan. The quality reviews also provide an ongoing source of information for developing the strategic plan, which in future is to be envisaged as a rolling process.

Recommendations

In terms of mission:

- Given DCU's recent rapid development and the growth in its range of activities, use the next strategic planning phase to develop an explicit mission statement, outlining succinctly what the university is trying to do;
DCU is in the process of developing an explicit mission statement, as part of the development of its new strategic plan, which will be finalised in 2005.

- As part of DCU's ongoing development and also in response to the changing nature and needs of Irish society, broaden the student profile further to include greater numbers of post-graduate, international, non-traditional and mature students;
DCU intends to continue the trend in recent years, adopted by many Schools following Quality Reviews, of developing more taught postgraduate programmes. DCU is also in the advanced stages of a redevelopment of its modular offerings, so as to make them more flexible and attractive not only to school leavers, but in particular to non-traditional and mature students

In terms of teaching and learning:

- Implement fully the ongoing modularisation of all study programmes at DCU;
The overwhelming majority of DCU Programmes have been fully modular since 1996. DCU is in the process of finalising a major redevelopment of its modular offerings
- Put in place a more reliable and vigorous student feedback system, so that the quality of all courses and modules is monitored and that this is used systematically to improve the quality of teaching and learning;
DCU intends to systematise the many forms of student feedback that are currently used
 - *Student Survey of Teaching*
 - *Student Experience Survey*
 - *Structured Discussions*
 - *Review of Individual Modules**so that all courses and modules are routinely and regularly monitored and formal feedback to students occurs. It is intended that this information will feed directly into the self-assessment report when a quality review of a School is undertaken*
- Re-examine the relationship between teaching and learning in DCU's programmes, so that this fits well with the desired learning outcomes of each programme;
The updated modular structure at DCU will require that each module be reassessed in terms of the fit of desired learning outcomes with teaching and learning
- Explore available options for implementing a robust system of performance appraisal, capable of assessing, rewarding and sanctioning staff teaching performance;
The rollout of the nationally-agreed Performance Management and Development System (PMDS) is proceeding throughout the university sector. This will provide opportunities for performance appraisal of staff teaching performance in a formative manner.

In terms of research:

- Build up more postgraduate research-based programmes, in line with DCU's own strategic priorities;

DCU is increasing its postgraduate research-based programmes, particularly in key strategic areas, through increasing success in winning external support funding.

- Examine possible strategies for developing more systematic research links with DCU's extensive network of industrial and other partners;
DCU researchers are developing deeper research links with key industrial partners through SFI funding programmes, IDA programmes, Enterprise Ireland Innovation partnerships and other support schemes.

In terms of quality assurance:

- Strengthen the explicit links between the various forms of quality assurance at DCU, as part of the university's ongoing development of a quality culture;
DCU, along with colleagues in the sector, intend to develop a template for a Quality Assurance Handbook, which will collate existing policies for QA in relation to teaching, research and administration into a single handbook. This will be made available as part of the information provided to reviewers engaged as members of Peer Review Groups for Quality Reviews
- Align the quality review process with the university's strategic processes;
The development of the current strategic plan has been informed by the outcomes of the quality review process. This input, over a five year period, permits analysis of the long-term impact of reviews that took place at the beginning of the review cycle in addition to the input of more recent reviews
- INVENT should systematically inform the quality review process of relevant Schools concerning research commercialization, IPR, and related matters;
DCU intends to use the information provided by INVENT in relation to commercialization and IPR for specific Schools as a systematic and direct input into the data appendix for the self-assessment report for a School undergoing a quality review
- Adopt a flexible approach when putting together peer review teams, in order to ensure that the collective expertise matches DCU's strategic needs
DCU intends to build on the lessons learned from the first round of quality reviews, in terms of the composition of Peer Review Groups
- Ensure that the length of time allocated to the self-assessment phase is kept as short as usefully possible. The same applies in preparing the official university response to the peer review group's report;
DCU will continue to emphasise to staff that, whereas, the unit is alerted to an upcoming quality review up to a year in advance of the site visit and that the peer review group is approached well in advance so as to ensure availability, it is expected that the self-assessment phase of a review is in the period September – December prior to the site visit
- Apply strict limits of 25-30 pages, excluding annexes, to the length of self-evaluation reports;

DCU has already adopted this approach in 2005 following the experience of the EUA institutional review. All self-assessment reports in the most recent round of reviews followed this recommendation

- Make more systematic and effective use of the university's database. This will also help reduce the length of time needed to compile reports;
Following the experience of the first round of reviews and with the preparation of data for the self-assessment report for the EUA review, DCU intends to use its institutional research capacity to provide much of the data required for the prescribed appendices in a self-assessment report.
- Reduce the overall length of the quality review cycle to match that of the strategic planning cycle. Six years is too long. Extra reviews can comfortably be fitted in each year to make this possible;
A cycle of 6 years was adopted for the first round of reviews with only one pilot Academic and Non-Academic School review in Year One. The next cycle will be on a five-year basis.
- Use relevant reports from the first round of quality review as good background documents for the second round, to ensure that this builds on the previous outcomes;
DCU intends to follow this good practice
- Identify university-wide issues for review which could contribute to the ongoing development of quality at DCU;
DCU intends to continue to monitor the recommendations contained within PRG reports and identify common themes that would best be covered by transversal thematic reviews.
- Put in place mechanisms to ensure undergraduate students are more aware of the quality assurance process and contribute to this;
As part of the commitment to systematising the student evaluation and feedback system, DCU intends to put such mechanisms in place

In terms of management and governance:

- Develop a more explicit link between the quality review outcomes and strategic management;
DCU will adapt its system of reviews analysis to ensure this outcome.
- Ensure staff expectations regarding the quality review process are more realistic and long-term;
DCU will continue to brief staff and peer review groups on the legislative basis of the quality review process and its requirement that the units must implement the recommendations of the PRG reports, so long as they are reasonable and practical and having regard to the resources available to the university.
- Clarify the respective roles of the executive Deans, the Heads of School and the Theme Leaders;

DCU will review these roles and clarify them

- Ensure that peer review group reports also go to the relevant Dean, who should then have the responsibility to oversee implementation;
As has been the practice to date, since the commencement of the Quality Review cycle, the Deans will continue to receive the Peer Review Group Reports and will continue to oversee the implementation of the recommendations that are within the scope of the School and Faculty.
- Linked to this, develop further mechanisms to ensure a more consistent follow-up to the quality improvement plans across the university;
DCU intends to use the expertise of the Quality Promotion Committee to conduct a more systematic follow-up of the recommendations of review reports. This sub-committee will update the university Executive on these matters and regular reports will also be given to the Governing Authority
- Identify possibilities to simplify decision-making processes, aiming for decisions on any one topic to be made at two levels only.
The progressive devolution of powers to Executive Faculties is intended to facilitate decisions being taken at the two levels of Faculty and University Management (through Executive)