

Quality Assurance / Quality Improvement
Programme for Academic Units
2002-2003



School Quality Improvement Plan

School of Communications

27 August 2003

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1. INTRODUCTION

This plan represents the third major outcome of the quality improvement review that the School of Communications has undertaken over the past 18 months. It follows the School's Self-Assessment Report (February 2003) and the report of the Peer Review Group (June 2003).

In undertaking this review, the School of Communications has followed the procedure adopted by Dublin City University in meeting its obligations under the Universities Act. The School has benefited from the opportunity afforded by this review to examine its performance closely; the benefits have been felt in improvements made even during the course of the review.

The School wishes to acknowledge the valuable contributions to this process of DCU's Quality Improvement Office, academic, administrative and technical staff of the School, students and graduates of the School, and administrative staff of the Faculty of Humanities and of the Registry.

In particular, the School wishes to thank the Peer Review Group of Dr Mary Corcoran (NUI-Maynooth), Kevin Griffin (DCU Faculty of Science and Health), Professor Denis McQuail (University of Amsterdam), Adrian Moynes (RTÉ) and Dr Anne Sinnott (DCU Business School) for the insights and wisdom they brought to their task.

The School of Communications was one of the original elements of the National Institute of Higher Education (later Dublin City University), at its foundation in 1981. The School delivers three undergraduate and six postgraduate taught programmes, with a total of 660 students registered on these programmes. The School has a further 30 postgraduate research students.

The School's Quality Committee was formed during Spring 2002 but its work was interrupted by a major review of the School's undergraduate programmes. The Quality Committee was reconstituted in December 2002 and quickly set about the work required to prepare for the Quality Review.

The School adopted an approach to the process that gave preference to qualitative, rather than quantitative, methods of research. This approach was intended to avoid overloading of the Self-Assessment Report with merely descriptive data.

As well as collecting data from various University offices, the School conducted surveys and focus group meetings with students, a focus group meeting with graduates, and surveys and interviews with School staff.

A high response rate was achieved on all aspects of the process that affected staff; over two-thirds of the staff took up the offer of a direct interview with a researcher to expand on views recorded in the survey. There was a 95%-plus response rate from academic staff to the request for activity reports covering research, professional and public service activities. A successful staff away day was held in January 2003 to allow discussion of the options and issues facing the School. Group discussions with current and past students drew relatively small numbers of participants but produced many, and diverse insights.

Through the combination of methods outlined the School obtained a much more detailed view of itself, from several perspectives, than was previously available, much less written down. The School was able to develop a comprehensive picture of its strengths and weaknesses that will inform discussion and strategic planning well beyond the present quality process.

The Peer Review Group described the Self-Assessment Report as "well crafted", "self-critical" and "analytical". The PRG wrote that "the School has much to congratulate itself on, not least its high standing in its academic area, but the School avoids – perhaps overly so – any kind of self-congratulatory stance". The PRG "highly commends" the Self-Assessment Report.

The members of the School's Quality Committee, through the period of self-assessment and currently: Brian Trench, committee chair and Head of School; Prof John Horgan; Prof Paschal Preston; Dr Roddy Flynn; Patrick Kinsella; Dr Pat Brereton; Dr Miriam Judge; Pauline Mooney (Senior Faculty Administrator, Faculty of Humanities).

2. MAIN FINDINGS IN SELF-ASSESSMENT AND PEER REVIEW PROCESSES

In its Self-Assessment Report the School summarised its strengths as lying in the breadth and diversity of disciplines and experiences it offers; the commitment and the qualifications of its staff; the quality of its students, both at entry and at graduation; the School's credibility and visibility in the University, the educational sector and in the wider public arena; its flexibility and capacity for innovation in development of programmes and modules; the good social environment it creates for staff and students; the standard of its taught programmes and of the overall student experience in School; and the successful encouragement of high standards in creative and critical work by students.

At the same time, the School identified the following as areas for improvement: collegiate decision-making; rewards to staff and balancing of demands on their time; the consistency of research achievement and of intellectual exchange among staff; the promotion of the School within and beyond the University and the School's involvement with the wider structures of the University; the support from the environment within University; and the adequacy of physical facilities at the disposal of the School.

The Peer Review Group (PRG), in its report, echoed many of these points in summarizing the School's strengths and weakness in organisation and management, in teaching, research and resources.

On organisation and management, the group noted that the School has a collegial management style where staff generally feel valued, and that the School staff exhibit a committed professionalism, with many staff enjoying a national profile. The group underlined the high calibre of the students and the high standing of the School's programmes in the wider industry context.

The PRG also noted the absence of a School strategic plan and the potential for the School to capitalize further on its position as a flagship department within the University. It noted that the impact of several changes of Head of School and the absence of transparent information on the allocation of workloads to School staff. Both of these later issues have been addressed in the past year.

Reporting on teaching, the PRG considered the School's programmes to be well-designed, intellectually demanding and relevant, and taught by a highly motivated staff willing to embrace new teaching methodologies. The students were assessed as high-calibre, articulate and committed, and benefiting from the School's student-centred approach.

The review group observed a residual problem of disaffection among some students concerning the changes in the undergraduate curriculum introduced in 2003. It reported a perception among some staff that workloads across the school may be inequitable, and it noted that the School may be over-committed to varied courses, with resulting strain and possibly some duplication of effort.

On research, the PRG noted the commitment of staff to scholarship and research across a broad range of subject areas and types of research, and the importance the School attaches to creative production and to participation in public life. It commended the number and size of research grants attracted by School members.

The group reported the perception that peers in other disciplines do not regard the School as academic and the feeling among staff that its skills are utilised but not valued in the overall University context. The PRG observed a lack of clarity about the status of activities that do not fit the traditional profile of academic publications/research, and the lack of internal communication mechanisms for disseminating information about staff research work and interests.

On staff and resources, the review group noted the very good match between staff expertise and the academic programmes offered by the School. It commended the ethos of a small-class teaching structure, and the quality of library facilities and audio facilities.

The report also noted the absence of clear staff:student ratios for the School. It described the School's television facilities as 'basic' and considered student access to technical resources to be inadequate. Breakdowns in equipment caused disruptions to the teaching programme, the PRG said.

The review group considered the building housing the School to be in generally poor condition and to make for cramped conditions.

Comparing these two sets of findings, the School observes a high level of agreement between its own self-assessment and the view taken by the review group. The School could not identify a significant point in the Peer Review Group's report with which it could not agree. In many of the identified areas for improvement changes are under way; for example, collegiate decision-making is being enhanced continuously through the increased use of staff committees in the School's organisational structures.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENTS

The Peer Review Group made the following specific recommendations in the final sections of its report. They are here presented, and commented on, in the sequence in which they occur in the PRG report.

1. The PRG recommends the development of a School strategic plan, which should include the prioritisation of teaching and research and articulate the Mission of the School. The PRG also recommends that documented processes for strategic planning and operational administration are maintained. This will help to ensure that clear and published procedures are adopted and followed in planning the future of the School and in managing its daily business. To assist in the development of this plan and in further strategic initiatives, the School will appoint a professional advisory group, to include high-achieving graduates of the School.

School response: The School considers the work undertaken for the self-assessment report and in the continuing quality improvement process as first steps towards the development of a strategic plan. The preparation of such a plan will be a priority for the School in 2003-2004. The School is seeking financial support to allow visits to and from the School, in exchange with comparable departments elsewhere, to learn from others' experiences of strategic planning. Target date for completion: February 2004

2. The PRG recommends a period of consolidation in terms of programme development. Any expansion of programmes, particularly at postgraduate level, should be considered very carefully and in the light of the level of resources available.

School response: The School has committed itself to support the development of a new cross-faculty BA programme for possible implementation from 2004. Any additions to postgraduate offerings, in the

short term, are likely to take the form of new pathways through existing programmes, with minimal additional elements. A strategy for programme development and/or expansion will be spelt out in the School strategic plan.
Target date for completion: June 2004

3. The PRG recommends that the School retains a small-class teaching structure, which has clear benefits in terms of the quality of teaching that can be provided to students.

School response: The School acknowledges relatively small class sizes as an advantage over other humanities and social sciences departments. It notes that trends in resource allocation have already made it increasingly difficult to adhere to this principle. The School will need to be flexible in interpreting this recommendation, more particularly as the recent introduction of larger class-groups at years 1 and 2 has brought some benefits as well as disadvantages. Target date for completion: Under way

4. The PRG recommends that the School continues to embrace new teaching and learning methods.

School response: The School is committed to continuing reflexivity and innovation in teaching and learning methods. It will expand the role of its Teaching and Learning Committee in fostering creative thinking on pedagogy and it will draw on the experience and insights of staff members who have secured fellowships to allow development of new methods and aids to teaching and learning. In the very short term, the School is seeking financial support to help develop resources for, and competence, in, web-based teaching and learning. Target date for completion: Under way

5. The PRG recommends that the School continues to work closely with library staff to deliver a high quality service to students. To this end, the PRG recommends that the subject [Humanities] librarian actively contribute to the planned Writing and Research module in year one, which the PRG would endorse.

School response: The School is aware of the Library's wish to be more actively involved in teaching and learning, and will ensure, during 2003-2004 that such contributions have been incorporated into suitable modules. Target date for completion: October 2003

6. The PRG recommends the continued monitoring of the staff-student ratio in the School of Communications and comparative schools in the University.

School response: The School notes that the PRG refers, in the main text of its report, to the absence of information about staff:student ratios. In fact, the Self-Assessment Report (pp 52-53) provided information on the School's staff and student numbers as compared with another school in DCU, and with four schools of communications/ media in Ireland and Britain. The internal DCU comparison shows the effect on the School of Communications of the differential allocation of financial resources by a mechanism which, in the School's view, requires revision. The external comparisons show the School of Communications as having the second highest student:staff ratio of the 5 sampled departments. The School will expand and update these and other relevant comparisons. Target date for completion: March 2004

7. The PRG recommends that the School develops a personnel development model to ensure that the current good match between expertise and programmes is maintained, so that future demands and developments in the School can be met.

School response: The School interprets this recommendation as relating to "the very good match between staff specialisms and expertise on the one

hand, and the academic programmes offered by the School on the other” (PRG Report). There are, in the School’s view, significant staffing needs in areas of specialism that are under-resourced, e.g. science communication and multimedia production. Proposals have been made, and will continue to be made, to senior management to address these deficiencies. Target date for completion: Under way

8. The PRG recommends an ongoing audit of technical facilities in order to prioritise the upgrading of facilities.

School response: The School reviews its technical facilities continuously through its Technology Committee. In line with the PRG’s observations elsewhere in its report, the School is giving priority to the upgrading of its television facilities and is seeking financial support to achieve this. The School anticipates a need for significant upgrades of computer equipment from 2004, and will seek, with support from the University management, to identify funding sources for those upgrades. An audit of facilities will plot these needs forward over five years. Target date for completion: January 2004

9. The PRG recommends the immediate appointment of dedicated technical support person on-site to service, maintain and trouble-shoot the technical equipment.

School response: The School interprets this recommendation as relating to the audio-visual services and computer-based services, e.g. software applications for image- audio-, video- and publication-editing, that are specific to the School. It intends to press the case with senior management of the University for the creation of a vacancy matching this description. It notes that the level of on-site technical and demonstration staff reported by comparable departments in four other higher education institutions was higher in all cases except one. The School is satisfied that the expansion of its technicians’ roles as demonstrators has brought benefits to the students and staff; this development could continue with the recommended appointment. Target date for completion: December 2003

10. The PRG also supports the School’s case for an additional member of staff for the loans facility.

School response: The School notes the critical comments in the main body of the report about the loans service of the School’s technical department. The School has sought to improve the service while at the same time having the technical department provide more support to teaching, as mentioned above. The existence within the School of a community employment scheme, funded by the state training agency FÁS, has made this possible. With the ending in summer 2003 of this community employment scheme, it becomes even more urgent that the position be recognised and be filled on a permanent basis. A formal proposal to this effect was made in January 2003, April 2003 and August 2003. The School will continue to press the case. Target date for completion: September 2003

11. The PRG recommends clarification at the earliest opportunity on the future of the building that houses the School. The physical environment does not compare well with other Schools on campus and is in need, at the very least, of total refurbishment.

School response: The School is joining with other elements of the Faculty of Humanities in pressing, in the first instance, for a clear statement of the options for refurbishing, rebuilding or replacing the Henry Grattan Building. The School will also press for a Faculty view to be determined and put

forward forcibly to senior management of the university. Target date for completion: October 2003

12. The PRG recommends that the Head of School and Vice President for Research work together to develop a strategy for validating the productive work of staff, such that a validation system can be put in place for those whose work does not fit easily into institutional categorisations of research.

School response: Through its annual Activity Reports, and its workload allocation scheme (see item 21 below), the School has instituted its own procedures for validating a broad range of intellectual and expressive work as legitimate and significant contributions to the School, University and wider community. The School will, as recommended, seek to have such validation inscribed into the university's own systems, e.g. for research support, for recording of expertise, and for promotion. Target date for completion: December 2003

13. The PRG recommends that the profiling of the School in terms of its major research interests should be a major determining factor in the selection of PhD students.

School response: The School has already moved in this direction by establishing, through 2002-2003, new procedures and policies for recruitment of postgraduate research students and for processing of scholarship applications from such students. These procedures are intended to move the School from a laissez-faire approach, based on the availability and interests of individual supervisors, to a more structured approach, based on collectively agreed research priorities. With the establishment of a second research centre (see below), the focusing of this recruitment on selected areas of interest will sharpen further. Target date for completion: September 2003

14. The PRG recommends that the School build on the strengths of the postgraduate 'school' and seek to give it more identity.

School response: The School has progressively strengthened the profile of its research students in recent years through expansion of numbers, through more frequent research seminars (at which research students are frequently presenters), through the increased use of research students as tutors and teaching assistants, through encouragement of research students' participation in research conferences, and through support for students' applications for Government of Ireland scholarships. However, in order to maintain a reasonable number and level of research student scholarships, and thereby a continuing throughput of research students, the School has had to take from its non-pay budget. This budget is now under increased pressure and the scope to allocate scholarships from it is greatly reduced. With the effective cancellation this year of the Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences project funding and a reduced number of PhD scholarships, the external funding environment has also deteriorated. Target date for completion: Under way

15. The PRG recommends that there should be more structured provision at the start of the PhD process on matters of methodology and work practices especially in the light of the diversity of academic backgrounds.

School response: The School plans to introduce from autumn 2003 a series of workshops and seminars on "methodology and work practices" targeted at first-year and second-year research students. The School is also opening discussions with other elements of the Faculty of Humanities on a possible

inter-school part-taught doctoral programme. Target date for completion: Under way

16. The PRG recommends that in planning for a Centre for media policy and professional practice the School should take into account Faculty restructuring and the institutional commitment toward developing more integrated relationships across Schools and Faculties.

School response: The School is seeking financial support to allow more focused attention be given to developing a programme for the centre, and to identifying prospective funding sources. The programme for the centre will define the relationships between that centre and the already established Centre for Society Technology and Media (STeM). The School is actively promoting cross-Faculty research initiatives that link existing and prospective centres based in the schools within the faculty. The School intends that the plan for the new centre should take full account of the need to develop such relationships further. Target date for completion: December 2003

17. The PRG recommends that the School takes a more proactive stance in advertising its research strengths, activities and performance within the University.

School response: The School has become more visible in the wider research community of the University through its active participation in the Research Advisory Panel. It aims to strengthen its profile further through in-house publications, the School's re-developed website, and through encouragement to School staff to take up internal and external fellowship and project funding opportunities. Target date for completion: Under way

18. The PRG recommends that the School actively seeks to further develop synergetic relationships with cognate Departments within and outside the University.

School response: The School acknowledges the benefits of the increasingly close ties between the Schools within the Faculty of Humanities, and will continue to play its part in further developing those relationships. The School has, through its teaching and research in science communication, built relationships with Schools in the Faculty of Science and Health. The School aims to develop co-operation with departments in other third level institutions, especially in the Dublin area, on topics of mutual interest. Other such relationships are being forged continuously through international exchanges. The School has adopted a strategic approach to international exchanges that aims to privilege those departments and universities with which a multi-layered relationship, encompassing student exchange, staff exchange and research collaboration, can be built. Target date for completion: Under way

In the main body of its report, the Peer Review Group made the following further recommendations which were not reiterated in the final section of its report:

19. The PRG recommends that the School engages as fully as possible with the development of the new organisational structures that are emerging, and in particular the move to a devolved Faculty model, with an Executive Dean.

School response: The School acknowledges that it may not always have been as actively engaged with the wider structures of the University as it might have been. Through the Head of School, in his membership of the newly constituted Faculty Board, and through the contributions of School members to discussions of proposed new Faculty-wide initiatives, the School has participated fully in the emerging new structures. The School also notes the further recommendation of the PRG that the senior management of the University spell out to the School the impact of the new structures, "including

the role of the Head of School in the new arrangements". The School shares the implicit concern of the PRG that the respective roles of Executive Dean and Head of School have not been adequately defined, and will press for a clear statement on these relationships following the appointment of the Executive Dean. Target date for completion: Under way

20. The PRG recommends that the University support and facilitate the School in implementing a marketing strategy.

School response: The School is re-developing its website as an important marketing platform, and is planning a number of annual events to showcase production and research work in the School. For these and other marketing purposes, the School will assign a member of academic staff the responsibility of Promotions and Admissions Officer and will seek the support of the Communications and Marketing Office in organising particular events and initiatives. Target date for completion: November 2003

21. The PRG states that there are acknowledged difficulties in the area of workload allocation across the staff in the School, which will need to be addressed by the provision of transparent workload allocation information.

School response: The Head of School proposed in June 2003 a scheme to allocate points for a range of staff duties and activities. This was modified in the light of submissions from individual staff members and discussions in a working group. It was partially implemented in the allocation of workloads for 2003-2004, and it was agreed that it should be reviewed in the early part of 2004 with the intention of implementing it fully from spring/summer 2004. Target date for completion: March 2004

22. The PRG notes the need to review the rationale for a four-year undergraduate programme in Journalism, now that students were no longer availing of the language option.

School response: The School, through the relevant programme board, has had intensive discussion on changing the BA in Journalism to a three-year programme. A decision in principle to make that change has been made, but discussion continues on the manner of implementing that change and on its implications for the BSc in Multimedia (also currently four years). The senior management of the University has, meanwhile, initiated discussion on the 'Bologna model', which also has a bearing on this matter. Target date for completion: December 2003

The School, in its Self-Assessment Report, presented 51 specific action items for implementation and 11 items for further discussion. Most of these concerned relatively fine detail of its operations. Many of these have already been implemented, or are in the course of implementation. However, others remain to be implemented, and some of these are amalgamated below to represent the kind of broader points contained in the PRG's recommendations. The School chooses to highlight that it has committed itself to the following and that all of these commitments should be measured against specific achievement with the next 12 months:

- A. To develop further team-teaching on individual modules, tutoring by research students, and mentoring of less experienced staff by those with more experience
The School's Teaching and Learning Committee will prepare recommendations for adoption by March 2004
- B. To introduce annual reporting of teaching activities to ensure more effective co-ordination

- The School's Teaching and Learning Committee will prepare proposals for implementation in April 2004
- C. To explore further the need for, and practical implementation of, a common first-year module in research and writing skills
The School's Teaching and Learning Committee will bring forward proposals by December 2003
- D. To redefine the status of undergraduate study abroad and, with that, the School's relations with selected international partners
The School's International Officer and affected programme boards will bring forward proposals for adoption by December 2003
- E. To support research publication by staff members through in-house working papers, external collaboration on a journal, and development of a proposal for a 'media reader'
The School's Research Committee will bring forward proposals for adoption by December 2003
- F. To develop a promotions programme and, within that, to introduce one or more annual public events that will showcase teaching and research achievements
The School's Executive Committee will bring forward proposals for adoption by December 2003
- G. To develop a programme of short courses and of other initiatives that will generate revenue for the School
The School's Executive Committee will bring forward proposals for adoption by December 2003
- H. To clarify and, if necessary, redefine the respective responsibilities of School, Faculty and Registry in specific areas of academic administration
The School's Executive Committee will bring forward proposals by December 2003 for discussion by the Faculty Board

4. PRIORITISED RESOURCE REQUIREMENTS

Recommendations to be implemented within one year

Recommendation 1 Appointment of technical support person

Estimated cost: €40,000 per annum

Recommendation 2 Appointment of additional member of staff for the loans facility

Estimated cost: €25,000 per annum

Recommendations to be implemented within five years

Recommendation 1 Upgrade of television facilities

Estimated cost: €100,000

Recommendation 2 Refurbishment, extension or replacement of Henry Grattan Building

Estimated cost: €5-€15 million

5. SUMMARY OF ONE-YEAR PLAN

Over the 12 months from submission of this Quality Improvement Plan, the School aims to attain the following targets:

- Completion of five-year strategic plan

- Accreditation of cross-Faculty BA programme
- Formal decision, following consultation and market research, on duration of undergraduate programmes
- Proposals from Teaching and Learning Committee on promoting innovation, including expansion of team-teaching
- Confirmation and full implementation of workload allocation scheme

- Report from Technology Committee on upgrade of television facilities and on medium-term needs for computer equipment
- Appointment of additional technician to technical department
- Appointment of clerical staff to loans facility of technical department
- Detailed proposal from School (and Faculty) on upgrade or replacement of current classroom, laboratory and office accommodation

- Agreed University statement on validation of wider range of research and research-based activities, including supervision of dissertations on taught programmes
- Confirmation of School policy on targeted recruitment of research students
- Formal establishment of second research centre, with development programme including detailed definition of relations with existing centres and proposed Faculty Institute

- Co-operation programmes with selected departments of other higher education institutions
- Update and revamp of School website and detailed proposals on public promotion of the School

6. SUMMARY OF FIVE-YEAR PLAN

The School's Strategic Plan to be prepared and produced over the academic year, 2003-2004, will present a statement on the School's principal objectives and set out targets for the School's growth over the period, 2004-2009.

The Plan will (re)define the School's role within the University, the wider higher education sector and Irish society as the premier national centre of teaching and research in mass communication and media, and position the School as a leading player in international networks.

The targets contained in the plan will concern issues such as:

- Numbers and categories of students, academic staff and full-time researchers
- Addition, amalgamation or restructuring of taught undergraduate and postgraduate programmes
- Upgrade or replacement of technical facilities to support teaching and learning
- Upgrade or replacement of School classroom, laboratory and office accommodation
- Recruitment and support of postgraduate research students
- Development of research centres, programmes and projects
- Development of strategic relationships with other schools in DCU, and with departments and centres in other universities
- Contribution of the School to the life of the university and of the wider society