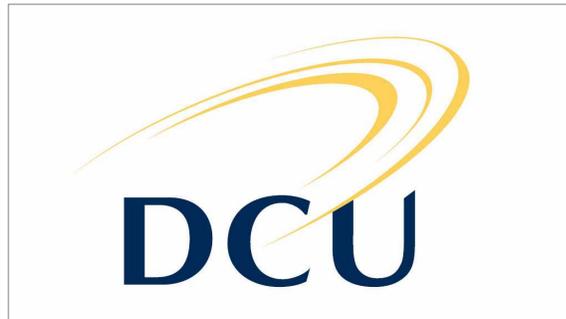


## Quality Assurance/Quality Improvement Programme



### Peer Review Group Report for Oscail

| Panel Members                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Dr. Conor Galvin (Chairperson)</b> School of Education, University College Dublin<br/><b>Mr. Gerry Walsh</b>, Managing Director, Iridium Ventures Ltd<br/><b>Mr. Piet Henderikx</b>, Secretary-General, European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU)<br/><b>Prof. Barry McMullin</b>, Electronic Engineering, Dublin City University<br/><b>Dr. Caroline McMullan (Rapporteur)</b>, Business School, Dublin City University</p> |

Date: March 2012

## Introduction

This Quality review has been conducted in accordance with a framework model developed and agreed through the Irish Universities Association Quality Committee and complies with the provisions of Section 35 of the Universities Act (1997). The model consists of a number of basic steps.

1. An internal team in the School/Faculty/Office/Centre being reviewed completes a detailed self-assessment report (SAR). It should be noted that this document is confidential to the School/Faculty/Office/Centre as well as the Review Panel and senior officers of the University.
2. This report is sent to a team of peer assessors, the Peer Review Group (PRG) – composed of members from outside DCU and from other areas of DCU – who then visit DCU and conduct discussions with a range of relevant staff, students and other stakeholders.
3. The PRG then writes its own report. The School/Faculty/Office/Centre is given the chance to correct possible factual errors before the Peer Group Report (PGR) is finalised.
4. The School/Faculty/Office/Centre produces a draft Quality Improvement Plan (QuIP) in response to the various issues and findings of the SAR and PGR Reports.
5. The PGR and the draft QuIP are considered by the Quality Promotion Committee.
6. The draft QuIP is discussed in a meeting between the School/Faculty/Office/Centre, members of the Peer Group, the Director of Quality Promotion and members of Senior Management. The University's responses are written into the QuIP, and the result is the finalised QuIP.
7. A summary of the PRG Report, the QuIP including the University's response is sent to the Governing Authority of the University, who will approve publication in a manner that they see fit.

This document is the report referred to in Step 3 above.

# Peer Review Group Report

## 1. Introduction and Overview

### Location

Oscail was established in 1982 as the National Distance Education Centre (NDEC) within Dublin City University (DCU). Oscail is located at the heart of the campus in the Bea Orpen Building. Oscail staff have offices on the ground, first and third floors of this four storey building. Rooms for meetings and teaching are booked through the central room booking system.

### Staff

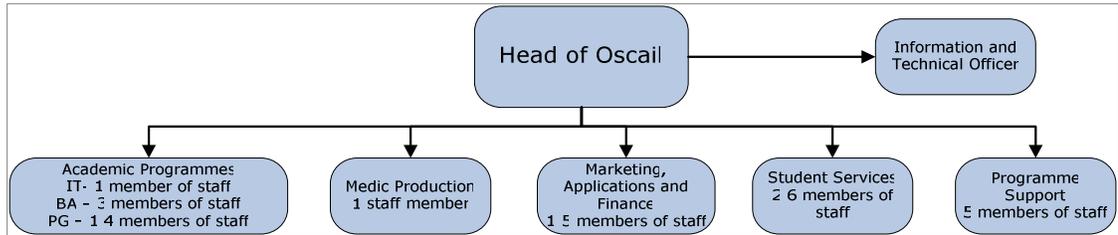
Oscail employs a total of 18.5 full-time staff. It also has a network of writers, tutors assignment monitors etc. drawn from DCU, other Colleges and Universities in Ireland and relevant/specialist organisations. Details of the staff employed by Oscail, along with the current and proposed organisation charts, are provided below.

| <b>Academic (Programme) Staff</b>        |                            | <b>Staff 2012</b>   |
|------------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|
|                                          | Senior lecturer            | 0                   |
|                                          | Lecturer (above bar)       | 3                   |
|                                          | Lecturer (below bar)       | 4                   |
| <b>Administrative (Operations) Staff</b> | <b>Permanent</b>           |                     |
|                                          | Grade 5.1                  | 1                   |
|                                          | Grade 4                    | 3                   |
|                                          | Grade 3                    | 3                   |
|                                          | Grade 2                    | 4.5 <sup>1</sup>    |
|                                          | <b>Temporary full-time</b> | 0                   |
|                                          | <b>Temporary part-time</b> | 0                   |
| <b>Technical support staff</b>           | <b>Permanent</b>           | 0                   |
|                                          | <b>Temporary full-time</b> | 0                   |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                             |                            | <b>18.5 [ FTE ]</b> |

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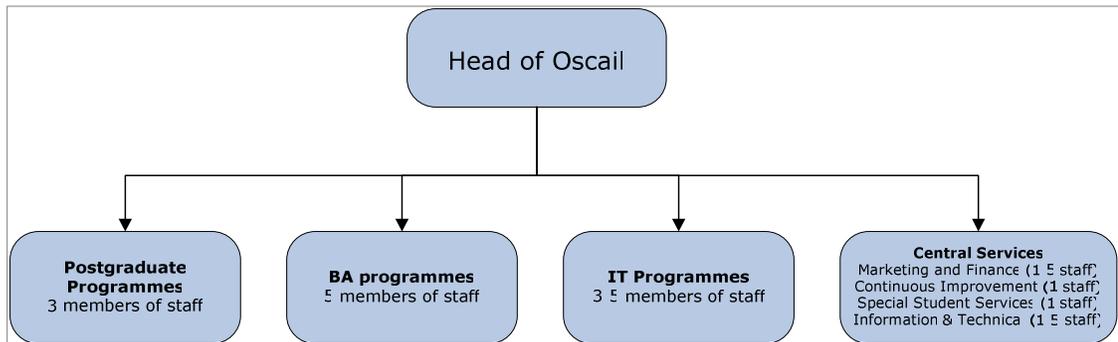
<sup>1</sup> One currently on maternity leave

## Current organisational structure of Oscail.



Oscail's current organisation structure (see above) has been redesigned in line with recommendations made by a process engineer's resource management report. See below for new structure which will go live on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2012 – immediately following the review visit.

## Proposed Oscail Organisational Structure



## Product / Processes

Oscail developed its first undergraduate programme (a BSc in Information Technology) in 1986; a BA in Humanities programme (accredited by six Irish universities) followed in 1993 and a BNS (Bachelor of Nursing Studies) in 1997 in cooperation with An Bord Altranais (the Irish Nursing Board). In 1990, in cooperation with the Irish Institute of Chartered Accountants, Oscail developed its first postgraduate programme, an MSc in Management and Applications of IT in Accounting. An MSc in Management of Operations followed in 1997 and an MSc in Internet Systems in 2001.

In the late 1990s the nature of distance education began to change radically. In essence, distance education started to move online. Oscail initiated a process to move its postgraduate programmes towards substantially online delivery and later its undergraduate programmes. During the period of the change to online delivery, Oscail has continued to produce self-instructional module texts for all its

programmes which remain the module content resources<sup>2</sup>. In terms of delivery, module texts are made available online to all students and hard copies are posted to undergraduate students. In addition, face-to-face tutorials continue to be offered to students on the undergraduate programmes at a number of study centres around Ireland but principally in DCU. There was some indication that take up of these tutorials was not high – this claim has not been validated by the PRG. On-line and forum based support is currently supplanting face-to-face contact at graduate programme level. Oscail seems aware of both the affordances and challenges of this.

## 2. The Self-Assessment Process

### The Co-ordinating Committee

| Oscail staff member | Role in Oscail                                              | Contribution                                                                                      |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Dr Anne Morrissey   | Programme Chair – Postgraduate programmes.                  | Chair of the Review Committee<br>Sections 1.4, 1.5<br>Section 2<br>Section 4.1                    |
| Mr Seamus Fox       | Head of Oscail                                              | Sections 1.1, 1.2, 1.3<br>Section 3.1<br>Section 4.2<br>Liaison with Process Engineer             |
| Dr James Brunton    | Programme Chair – Humanities Programmes                     | Programmes and Instruction Section 3.2<br>Student Questionnaire<br>Tutor Evaluation Questionnaire |
| Mr Eamon Costello   | Programme Chair – IT programmes                             | Scholarship and Research Section 3.3<br>Graduate Evaluation Questionnaire                         |
| Ms Maree Ralph      | Student Services Manager                                    | Community Relations<br>Section 3.4                                                                |
| Ms Michelle Brennan | Programme Support Manager                                   | Statistics, student numbers, no. graduations<br>Section 1.1, 1.2, 3.2                             |
| Mr Paul Moore       | Information and Technology Administration                   | Information Technology<br>Statistics<br>Report editing and layout                                 |
| Ms Elaine Walsh     | e-Learning Support Specialist<br>BA Programme Academic Team | Assistance to Head of School in writing Sections 1 and 3.1                                        |

<sup>2</sup> Oscail is currently researching the transformation of its module texts into online interactive e-documents with hotlinks to articles, videos, self-tests, etc. Such e-texts should be accessible via e-readers, ipads, smartphones, etc. It is envisaged that this transformation will take place over the next two to three years. It is also highly likely that significant changes will continue to be a feature of Oscail's working environment and, for this reason, consideration has recently been given to ensuring that Oscail has the organisational capacity to encompass significant on-going change.

### **Methodology adopted during process**

Preparation for the Quality Review began approximately one year before the PRG visit, when Dr Anne Morrissey was appointed Chair of the coordinating committee. In preparation for the review, in addition to the usual student surveys, Oscail has undertaken a tutor survey, and employed a process engineer to examine systems of work. The output from staff meetings, student evaluations, tutor evaluations and the findings of the previous Quality Review formed the basis of the Self Assessment Report (SAR).

### **3. The Peer Review Group Process**

#### **The Review Group**

The review group comprised:

Dr. Conor Galvin (Chairperson) School of Education, University College Dublin

Mr. Gerry Walsh, Managing Director, Iridium Ventures Ltd

Mr. Piet Henderikx, Secretary-General, European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU)

Prof. Barry McMullin, Electronic Engineering, Dublin City University

Dr. Caroline McMullan (Rapporteur), Business School, Dublin City University

#### **Site Visit Programme**

| <b>28<sup>th</sup> March<br/>2012<br/>TIME</b> | <b>ACTIVITY</b>                                                                                                                                                                            | <b>ATTENDEES</b>                                                                             | <b>VENUE</b>          |
|------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 2.00-3.00pm                                    | First meeting of members of the Peer Review Group.<br>Briefing by Director of Quality Promotion.                                                                                           | PRG members<br>Dr. Sarah Ingle                                                               | A204                  |
| 3.00-4.00<br>pm<br>(3.40pm<br>coffee break)    | Meeting of members of Peer Review Group to:<br>1. Select Chair of PRG<br>2. Confirm suitability of review visit timetable<br>3. Agree work schedule and assign tasks for the review visit. | PRG members                                                                                  | A204                  |
| 4.00-5.30<br>pm                                | Consideration of Self Assessment Report with members of Oscail's Quality Review Committee.                                                                                                 | Oscail's Quality Review Committee.<br>(10 minute presentation at beginning by Mr Seamus Fox) | A204                  |
| 7.00pm                                         | Private working dinner for PRG members.                                                                                                                                                    | Peer Review Group meet in the Fahrenheit Restaurant                                          | Clontarf Castle Hotel |
| <b>29<sup>th</sup> March<br/>2012<br/>TIME</b> | <b>ACTIVITY</b>                                                                                                                                                                            | <b>ATTENDEES</b>                                                                             | <b>VENUE</b>          |
| 8.45 -9.00am                                   | PRG meets privately to prepare for morning meetings.                                                                                                                                       | PRG                                                                                          | DG11                  |
| 9.00 -<br>9.40am                               | PRG meets with Head of Oscail                                                                                                                                                              | Mr Seamus Fox                                                                                | DG11                  |
| 9.45 -                                         | PRG meets with staff working on Postgraduate                                                                                                                                               | Dr Anne Morrissey (Chair of PG programmes)                                                   | DG11                  |

|                 |                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                    |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 10.25am         | Programmes                                                                                                | Ms Lorraine Delaney<br>Ms Aisling Deignan<br>Mr Colum Foley (Tutor)<br>Mr Michael Doherty (Writer)                                                                                            |                                    |
| 10.30-11.00am   | Break                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                               | DG11                               |
| 11.00-11.35am   | PRG meets with staff working on BA Programmes                                                             | Dr James Brunton (Chair of Humanities programmes)<br>Ms Noeleen O'Keeffe<br>Ms Fiona Benson<br>Ms Elaine Walsh<br>Ms Shirley O'Brien<br>Dr Anne Markey & Dr Leeanne Lane (Tutors and Writers) | DG11                               |
| 11.35am-12.15pm | PRG meets with staff working on BSc Programmes                                                            | Mr Eamon Costello (Chair of the BSc programmes)<br>Mr Paul Moore<br>Ms Una Ryan<br>Ms Melanie Lonergan<br>Mr Alan Mullally                                                                    | DG11                               |
| 12.20-12.55pm   | PRG meets with Central Services                                                                           | Mr Seamus Fox<br>Ms Michelle Smyth<br>Ms Amanda Bermingham<br>Ms Maree Ralph<br>Ms Michelle Brennan<br>Mr Paul Moore<br>Ms Susan Coghlan                                                      | DG11                               |
| 1.00-1.45pm     | PRG - Brief discussion with Head of Oscail if required                                                    | PRG                                                                                                                                                                                           | DG11                               |
| 1.45-2.40pm     | PRG visit to core facilities of Area                                                                      | Dr Anne Morrissey, Chair, Quality Review Committee                                                                                                                                            | DG11                               |
| 2.45-3.25pm     | PRG meets representative groupings of undergraduate and post-graduate students                            | Mr Dara Cummins (IT);<br>Mr Seamus Power, Mr John O'Sullivan and Ms Carmel Somers (BA)<br>Mr Enda Martin, Mr Alan Mangan and Mr Claudio Libanori (PG)                                         | DG11                               |
| 3.30-3.55pm     | PRG meets with Oscail recent Alumni                                                                       | Mr John Byrne & Mr Rory Fitzpatrick (MOPs)<br>Mr Larry Baxter (MSIS)<br>Dr Henry Bacik & Mr Liam Meany (IT)<br>Ms Danielle Montgomery & Ms Rosita Owens (BA)                                  | DG11                               |
| 4.00-4.15pm     | Break                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                               | DG11                               |
| 4.15-4.30pm     | PRG meets with Professor Richard O'Kennedy, ex-Vice President for Learning Innovation                     | Professor Richard O'Kennedy                                                                                                                                                                   | DG11                               |
| 4.30-5.00pm     | Open invitation for any student, or staff member of Oscail to meet with PRG                               |                                                                                                                                                                                               | DG11                               |
| 5.00-5.15pm     | PRG meets with Mr Joe Maxwell, Human Resources, DCU                                                       | Mr Joe Maxwell (Human Resources)                                                                                                                                                              | DG11                               |
| 5.15-5.30pm     | PRG meets to review and finalise tasks for final day.                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                               | DG11                               |
| 7.00pm          | Dinner for members of PRG, staff of Quality Promotion Office and Oscail quality review committee members. | PRG members, Dr. Sarah Ingle, Ms. Fiona Dwyer, Members of Oscail Quality Review Committee.                                                                                                    | Tower Suite, Clontarf Castle Hotel |

| <b>30<sup>th</sup> March 2012 TIME</b> | <b>ACTIVITY</b>                                                                    | <b>ATTENDEES</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <b>VENUE</b> |
|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| 8.45 -9.00am                           | PRG meets privately to prepare for morning meetings.                               | PRG                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | DG11         |
| 9.00-9.55am                            | PRG meets with members of DCU's Senior Management Group (SMG).                     | Professor Brian MacCraith, President<br>Professor Anne Scott, Deputy President/ Registrar<br>Executive Deans of Faculty<br>Vice-President for Research & Innovation<br>Director of Human Resources<br>Director of Finance<br>Executive Director for External and Strategic Affairs | AG01         |
| 10.00-10.25am                          | PRG meets with Oscail reporting Head.                                              | Professor Anne Scott, Deputy President/ Registrar<br>Mr Billy Kelly, Deputy Registrar and Dean of Teaching & Learning                                                                                                                                                              | AG01         |
| 10.30-11.00am                          | Break                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | DG11         |
| 11.00am-12.30pm                        | PRG meet with DCU academic/administrative staff that Oscail work with.             | Individual meetings with:<br>Ms Barbara McConalogue, Director, Information Systems & Services (ISS), DCU<br>Mr Brendan Gillen, Financial Operations Accountant, Finance Office, DCU<br>Ms Ellen Breen, Library, DCU<br>Ms Gillian Barry, Student Awards Manager, Registry, DCU     | DG11         |
| 12.30-12.40pm                          | PRG meet with Director of Oscail and/or Director of Quality Promotion if required. | Mr Seamus Fox and Dr Sarah Ingle                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | DG11         |
| 12.40-1.15 pm                          | Preparation of PRG exit presentation.                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | DG11         |
| 1.15-2.15 pm                           | PRG working lunch.                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | DG11         |
| 2.15-3.45pm                            | Preparation of PRG exit presentation                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | DG11         |
| 3.45-4.15pm                            | Exit presentation by PRG to outline main findings and recommendations.             | PRG, Director of Quality Promotion, Oscail staff members.                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | D404         |

Quality review is a challenging process. The methodology therefore needs to be sharp and rigorous and the process well supported. All necessary documentation was circulated to the Panel well in advance of the site visit. This allowed the PRG to review the SAR before arriving on campus. This document presented a comprehensive overview of Oscail and served as a useful starting point for the review.

The visit began with an excellent briefing regarding the Quality Review Process from the Director of Quality Promotion. At the first meeting of the panel, Dr. Conor Galvin was elected PRG Chairperson and, with minor changes, the Group adopted the proposed schedule for the visit. The panel decided to attend all meetings together,

rather than divide into sub groups. There was excellent engagement between the panel and the various stakeholders who attended meetings over the three days.

The exit presentation focused on the key recommendations which form the core of the final PRG Report.

### **Schedule of Activity**

The visit by the panel to DCU was smoothly and efficiently facilitated. The timetable stood up well - with only one minor adjustment being required to allow the PRG to spend more time with key university service/support personnel.

The review report production needed slight re-tracking in view of the Easter break falling immediately subsequent to the visit, however the overall time frame was not unreasonable.

The Report document itself was generated jointly with Dr McMullan, as Rapporteur, taking the lead on this. Each member of the quality review panel was afforded the opportunity to comment and recommend across the full range of our focus and deliberation. Individual submissions were compiled into a single document and then circulated for annotation by each of the PRG. This final version of the Quality Review Report is the product of three such rounds of comment and correction.

### **View of the Self-Assessment Report**

The self assessment was very thorough and examined all aspects of the activities of Oscail. It was open and honest throughout and was succinct enough to be read and understood without overloading the reader. In fact, without the level of detail that was presented, it would not have been possible for the PRG to conduct such a comprehensive examination of the structure and workings of Oscail. The self-assessment documentation was thorough in its presentation of Oscail's practices and procedures, and frank in its indications of the challenges ahead.

## **4. Findings of the Review Group**

### **1. Background, Overview, Strategy, Context**

During its long history since 1982, Oscail has developed from a collaboration between Irish universities (National Distance Education Centre), led by DCU, to a distance education unit within DCU, specifically serving off campus students. It has adopted strategies and working methods from open universities internationally, and from other European distance teaching universities.

Today, Oscail is an important strategic asset for DCU, as it serves distance education students in a systemic and professional way. Even when university courses are brought online and students can register for separate credits, as is the

case in some European universities, the outreach to off campus students is not easy without a dedicated provision like Oscail. Given its function and level of service and expertise, Oscail is a unique asset from a national perspective and it offers exceptional opportunities for the future to DCU. From a European point of view, Oscail is a university distance education centre that compares favourably with the best of its peers.

## **2. Organisation and Management**

Oscail is DCU's principal vehicle for distance programmes. The system includes all stages and aspects of the distance education cycle: marketing, programme and course design and development, educational support of the design, student admission and registration, organization of tutoring, ICT based learning communities and learning environments, student assignments, library access, student guidance, exams and quality assurance at all stages.

Nevertheless, the relationship and role of Oscail to the wider University seems poorly defined, still reflecting the legacy of Oscail's historical separation from the mainstream mission of the University. There is a general understanding that Oscail is key to implementing a distance education strategy for DCU. University senior management needs to decide how best to align Oscail and the goals of such a strategy. This may lead to a kind of matrix organization – with academic responsibility for programmes remaining in the DCU academic entity where the most relevant, cognate, expertise resides and responsibility for design, marketing and delivery to off-campus students resting with Oscail.

DCU management and Oscail should develop clear strategies and objectives for distance education, off campus, students. The existing expertise and viable systems already in place within Oscail should be consolidated. Above all, DCU should create a national and, where appropriate, an international provision and leadership in the field of distance education.

Internal organisation at Oscail has changed considerably due to a shift to primarily online pedagogy, and severe reduction in available funding. A recent review by an external process engineer is leading to further internal re-organisation. The process engineer reports make recommendations around streamlining and refocusing mission which are both reasonable and necessary. This should leave Oscail with a lean structure, well optimised for its current core activities and operation model; however, it leaves little or no resilience to further shocks or capacity for strategic development and growth. This may have implications in the mid- to longer-term for both Oscail and the university's capability and capacity in relation to digital pedagogy. The on-going restructuring of tasks and responsibilities within Oscail is positive and should be allowed to continue to its conclusion. It needs to be complemented by university-level action in the wider aspects of developing a culture of digitally supported higher education.

### **3. Staffing and Accommodation**

The enthusiasm and commitment of Oscail staff for their distinctive mission was palpable. Despite rapid and extensive reorganisation, and major reduction in overall staffing, the team remain dedicated to serving the distinctive mission of Irish higher level distance education. The overall staff profile is relatively junior; there is therefore a heavy reliance on a small number of key senior staff. This necessarily leads to some significant business risk. The present staffing levels are sufficient to support Oscail's current stated aims. However, if Oscail is to become a fully integrated part of DCU's move to position itself as a field-leader in digital provision, it does not have the academic staffing resources to support the wider provision of services to the entire campus.

There is an appropriate level of staffing for administration and support duties. Part of the centre's on-going reorganisation is to help those who wish to move into more technical/ learning design functions to do so. This is commendable.

The general accommodation is satisfactory but noticeably fragmented. It would be preferable to provide more integrated accommodation and team working spaces.

There was criticism by alumni of some aspects of campus facilities for face-to-face tutorials (particularly at weekends, out of conventional semester time). However, this appears to be an historical issue which may no longer be current. There were also some deeply-felt concerns about the implications for off-campus students of a move to on-line only course delivery and support. This needs to be considered closely and carefully by the university.

### **4. Management of Financial and other Resources**

Oscail is managing a major and rapid change in its funding model with the withdrawal of formerly ring-fenced income from the HEA. This has been exacerbated by the delay in integrating part-time students into the standard HEA funding model. In these circumstances, Oscail has performed very well in its financial planning and management, with a reasonable expectation that it can achieve operational break-even in 2012-2013.

The burdens of management fall heavily on a small number of more experienced staff at the centre. Experience is not enough in itself, however, to ensure quality and leadership going forward. This needs to be addressed by the university as a matter of priority.

## **5. External/Internal Relations including Community Engagement**

Oscail interacts with the wider DCU community through appropriate participation in University committees, and through direct engagement with individual academic staff in supporting the Oscail-led programmes. It does not appear that the University has a formal structure to support engagement between Oscail and Schools or Faculties.

In its role and relationship with the University, Oscail has some attributes of an academic unit (School/Faculty) in that it develops and delivers programmes, and carries out some academic research. However, it is notable that, in its core domain of academic expertise (online, distance-mode, higher education), Oscail does not provide taught programmes.

The scope and nature of the DCU Online initiative, and especially its relationship to DCU's distance education mission, is unclear. Oscail's participation and contribution to international development of distance-based higher education has been strong, particularly through its membership of EADTU. Oscail faces outwards from the university and has for many years serviced a unique and important market; mature, off-campus/distance students. Oscail's connection with other Irish Universities is a unique feature of the centre's work. This is a strength that should not be let slip away even though the centre needs to more closely align with DCU central.

Oscail supports, within the limits of its current capacity and resources, other DCU elements involved in outreach and on-line development – such as the LIU. Members of Oscail participate in a large number of DCU committees and working groups. Several are also active in transnational organisations such as EADTU and the European Distance Learning and E-Learning Network (EDEN).

The DCU Online Initiative, particularly its off-campus and distance education mission, needs to be framed and developed in such a way that it benefits from, rather than duplicates, the work of Oscail.

## **6. Academic Programmes, Teaching & Learning**

Oscail has a very well developed model of distance education, which is cost-effective and delivers high academic standards. It is also very flexible in adapting to dynamic changes in the marketplace. This should provide an excellent platform for potential growth and diversification: however that would require significant investment, and much more streamlined and aligned contribution from the core academic expertise of the wider University.

To ensure sustainability, senior staff/management in Oscail highlighted the need to develop more programmes and courses for distance education. Such courses are best designed with Schools or Faculties in DCU. The ultimate academic responsibility for programmes should lie with the academic entity where the expertise resides. In order to facilitate this development, DCU should develop and implement systems and incentives to ensure university Schools/Faculties engage with such activity. It will be an institutional asset to have these courses delivered

through Oscail – where the relevant experience (flexibility, student follow up/retention measures, the organization of tutoring, assignments, exams, quality assurance, student guidance) resides. Such a strategy would require expansion and refinement of the role of Oscail so that at University level there is a clear function responsible for the marketing, management and delivery of distance education in a single unit and also an academic centre for research and scholarship in Distance Education.

Guided by University strategic priorities, Oscail could also consider the provision of customized training, using available course material, as well as flexible short courses in the non-degree sphere, meeting the needs of enterprises and the public sector.

Overall, Oscail's develops and delivers good quality, off-campus programmes in a range of disciplines. Academic leadership on the postgraduate courses seems particularly assured and leverages well the experience and background of the staff involved.

## **7. Research, Scholarship & Training**

Oscail is more a teaching centre than a research centre in its current configuration. However, there are strong indications of on-going efforts to re-establish Oscail at the centre of academic research and scholarship nationally and internationally on distance and off-campus higher education. This is evident at both individual staff and overall unit level.

Oscail has had a track record of substantial academic research activity in its core domain of distance-mode higher education. However, this has been negatively affected in recent years by the serious contraction in staff resources, particularly senior academic staff. There is evidence of significant effort to re-build research activity and profile. It is essential that the academic research and scholarship of distance education continues to be closely integrated with the practice of distance education delivery in Oscail. The University should consider carefully what would be the most effective institutional structure and framework to ensure this.

Oscail should (re)develop research and development relationships with important research and development centres in Europe<sup>3</sup> as well as with innovative initiatives with regard to OER<sup>4</sup> and customized training centres<sup>5</sup>.

Distance education can be an important joint/integrated research and innovation strand. As an innovative environment, Oscail can become a distance education research base for its academic staff and for other research institutes in DCU and its

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<sup>3</sup> Important examples of such centers are the Knowledge media Institute and the Institute of Educational technology at the Open University; Celstec at the Open Universiteit in the Netherlands, IN3 at the UOC in Barcelona

<sup>4</sup> For example OpenLearn at the Open University, the Open Courseware Consortium

<sup>5</sup> For example the Centro Superior para la Enseñanza Virtual (Center for Higher Virtual Education) in Madrid and the EI IPTS (Institute for Prospective Technologies in Society), in Seville.

Associated Colleges. Oscail's academic staff should be involved in research and innovation to enhance the quality of Oscail's provisions continuously.

### **8. Student/Staff Perspective**

The feedback from Oscail students and alumni was extremely positive. While they also continue to seek further improvements (both in quality of service and cost control), they are clear that the educational experience and standard is extremely high, and they are very proud of their achievements. Students/alumni raised a number of areas where further enhancement is possible. Experience of tutor support (e.g., in online forums) can be variable and unsatisfactory in a small number of cases. This may primarily relate to academic staff being overstretched in terms of time and responsibilities. Some reported issues such as the late delivery of hardcopy materials. Notwithstanding possible funding incentives, there was clear opposition to the concept of industry branded awards. Some technical issues with using Oscail-developed electronic content materials on dedicated ebook readers (e.g., Amazon Kindle) were mentioned.

Oscail staff enthusiasm and commitment remains very strong. This is highly commendable. However, there is a strong need for clarity at the University level regarding the role of distance education in the overall mission of DCU, and the consequent future role and development of Oscail.

Off-campus and distance HE students have distinctive needs and expectations - academic, pastoral and learning support. Oscail has, over time, developed an excellent set of practices, protocols and procedures to meet these needs. This is reflected in the extremely positive feedback we received from Oscail students and alumni.

## 9. Overall Analysis of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Concerns

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
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| <p><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⤴ A unique asset which delivers an excellent product</li> <li>⤴ Dedicated, enthusiastic, staff (both core and contract), with strong expertise and experience in core domain.</li> <li>⤴ A very well honed model of high quality, cost-effective, distance-mode higher education.</li> <li>⤴ Mutual respect, engagement and loyalty between staff and students.</li> <li>⤴ Well developed networks of academic expertise distributed across Irish higher education systems.</li> <li>⤴ Major organisational changes have been completed successfully (transition to primary online pedagogy, alignment with University academic year, restructuring of operations in light of withdrawal of direct HEA funding).</li> <li>⤴ Close to operational financial break-even.</li> <li>⤴ A wellspring of pedagogical and procedural capability relating to Oscail’s core constituency.</li> <li>⤴ Openness within Oscail to repurposing the centre within the changing world of off-campus and distance education.</li> <li>⤴ Well-articulated, well-managed quality arrangements across existing course offerings.</li> <li>⤴ A record of flexibility and adaptability in the face of change.</li> </ul> | <p><b>Weaknesses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⤴ Unclear/equivocal University strategy/mission around distance-mode education. There can be no reasonable expectation of major further development until these issues are resolved.</li> <li>⤴ Fragile funding model, based exclusively on fee income. Fees alone are not an adequate way to support the sustainability of Oscail – though current operational margins are commendable.</li> <li>⤴ Relatively narrow and idiosyncratic portfolio of programmes.</li> <li>⤴ Weak brand image and recognition, even at national level.</li> <li>⤴ Recent decline in research income and activity.</li> <li>⤴ Academic staff capacity is currently at full stretch.</li> <li>⤴ The future growth strategy may stretch management capacity within Oscail – essentially due to the imbalance of numbers between senior and junior colleagues in the unit and the large number of associate staff Oscail needs to train and utilise.</li> </ul>                                                                                                               |
| <p><b>Opportunities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⤴ Latent national market for broader range of distance-mode higher education programmes.</li> <li>⤴ Significant competitive opportunity given increase in fees by major market competitor (UK OU).</li> <li>⤴ Potential for marketing of DCU degrees taken on a distance-basis internationally; particularly in regions where DCU has specific strategic engagement and profile.</li> <li>⤴ Potential for significant research income, particularly from EU Horizon 2020 programme, where online distance education can address serious problems of social inclusion and international development.</li> <li>⤴ Oscail has developed over time a viable and robust model of off-campus and distance education. This is cost-effective and supportive of good quality standards. To maximise the benefits of this, DCU needs as a matter of some urgency to complete the work initiated by the DCU Virtual Online Learning Group (VOLG) and to properly resource and support a model of digital pedagogy, across the university, which draws on many of the core values and practices of Oscail. This will require substantial human resource and IS investment.</li> </ul>                      | <p><b>Concerns</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⤴ Unclear University strategy around distance-mode education.</li> <li>⤴ Dependence on small number of key senior staff: significant potential threat of business disruption.</li> <li>⤴ Academic support for core existing programmes (especially undergraduate) relies on engagement from academic staff distributed around the Irish university system. Should other universities decide to compete in the Distance Education Market this support may be more difficult to sustain.</li> <li>⤴ Migrating from face-to-face tutorials to primarily (or exclusively) online tutorials may alienate some current students.</li> <li>⤴ Migrating from custom written content materials to “curation of open resources” model may reduce perceived value for money.</li> <li>⤴ Danger that distinctive distance education mission and brand will be diluted through promotion of all-encompassing “DCU Online” initiative. “Digital” and “distance” pedagogy are related, overlapping, but still very distinct, domains of research and practice.</li> </ul> |

## 5. Recommendations for Improvement

| Number | P1, P2, P3 | Level<br>U or A | Recommendation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|--------|------------|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1      | P1         | U               | Articulate a clear vision for the development of Distance Education within the University.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 2      | P1         | U & A           | Identify, in collaboration, the best role for Oscail in delivering DCU's vision for Distance Education.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| 3      | P1         | U               | Capitalise on the expertise which exists within Oscail to establish DCU as the National Leader in the provision of Distance Education.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 4      | P1         | A               | Drive to conclusion the current change process with which Oscail is currently engaged.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 5      | P1         | U & A           | Confirm a clear commitment not to damage the current provision and the product offered to off-campus, distance education students.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 6      | P2         | U & A           | Expand and refine the role of Oscail so that at University level there is a clear function responsible for the marketing, management and delivery of distance education in a single unit and also an academic centre for research and scholarship in Distance Education. This academic centre should build international links with other research centres and distance education networks. |
| 7      | P2         | U & A           | Design and implement systems and incentives to ensure DCU Faculties engage with this Distance Education mission. The ultimate academic responsibility for all DCU programmes should lie with the DCU academic entity where the most relevant, cognate, expertise resides (even where this continues to involve external academic partners).                                                 |
| 8      | P1         | U & A           | Deliver significant, coordinated and ongoing investment in IS hardware and software in order to ensure the ongoing success of Distance Education at DCU. This investment must be aligned to the DCU strategy for Distance Education.                                                                                                                                                        |
| 9      | P3         | U & A           | Reorganise office space in Bea Orpen building so that Oscail staff are clustered together.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 10     | P1         | U               | Assign a member of the Senior Management Group to drive the development and implementation of the DCU distance education Mission, Vision and Strategies.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 11     | P2         | U & A           | Develop a coherent plan to attract research funding in relation to policy and practice regarding off-campus and digitally enhanced higher education.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |

### KEY

P1: A recommendation that is important *and* requires urgent action.

P2: A recommendation that is important, but can, or perhaps must, be addressed on a more extended time scale.

P 3: A recommendation which merits serious consideration but which is not considered to be critical to the quality of the ongoing activities.

A: Area under review (School/Faculty/Office/Centre)

U: University Senior Management