

Quality Assurance / Quality Improvement  
Programme for Academic Units  
2006-2007



Peer Review Group Report  
for the  
**First Year & Beginner Student Experience**

**Peer Review Group**

Mr Michael Dwyer, Chief Executive Officer, Empathy Marketing Limited (Chair)  
Mr Hamidreza Khodabakhshi, President, Union of Students in Ireland  
Ms Helen McNeely, Assistant Director, Services for Students, Kings College, London  
Ms Pauline Mooney, Senior Faculty Administrator, Faculty of Science & Health, DCU  
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Professor Helena Sheehan, School of Communications, DCU  
Mr Adrian Thomas, Director of Quality, University of Limerick  
Professor Gerard F. Whyte, Associate Professor of Law, Trinity College Dublin

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## Introduction

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

1. A Review Committee associated with the Theme being reviewed completes a detailed self-assessment report (SAR). It should be noted that this document is not a public document; it will be read by 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 the university and conduct discussions, with a range of staff, students and other stakeholders as appropriate.
3. The PRG then writes its own report. The Review Committee is given the chance to correct possible factual errors before the Peer Group Report (PRG) is finalised.
4. The university produces a draft Quality Improvement Plan (QulP) in response to the various issues and findings of the SAR and PRG Reports.
5. The PRG and the draft QulP are considered by the Quality Promotion Committee and by the Senior Management Group (SMG).
6. The draft QulP is discussed in a meeting between the Review Committee, Senior Management, in the presence of members of the PRG, chaired by the Director of Quality Promotion, resulting in the finalised QulP.
7. A summary of the PRG, the QulP and the Executive 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

## 1. The Theme

### Definition of the Theme

The theme, First Year and Beginner Student Experience, encompasses the totality of first time undergraduate student experience at DCU. It includes every facet of university life – academic and non-academic, intellectual and social, individual and collective – as experienced by undergraduate students during their first period of registration with the university.

### University areas

The scope of the theme is such that the self-assessment and review processes involved and drew upon input from academic, administrative and support units from across the whole of the university. Consequently, each of the four faculties within the university – Business, Engineering and Computing, Humanities and Social Sciences, and Science and Health – participated in the process. Equally, all relevant support units, viz., Administrative Services (Registry, faculty and school offices, the finance office); Student Support (careers, counselling, health, interfaith, international, sports and recreation, student activities and financial support, all of which are subsumed within Student Affairs); Access and Disability Offices; the Office of Student Life (incorporating the Students' Union); Student Welfare and Safety (incorporating the equality office, health and safety and security); and Student Facilities (including catering, accommodation, recreation, computing and technical facilities and retail outlets) contributed to the process.

### Product / Processes

As evident from the number of university areas or units identified above, the scope and scale of activity encompassed within the First Year and Beginner Student Experience is very substantial, including as it does every point of interaction that first time students have with the university in advance of and during their first year or period of registration. Perforce it includes:

- Pre admission information provision and support
- Registration and orientation
- Academic (learning and assessment) and academic related activity
- Non-academic and/or social activity
- Student support provision
- Catering and facilities (including accommodation)

It is acknowledged, however, that the First Year and Beginner Student Experience is more than the sum of the parts or processes listed above. Necessarily, it speaks also to the manner in which these parts are combined or integrated at DCU, and their efficacy and adaptability in the face of an increasingly diverse student population and rapidly changing sectoral, national and international context. In recent years, issues of retention combined with a rapidly changing and increasingly diverse student population have resulted in DCU and the university sector generally, becoming increasingly aware of and concerned with the nature and quality of first year and beginner student experience. Consequently, the university has identified two principal objectives with respect to its first year and beginner students. The first is to improve “good” retention; good in this context meaning assisting and supporting students in deciding what is best for them, including, potentially, deciding to leave the university. The second is to ensure that first year students in particular are provided with the requisite skills sets and support structures in order to optimise their university experience and better

enable their overall development and progression. The thematic review of First Year and Beginner Student Experience is, therefore, timely. In conducting this review, the university captured, perhaps for the first time, the breadth of activity in which academic and non-academic units engage with a view to enhancing and improving student, and particularly, first year student experience at DCU.

## 2. The Self-Assessment Process

### The Co-ordinating Committee

In order to fully represent academic and non-academic aspects of the first year experience, a large Co-ordinating Committee was formed. Its membership was as follows:

<b>Committee Member</b>	<b>Role in DCU</b>	<b>Area</b>
Dr Claire Bohan Thematic Review Co-Chair	Director of Student Affairs	Student Affairs
Dr Sarah Ingle Thematic Review Co-Chair	Lecturer in Entrepreneurship	Faculty of Business
Ms Phylomena McMorrow	Director of Registry	Registry
Mr Brendan Gillen	Financial Operations Accountant	Finance Office
Ms Deirdre Moloney	Head of Student Advice Centre	Student Affairs
Ms Marie Heraughty Ms Angela Mitchell	Head of International Affairs Assistant International Officer	International Office
Ms Siobhan Murphy	Business Manager	Trispace (Catering)
Ms Niamh Connolly	Accommodation Coordinator	Accommodation
Mr Alan Flanagan Ms Hazel Hayes  Mr Gary Boylan	President Deputy President, Education and Welfare Officer Vice President, Campaigns & Information Officer	Students' Union
Ms Una Redmond	Manager	Office of Student Life
Mr Breffni Lynch	Helpdesk Manager	Computer Services Department/ <i>Moodle</i>
Ms Anne O'Connor	Disability Officer	Disability Office
Mr Paul Smith	Director of Equality Office	Equality Office
Ms Ita Tobin Ms Colette O'Beirne	Head of Access & Recruitment	Access/Recruitment Office
Ms Ellen Breen	Sub-Librarian, Head of Information & Public Services	Library
Mr Mike Kelly	Director of Estates	Buildings / Estates
Ms Aisling McKenna	Research and Analysis Officer	Institutional Analysis Office
Ms Deirdre Wynter Ms Eileen Colgan	Marketing Manager Senior Public Relations Officer	Public Affairs & Media Relations Office
Ms Hannah Dyas	Senior Faculty Administrator	Faculty Administrators' Peer Group
Dr Charlotte Holland  Ms Monserrat Alvarez Pino Dr Jacinta Wright	Chair of Undergraduate Studies, School of Education Studies School of Education Studies  Lecturer in French Literature, School of Applied Languages and Intercultural Studies	Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences
Dr Monica Ward  Dr Gabriel Miro Muntean	Lecturer and First Year Head, School of Computing Lecturer and First Year Head, School of	Faculty of Engineering & Computing

Committee Member	Role in DCU	Area
	Electronic Engineering	
Dr Ruth Mattimoe	Lecturer in Management Accounting and Financial Statement Analysis, DCU Business School	Faculty of Business
Ms Claire Kearney	Lecturer in Economics, DCU Business School	
Ms Rufina Morgan Prof. Colette McDonagh	Lecturer in Nursing, School of Nursing Teaching Convenor, School of Physical Sciences	Faculty of Science & Health

### Methodology Adopted

The Co-ordinating Committee was jointly chaired by Drs Claire Bohan, Director of Student Affairs and Sarah Ingle, Lecturer, Faculty of Business. As well as a small number of full committee meetings, the Co-ordinating Committee was divided into two sub-committees, academic and non-academic, co-ordinated respectively by Dr Ingle and Dr Bohan.

Formal meetings were held at committee, sub-committee and chair level between November 2007 and March 2008, as detailed below. Supplemental meetings were co-ordinated by individual committee members in their respective schools, faculties, units, and administrative areas to gather relevant details for the self assessment report (SAR).

Date	Purpose	Attendance
26 Nov.	Initiate review, and decide on potential committee members and initial project plan.	C. Bohan, S. Ingle.
4 Dec.	First full committee meeting to outline the review objectives and deadlines.	Full committee with Dr Heinz Lechleiter, Director of Quality Promotions unit, C. Bohan, S. Ingle.
5 Dec.	Organise and set-up primary research activities.	C. Bohan, S. Ingle, A. McKenna, G. McConnell, Head of President's Office and Director of Strategy.
8 Jan.	Academic sub-committee meeting.	Faculty representatives, S. Ingle
14 Jan.	Discuss initial survey results and proposed focus group themes.	C. Bohan, S. Ingle, A. McKenna
23 Jan.	Non-academic sub-committee meeting.	Non-academic representatives, C. Bohan, S. Ingle
25 Jan.	Meet and appraise focus group facilitator.	C. Bohan, S. Ingle, A. McKenna, Facilitator.
20 Feb.	Academic sub-committee meeting.	Faculty representatives, H. Dyas, S. Ingle
3 Mar	Review SAR and decide interim deadlines.	C. Bohan, S. Ingle.
13 Mar	Final full committee meeting to review SAR	Full committee. C. Bohan, S. Ingle.
14 Mar	Review SAR and compile appendices	S. Ingle, C. Bohan
18 Mar	Final review of SAR and appendices	C. Bohan, S. Ingle

Student feedback was obtained by means of an on-line student survey and facilitated student focus groups, as follows:

Date	Type of research	Details
Dec-Jan 2007	On-line survey developed by D. Wynter, A. McKenna, C. Bohan and S. Ingle with input from committee	All first year and beginner students were invited to complete an on-line survey covering all aspects of their experience in DCU up to early January 2008.
18 Feb. 2008	Focus Groups. Themes developed by Chairs, committee and facilitator.	16 students in four groups discussed the required themes for 1.25 hours each. Students were each provided with a €15 restaurant voucher.

Expert interviews were also conducted with a view to providing an overview of the first year academic environment and an understanding of the context in which the review was taking place, as follows:

Date	Type of research	Details
28 Jan. 2008	Expert interview carried out by S. Ingle	Dr Anne Sinnott, Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning, DCU Business School and current Chair of DCUBS's review committee.
30 Jan. 2008	Expert interview carried out by S. Ingle	Mr Billy Kelly, Chair of Bachelor of Business Studies Programme in DCU Business School and previous first year co-ordinator.

### 3. The Peer Review Group Process

The Peer Review Group comprised the following members:

Mr Michael Dwyer, Chief Executive Officer, Empathy Marketing Limited (Chair)  
 Mr Hamidreza Khodabakhshi, President, Union of Students in Ireland  
 Ms Helen McNeely, Assistant Director, Services for Students, Kings College, London  
 Ms Pauline Mooney, Senior Faculty Administrator, Faculty of Science & Health, DCU (Rapporteur)  
 Professor Helena Sheehan, School of Communications, DCU  
 Mr Adrian Thomas, Director of Quality, University of Limerick  
 Professor Gerard F. Whyte, Associate Professor of Law, Trinity College Dublin

#### Site Visit Programme

Day 1 (Wednesday, 16 April 2008)

Time	Activity	Location
2.00-4.00pm	PRG meeting with Director of Quality Promotion Unit (QPU).	DG11
4.00-5.30pm	Presentation of Self Assessment Report (SAR) to PRG, and discussion with members of Co-ordinating Committee.	DG11
7.30pm	Dinner with members of Co-ordinating Committee and Director of QPU	Morrison Hotel

## Day 2 (Thursday, 17 April 2008)

Time	Activity	Location
9.15-9.45am	Meet with Co-chairs of Co-ordinating Committee.	CG35
9.45-10.00am	Meet with senior member of academic faculty	CG35
10.00-10.30am	Meet with academic faculty from Faculty of Business and Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.	CG35
10.30-11.00am	Meet with academic faculty from Faculty of Engineering and Computing and Faculty of Science and Health.	CG35
11.00-11.15	Break	CG35
11.15-11.30	Meet with Director of Student Affairs.	CG35
11.30-12.00pm	Meet with staff representatives from recruitment, administration and social support. - International Office - Access/Recruitment - Registry - Clubs and Societies / Sports - Interfaith Centre	CG35
12.00-12.30pm	Meet with staff representatives from learning and professional development support units - Disability office - Library - Careers - Counselling - Learning Innovation Unit	CG35
12.30-1.30pm	Working lunch (including tour and use of student canteen)	Student canteen
1.30-1.45pm	Meet with Thought Leader of BEST Orientation Programme	CG35
1.45-2.45pm	Meet with first year non-standard entry students (Access, Mature and International students)	CG35
2.45-3.45pm	Meet with 1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup> year standard entry students	CG35
3.45-4.00pm	Break	CG35
4.00-5.00pm	Tour of Campus, including: Student Advice Centre, Registry, Students Union/Office of Student Life, Sports Centre, Restaurants, Lecture rooms, Fees office, Access office	Campus
7.30pm	Private working dinner for members of PRG	Morrison Hotel

## Day 3 (Friday, 18 April 2008)

Time	Activity	Location
9.15-10.00am	PRG meet to review findings	CG35
10.00-11.00am	Meet with Senior Management Group	A204
11.00-11.15am	Break	CG35
11.15-11.45am	Meet with Manager, Office of Student Life	CG35
11.45-12.30pm	PRG review of findings contd.	CG35
11.30-1.30pm	Working lunch (joined by Co-Chairs) Meet with Director of Estates	CG35

Time	Activity	Location
1.30-2.15pm	Private deliberations and preparation of exit presentation by PRG	CG35
2.15-2.50pm	Meet with sabbatical officers from DCU Students' Union	CG35
2.50-3.50pm	Private deliberations and preparation of exit presentation contd.	
4.00-4.30pm	Exit presentation by PRG to Co-ordinating Committee and others.	CG12

## Methodology

Peer Review Group (PRG) members received and familiarised themselves with the content of the Self-Assessment Report (SAR) and related appendices in advance of the site visit. The SAR was clear and frank in its engagement with the Theme under review. It reflected very positive engagement with both the Theme and the review process itself on the part of a wide spectrum of staff members drawn from across the university.

On arrival at DCU, the PRG was provided with a clear context for the review and was briefed as to its remit by the Director of the Quality Promotion Unit. Thereafter, the Group elected Mr Michael Dwyer as chairperson, and discussed the SAR and the distribution of responsibilities amongst Group members. The Group then met with members of the Co-ordinating Committee, and Co-chairs, Drs Bohan and Ingle, gave a brief but very informative presentation on the self-assessment process and report. This presentation was followed by discussion between Committee members and the PRG. On departure of the Co-ordinating Committee members, the PRG agreed the sections of the SAR for which each Group member would assume responsibility, both for the purpose of the site visit and PRG Report preparation. Discussions with members of the Co-ordinating Committee continued informally over dinner that evening.

The original meeting schedule for days 2 and 3 was amended at the PRG's request to include meetings with the Director of Estates and the Business Manager of Trispace (DCU catering company). The second day of the site visit comprised a series of meetings with relevant stakeholders, in keeping with the timetable given above. PRG deliberations continued over a working dinner that evening. Additional documentation, including retention data, post descriptors for first year Heads and/or Tutors, details of the BEST Orientation Programme and details of the Student Learning Agreement pilot conducted in 2006 were requested by the PRG and furnished in the course of days two and three.

Meetings with stakeholders on the third and final day took place as detailed in the timetable above. The PRG's final deliberations focused on principal findings and related recommendations and these form the basis for the PRG Report. These findings and recommendations were the subject of a presentation to members of the Co-ordinating Committee and other members of university staff. It should be noted that, given the nature of the review, an open invitation to attend this presentation was extended to all staff members.

## Schedule of Activity

The schedule of meetings was intense over the three day period, perhaps particularly so given the breadth of activity that the review encompassed. The Group was readily facilitated in any requests it made, whether for additions to the schedule or additional information. The Group was provided with excellent support and assistance by members of staff from the Student Advice Centre. The Co-chairs of the Co-ordinating Committee, Drs Bohan and Ingle, made themselves available to the Group throughout the visit. They, together with members of the Co-ordinating Committee, members of staff and students contributed generously and openly to the work of the review.

## View of the Self-Assessment Report

The PRG recognised that production of the SAR in itself represented a significant achievement, particularly given the thematic nature of the area under review and, consequently, the number of units and/or individuals involved in its production. It was noted that the First Year and Beginner Student review was the first of its kind in DCU and (in so far as is known) the Irish university sector generally and as such represented a significant and very timely development. In the course of the site visit Co-ordination Committee members commented that the review exercise had brought together individuals who, in the normal course of events, would not necessarily come together in a single forum. This in itself was felt to be valuable and, in this regard, the PRG concurred; the self assessment and review process was clearly a mobilising and unifying one for all involved.

The PRG was satisfied that the SAR adequately described activities associated with the theme under review, and adequately and honestly explored related strengths and weaknesses. The Group did note that certain of the relationships between units and respective areas of responsibility might have been more clearly articulated. For example, the relationship and distribution of responsibilities between Student Affairs and the Office of Student Life, particularly as it related to clubs and societies, was unclear to Group members. It was recognised that this lack of clarity may have resulted from the number and variety of contributors to the SAR. Some omissions – whether intentional or otherwise – were noted, including the apparent absence of input to the SAR from the Learning Innovation Unit and the Registrar, and, consequently, their absence from site visit meetings.<sup>1</sup> The Group noted that the process and ultimately the SAR findings would have benefitted from greater student engagement in focus groups, though it acknowledged that considerable efforts had been made on the part of staff and student members of the Co-ordinating Committee to secure student engagement. The Group also noted that availability, on an ongoing basis, of key performance indicators or metrics in relation to student retention should inform future developments and/or reviews in this area.

SAR findings and related recommendations were reviewed by the PRG on a section by section basis. These findings and recommendations were, in the main, endorsed and confirmed during the course of the site visit. Any exceptions to this are noted in the relevant findings and/or recommendations sections that follow.

Attention is drawn here to one of the principal SAR findings, which was very clearly endorsed during the site visit, as it relates to and permeates all of the areas addressed in detail below. There is a clear need for greater co-ordination and clarity in relation to

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the PRG met with the Vice-President for Learning Innovation/Registrar in her capacity as a member of Senior Management.

first year and beginner student support. Logically, this co-ordination role should lie with the Director of Student Affairs and the offices that fall directly within her remit. A fully integrated approach to academic and non-academic support provision requires the endorsement and pro-active engagement of senior management within the university and clearly, the Vice-President for Learning Innovation/Registrar, within whose remit Student Affairs also falls, is key in this regard.

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

##### **4.1 Background and Context**

The First Year and Beginner Student Thematic Review was undertaken as part of DCU's on-going quality review process for academic and non-academic units. The stated purpose of the review was to research and document current first year and beginner student experience and to this end student, faculty and staff opinion was requested and obtained in a number of ways. The stated aim of the Self Assessment Report (SAR) was to report, reflect and make recommendations on the overall environment for first year and beginner students.

Prior to the review, it had been acknowledged in DCU that there were some areas in which the experience of new students could be greatly improved. The thematic review was welcomed, therefore, as an opportunity to formally consider the issues involved, as well as acknowledge the many positive activities already being implemented.

The review follows the relatively recent appointment, following a two year hiatus, of a Director of Student Affairs and the very recent inclusion of retention within her remit. It was acknowledged that stability in this role has brought much progress and focus to the student experience, and the first year student experience in particular. For example, a student advice centre – effectively a one stop shop for student related queries – has been established in recent months and is seen as a positive and beneficial development. Also, student service and support offices have, in the main, been co-located facilitating visibility, and ease of access and referral.

##### **4.2 Student Profile and Opinion**

The focus of this review was placed on new entry first year undergraduate students, the numbers of undergraduate entrants having grown from almost 1700 in 2003 to almost 2000 this year. This group consists of approximately 69% “standard entry” students, taken to mean regular CAO entrants, and the balance is made up of Access (7%), Mature (13%), students with disabilities (2%) and International full-time students (9%). The proportion of non-standard students has grown from 29% to 31% in just four years, many of whom traditionally benefit considerably from enhanced support outside the classroom. The PRG noted that the student data provided was somewhat confusing and seemingly inconsistent. The PRG recommends that these figures are checked. Had there been a significant increase in the number of non-standard students during the period 2003 to 2007, as appeared to be suggested by the report, the need for further investment in related student support services would need to be addressed. The apparent lack of an office dedicated to Mature Student Support and the location of the Access Office are matters for concern. In addition, there are almost 200 students transferring from other institutions each year and this group often needs very specific help adjusting to the new environment.

The PRG was impressed by the student survey conducted during the review and would strongly encourage the university to streamline and use it routinely, initially every

semester. The results should be analyzed professionally and published internally, showing trends on a year by year basis. The PRG also noted that student focus groups had been organised but that these were poorly attended, despite the considerable work which went into securing student attendance. Most of the attendees were from the non-standard group and this must have biased the findings. It was suggested that the provision of training to students to better enable them to participate in review processes generally would be beneficial. Whilst this focus group activity was valuable and could be repeated from time to time, it is probably not a good use of resources at this time.

The survey results indicated that students were generally quite happy with the culture and ethos of DCU, their academic programmes, degree of challenge etc. Orientation, computer access, lecturers, academic progress etc. fared moderately well with clear criticism from some students. There was anecdotal evidence of discipline and communication difficulties in some large first year classes, and there were complaints by the students about background noise, interruptions and lecturer failure to use Moodle effectively. The lowest opinions came from areas such as the personal tutor system, online registration, interaction with non-academic staff, timetables and opportunities for feedback and involvement in classes. In a second section dealing with facilities at DCU, the library, sports facilities, general environment, labs etc. fared well, with student concern focusing on the Hub, campus shops, restaurants and accommodation. The PRG visited all four of these latter facilities during a short campus tour and found them all to be adequate, at first inspection. In the case of accommodation, the lack of on-site capacity may well have been behind the negative scoring and there was considerable criticism of the support given in finding local accommodation, particularly for International Students. In the case of restaurants and shops, some students found the prices to be much higher than their budget could afford and, in the case of the Hub, there was some negative comment regarding the style and atmosphere in the NuBar, which was reported to have a considerably reduced trade in recent times. All these issues should be investigated thoroughly and remedial actions initiated.

Analyzing both the written and verbal feedback, there was some evidence that students found the socializing opportunities on campus to be inadequate, with relatively few comfortable areas where students could meet and relax between classes, without having to spend money.

In conclusion, the surveys and analysis of student data provided the Co-ordinating Committee with valuable information, which now needs to be followed up systematically. The self-assessment report itself contains many valuable suggestions - both from the Co-ordinating Committee and others - to address the various issues that have been identified. In particular, the analysis of first year intake, profile, performance and attrition should become an established routine and should be focused on identifying students at risk in order to be able to reduce attrition by early intervention. This may require close monitoring of classwork marks, student opinions, random attendance audits and improved support group schemes such as proposed for mature students. This work, which should be overseen by a university wide committee, will require dedicated staff, not only to reduce attrition but also with a view to providing a more rewarding first year experience at DCU. The main activities of this committee should be twofold, firstly to develop a stimulating, welcoming atmosphere, encouraging and helping students to integrate and make the transition from school to university study and secondly to provide a predictive safety net, identifying students at risk and moving in to rescue them before they fall.

### **4.3 Physical Environment**

SAR findings reflected relatively high levels of student satisfaction overall with the physical environment at DCU and these findings were confirmed in the course of the site visit. The PRG noted that, in many respects the physical environment in DCU is excellent. The new student advice centre, the Hub, the Mezz, the sports centre, the library, the restaurants, and campus accommodation combine valuable resources with attractive and appropriate surroundings.

However, there is room for some improvements, which would enhance the student experience. There is a very substantial difference in the quality of classrooms between the Henry Grattan building and other teaching buildings across campus. There is need of drastic refurbishment of classrooms in the former, particularly in student seating, which is so uncomfortable as to be a hindrance to concentration at lectures. Classroom technology within the Henry Grattan building should be brought up to the level of that in the Business School or the School of Nursing. In the course of site visit meetings, academic staff identified a need for more flat classrooms across the campus, in order to better facilitate small group and seminar style teaching.

The Street is an important area where students congregate to socialise, read, eat and access wi-fi. It is one of a small number of social spaces across campus where students can congregate without necessarily having to purchase food or drink. The provision of another such space (extra seating outdoors could provide a good space for reading and talking in good weather, for example) and/or the refurbishment of the Street could provide significant benefit to the student population at, it would seem, relatively low cost to the university. Specifically, with regard to the Street, the furniture in this area is falling apart and should be repaired or replaced with some made of more durable material. It was noted that this area is often strewn with litter, despite many bins at convenient points. It was suggested that some signs might be posted asking students to take more care with their use of public property.

Despite its relatively compact nature, some students recounted the difficulty they experienced in negotiating the campus during their first weeks in the university. The PRG noted that building designations (X, H etc) and related classroom designations were neither intuitive nor, in the case of building designations, well signposted externally. There is a need for better and more signage on campus. Similarly, the campus map, which is provided to all incoming students in various forms, could be improved. It was suggested that perhaps multimedia students could be tasked with this as a project and that the project could be sponsored.

The current location of the disabilities office was noted as less than ideal. However, it is understood that the office's possible relocation to a more suitable and visible location is to be considered as part of an overall redistribution of space in the medium term. The layout of the fees office was also noted as less than conducive to student service provision and it is recommended that this be reviewed.

### **4.4 Administrative Services**

SAR findings regarding Administrative Services were, in the main, endorsed during the site visit.

While falling specifically within the remit of Student Affairs in terms of its co-ordination, orientation involves a university wide spectrum of units and individuals, and findings relating to it were included in this section of the SAR. Students were generally positive regarding their experience of orientation. However, some students did indicate that

they found the information sessions in the Helix, with up to 1,000 students present for each, daunting. The PRG noted that plans are already under way to reformulate orientation, with the intention of moving to localised or School-based orientation. It was noted that, in recent years, orientation at DCU focused largely on information provision and that, consequently, students could experience information overload. There was consensus that one of the principal objectives of orientation was to provide students with an opportunity to form social networks, to find a friend. In this regard the BEST Orientation Programme offered to first year business and, more recently, language students, was noted as a model of good practice that might be extended university wide. The provision of a year-long schedule of orientation events was suggested whereby the programmes offered across campus, whether by schools, Student Affairs, the library or other units could be co-ordinated, and the PRG recommends that this be pursued. It was also suggested that a focused “reorientation” programme might be offered at the beginning of second semester and the feasibility or usefulness of this should also be explored.

Reference was made in the SAR to the role of faculty offices which, in some cases, have relatively little if any direct contact with first year students, though they are intimately involved in and/or responsible for processes that impact on the student experience, including the provision of timetables. Specifically, with respect to timetables and issues in this regard identified in the SAR, students indicated that changes to timetables occurred during the first week or two of semester but that they then became fixed. The PRG noted that school offices frequently act as a first point of contact with students, taking assignments, acting as a point of communication and/or interface between students and academic staff. The role of school office, and where relevant, faculty office staff as a first point of contact for students was not particularly clearly identified in the SAR. Given the first point of the contact role they frequently fulfil, their inclusion in the “information loop” and ability to refer students appropriately should be addressed. Consequently, the PRG recommends that steps are taken to ensure that members of staff who provide first point of contact functions – whether in central or school/faculty offices - are appropriately briefed and trained.

SAR findings in relation to the student experience of registration were largely borne out or endorsed in the course of the site visit. The implementation of on-line registration – first introduced for continuing students in the academic year 2006/07 and rolled out to first year students in the academic year 2007/08 – has been largely successful. However, feedback in relation to student experience of the process was mixed. As noted previously, on-line registration was among the lowest scoring items in the student survey. Student feedback in this regard received during the site visit was neither positive nor negative. The PRG did note, however, that the Registry had conducted a survey of students and that the results of this survey were positive. It was acknowledged both in the SAR and during the site visit that further improvements to the process are required, both from a technological and student support perspective, particularly for those students who are registering for the first time. The PRG also noted that these improvements were in the process of being made.

Student feedback in relation to administrative offices (as distinct from student services and/or support offices) during the site visit was mixed, reflecting SAR findings in this regard. Specifically, it was suggested that service provision via the Registry information point could be improved, with an increased emphasis on student focused service provision. Students indicated that they had difficulty attracting the attention of staff members when the information desk was open but not staffed. It was suggested that some mechanism be put in place to alert staff within Registry to student presence at the information desk. Feedback in relation to the service provided via this point was

mixed with students reporting both positive and negative experiences. The PRG noted that Registry was working closely with the recently established student advice centre in order to enhance service provision overall.

SAR recommendations in relation to the Fees Office, in terms of location and fees processing in general were endorsed by the PRG.

The need for greater co-ordination between all of those individuals and units who engage with first year and beginner students identified in the SAR and reinforced during the site visit applies equally to the co-ordination of process and enhanced communication between administrative units with which students interact. Such co-ordination would reduce duplication of effort, enable students to better comprehend and therefore access what was termed during the site visit the “ladder of referral”. It would also enable staff to refer students appropriately, thereby enhancing student service provision. Equally, the provision of training for staff, and the development and embedding of a culture of student focused service provision across all units should be pursued.

#### **4.5 Student Support**

The Peer Review Group found that the Self Assessment Report accurately reflected the huge amount of activity that is going into supporting first year students and helping them progress on their programmes of study.

The university clearly understands that student support is the responsibility of all members of staff from Personal Tutors and Student Union Officers through to specialist support workers. It is also apparent from the report that student support is viewed in its totality and encompasses initiatives to develop study skills support, advice and guidance before and during a student’s time at university and co-curricula activity such as clubs and societies.

It is clear that the process of this review has allowed the university to better articulate what is already being done to support the first year experience and that this has already generated a level of momentum that staff are keen to capitalise on. The PRG agrees with the recommendation of the SAR that an overarching body is established to review and develop the first year student experience.

During the visit the PRG met a range of academic colleagues and heard about different models of support for first year students. A particular model of good practice was where schools had appointed first year heads – who in some cases were also programme heads – to oversee first year progression. The PRG recommends that all schools appoint a first year head, with a job title more appropriate to third level, which would be responsible for the progression and support of first years. These ‘year heads’ should also have a role on the overarching body monitoring the first year experience referred to elsewhere in this report.

In particular the review group was impressed by the recognition that early attachment to the university community was key to a student’s integration in the first few weeks. Whilst all universities in the sector are struggling to keep pace with the changes in student behaviour, and in particular their use of digital communications, students we met vocalised the need to be part of a physical community both with each other and their academic tutors.

The PRG, therefore, recommends that all schools are asked to review how they orientate students through the use of small group work that is activity rather than

content lead. BEST was noted as an example of good practice in this area, in particular the emphasis it places on activity rather than content delivery with the aim of helping students form a social network early in their university career.

Additionally, efforts that have been made to improve academic advice through the Careers Service and on the internet through the Academic Portal will help students to make the transition to self directed learning at third level. Further possible models were identified in this regard – a transition module focused in the first weeks of first semester, a year long module or a module which would be taken each year for the duration of undergraduate studies. These models need to be explored as part of a university wide, curriculum based strategy to improve student skills.

Within Student Affairs there are skilled professional members of staff who work closely together under the leadership of a very good Director who should be commended on the work she has done over the last eighteen months. Co-locating services will make it much easier for staff to refer students for support which cannot and should not be delivered at school level.

The PRG was concerned to hear about long waiting lists for the Counselling Service, however, did not have time to explore further whether this was to do with the poor use of resource or lack of resource. We therefore ask that this is reviewed to ensure that students are seen within an appropriate timescale.

The PRG did note that two important support services were outside of Student Affairs – the Disability Office and the Access Office. Both these offices are working well and there was no obvious operational reason for them to be moved to Student Affairs based on current working relationships. However, the PRG did note that this needs to be strategically reviewed to ensure an ongoing integrated approach to student support. It was also noted that co-location of services makes it much easier for staff in academic schools to refer students – in particular staff such as departmental secretaries who are often front line and most likely to notice a student in distress but may not know how to help students. To have one point of referral for all students regardless of issue would significantly assist student pathways.

Academic preparedness for study at third level, particularly on the part of CAO entry students, was an underlying theme for many discussions. The PRG fully supports the recommendation in the SAR that work is done with students prior to entry. It is clear that this is a national issue and the PRG wonders if this is something DCU could lead at a national level with other stakeholders such as the government and schools sector.

Tied to the issue of student preparation for third level education was the issue of engaging this generation of students and communicating with them. The students we met used and benefited from Moodle but rarely used their personalized web portal, other than to access examination timetables and results, as it was felt there was no need. It seems that there is an opportunity to review how web based technologies can be used to improve communications without undermining face to face contact. The PRG would also recommend that DCU looks at how other universities have used tools such as Moodle to communicate with and prepare applicants for entry into higher education and facilitate the early establishment of social networks.

The review team enjoyed meeting a range of students during the visit. They clearly appreciate the work of the Students' Union which this year is run by a team of committed officers. It did, however, take time to untangle the lines of responsibility for the Office of Student Life and its relationship with Student Affairs. It was not always

clear who was responsible for which student activity. There were concerns about duplication of activity and it was suggested that this could be reviewed so that limited resources could be used to maximum effect.

The PRG also recommends that steps be taken to ensure that any decision in respect of the post of Student Activities Officer does not adversely affect engagement with Clubs and Societies.

#### **4.6 Student Facilities**

SAR findings in relation to Student Facilities were endorsed during the site visit. The PRG noted that, in general, DCU has succeeded in the very hard task of creating a 'campus community'. The PRG noted that first year and other students are generally well catered for in terms of the facilities available to them on campus, with many high quality facilities such as the Sports Centre, accommodation, library etc. The compact nature of the campus assists first year students in their orientation to their physical surroundings. However, the PRG noted some areas of concern, also highlighted in the SAR, which could be addressed with the allocation of relatively minor resources by the university.

##### *Catering*

The PRG noted much that was positive about the catering facilities and services available to students. It was noted that all catering services on campus are provided by a DCU owned company and that catering facilities of various sizes and types operate at several locations across campus. The availability of many different options in the main student canteen, including vegetarian and Halal food, was noted as positive as was the clear commitment on the part of catering services to provide healthy and home cooked or on-site prepared options. The PRG noted that there was scope for promotion of these options and their availability within the university.

Consistent with SAR findings, students did express two issues of concern, namely, food prices and the lack of facilities (with the exception of the main canteen) where students can consume their own food. While the PRG noted that prices seem to be fairly standard when compared to other third level institutions, the general view among students was that the prices are high, that they appear to vary across the different outlets across campus and, in particular, that charges for boiling water to make tea/coffee – described as a hidden cost – were excessive. The PRG recommends that the university identify additional areas where students can consume their own food and drink and that the provision of access to microwave facilities (perhaps within one of the existing catering outlets) be considered; any charges attaching to the provision of this service and the provision of hot water, should be nominal and cover the costs of staff support or supervision, if required.

##### *Accommodation*

The standard of on-campus accommodation was acknowledged to be good. The proximate location of on-campus accommodation and sports facilities with a view to promoting health and welfare within the student body was noted as positive.

However, the limited availability of accommodation within university grounds and in the area immediately surrounding DCU has a consequent impact on first year, beginner and international students in particular. This issue needs to be proactively addressed by the university. The PRG recommends that consideration be given to the following approaches.

- Prioritising the allocation of on-campus accommodation on the basis of distance from the university in the first instance – international students and students coming from farthest outside Dublin and then first year students
- Block booking appropriate off-campus accommodation, signing standard agreements with landlords in the local area to be overseen by the accommodation office in DCU in order to cater for the lack of on campus accommodation (ref. system employed in Nottingham Trent University);
- Assign a staff member at the start of the year to help students find accommodation and guide them through effective routes to securing accommodation.

It was noted that the Students' Union could prove a very useful resource in identifying and effecting a solution to these issues.

#### *Recreational Facilities*

As indicated previously, the PRG acknowledged the excellent sports facilities that are available to students on campus, which assist in promoting engagement and the adoption of a healthy attitude towards university life within the student body.

#### *Technology & Other facilities*

There was general agreement amongst staff and students that computing and related facilities are adequate and, in the case of certain units or buildings, better than adequate. However, the group did note the lack of non-timetabled access to computers in some schools.

The PRG noted the range of other facilities available on campus including the pharmacy, Bank and Bookstore.

Concerns were raised by students regarding the very limited number of places available to students in the on campus Crèche. The PRG noted student perceptions that the DCU Crèche prices were expensive when compared to off campus facilities. The PRG recommends that the limited number of places available to students be reviewed, particularly in the context of increasing numbers of mature students within the student population, and that consideration be given to university subvention of costs associated with student places and/or to the establishment of a specific child care fund to which students may make application to assist with costs.

### **4.7 Academic Environment**

The PRG made a number of positive findings in relation to the academic environment at DCU. First, students are generally very positive about the DCU experience and take pride in their university. Second, the university has many committed and inspirational teachers who are pioneering imaginative ways of helping students to make the transition from second level to third level education. Third, the web-based virtual learning environment, Moodle, is impressive and we recommend that it should be used to a minimum defined level in every first year module. This will entail the preparation of guidelines for lecturers on the optimal use of Moodle. DCU should also investigate the possibility of enabling incoming first year students to use Moodle prior to registration in order to facilitate the development of social networks. Fourth, we were impressed by the PDP module (BEST), designed to encourage students to become self-regulated learners, and we recommend that a similar module be provided to all first year students. Fifth, access students derive great support from the Access Office. Finally, we note that DCU piloted a student learning agreement in 2006. We hope that the pilot findings will lead to the adoption of a university-wide 'Two way Code of Conduct'

outlining the mutual obligations of academic staff and students in the academic environment.

The PRG also identified a number of concerns about the academic environment at DCU. First, there is no university-wide early warning system for identifying first year students who may be experiencing difficulties with the transition from second to third level education. A number of models operating in the academic environment could meet this need, including monitoring of attendance at classes, particularly during the first five to six week period of first semester, greater use of small group teaching, reliance on Moodle based assignments and setting mid-term assignments. We accept, however, that monitoring of attendance may be difficult in relation to larger classes and that greater use of small group teaching has obvious financial implications. We recommend that the university should identify and implement, across all schools, appropriate mechanisms in the academic environment that will identify first year students experiencing difficulties and that appropriate support be provided to such students.

Second, the personal tutoring system does not appear to be functioning effectively across all schools. The PRG understands that the university is currently reviewing this role and/or an academic advisor role and would urge careful consideration of the following recommendations in bringing this review to conclusion. We recommend that a university officer be appointed to oversee the operation of whichever system is adopted, that the role of the personal tutor or academic advisor be clarified, that a selection process be adopted to identify suitable staff for this purpose, that appropriate training be provided to such staff and that they be incentivised to take on this role through remission of teaching loads and enhancement of promotion prospects. In addition, each student's portal page should contain the name of his/her tutor/advisor.

Third, the quality of the classroom experience is patchy and there is evidence that some lecturers are not able to engage their students or maintain classroom discipline, particularly when teaching to very large classes. The quality of teaching is very relevant to the question of student retention and so we recommend that the Student Survey of Teaching (SSOT) should be made compulsory and consequential for all first year modules, with the SSOT results being made available to each Programme Chair. Schools should also ensure that lecturers are provided with appropriate training in relation to maintaining discipline in class. The PRG noted that specific provision has been made within a recently funded SIF programme shared between DCU and other institutes of higher education for training provision in this area.

Fourth, the issue of students working part-time presents a serious challenge for the third level sector generally. The SAR suggested that it may be of use to introduce a four-day week whereby students are encouraged to work on the fifth day but dedicate themselves entirely to their studies for the other four days. We consider that this suggestion is premature and that this issue needs to be debated further in the university. Fifth, we consider that mature students would benefit from greater support from the university. In particular, we recommend that DCU appoint a Mature Students' Officer and that the university support the mature students in establishing a Mature Students' Association.

**Overall Analysis of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Concerns**

<u>Strengths</u>	<u>Weaknesses</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Happy atmosphere</li> <li>▪ Many excellent and committed members of staff</li> <li>▪ Range and variety of student support activities currently in place</li> <li>▪ Flexibility</li> <li>▪ Many excellent facilities and good overall physical environment</li> <li>▪ Moodle</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Lack of co-ordination</li> <li>▪ Inconsistency of levels of support and advice provision</li> <li>▪ Poor evaluation system for teaching</li> <li>▪ Absence of early warning system to identify students at risk</li> <li>▪ Lack of engagement on the part of some staff and students</li> </ul>
<u>Opportunities</u>	<u>Concerns</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ First Year and Beginner Student SAR</li> <li>▪ Momentum created by Director of Student Affairs appointment and review process</li> <li>▪ Moodle and other web based developments that might assist student preparedness for entry to university, as well as integration and learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Part-time student phenomenon</li> </ul>

**5. Recommendations for Improvement**

The following notation is used in the recommendations for improvement.

- 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 timescale.
- P3: A recommendation which merits serious consideration but which is not considered to be critical to the quality of the ongoing activities associated with the Theme.

Additionally, the Review Group indicate the level(s) of the university where action is required by using the following:

- Adm: Administrative Units (specify if necessary)
- Sup: Support Units (specify if necessary)
- Aca: Academic Units (Faculties/Schools; specify if necessary)
- U: University Executive/Senior Management

It should be noted that many of the recommendations below will require university-wide support and/or a decision on the part of the university to move in a particular direction. Where this is clearly the case the notation U has also been applied.

In addition to recommendations that relate specifically to PRG findings outlined in sections 4.2 to 4.7 above, the PRG also identified a number of recommendations that span a number of these specific areas. These global recommendations are outlined directly below and recommendations relating to sections 4.2 to 4.7 follow thereafter. Please note that while some of the following recommendations will potentially affect the entire student body in a positive way, they are being made to particularly address improving the DCU First Year Student Experience.

### **Global recommendations**

1. **(PI U, Sup)** Develop a student retention strategy which addresses both student retention and development.
2. **(P1 U, Aca, Sup)** Develop the role of “first year leader” the duties and responsibilities attaching to which are universally defined and recognised within workload distribution and promotions criteria, and which is not school dependant.
3. **(PI U)** Establish a Committee comprising first year leaders and the Director of Student Affairs under the direct leadership of the VPLI. The main activities of this Committee should be twofold, firstly to develop a stimulating, welcoming atmosphere, encouraging and helping students to integrate and make the transition from school to university study and secondly to provide a predictive safety net, identifying students at risk.
4. **(PI Sup)** Articulate a clear ladder of referral to ensure that students can access relevant support services (academic and non-academic) and/or can be appropriately referred by members of staff whom they approach for assistance.
5. **(P2 Sup & Adm)** Develop a Postmaster system (mirroring the advice and support services) and FAQ system dealing with student concerns, linked to all DCU web resources, directed and managed by Student Affairs.

### ***Student Profile and Opinion***

6. **(PI Aca)** Identify and implement, across all schools, appropriate mechanisms in the academic environment (small group delivery, mid-term exams and attendance tracking, for example) that will identify first year students experiencing difficulties so that appropriate support can be provided to such students.
7. **(P1 U & Sup)** Invest in additional support staff, particularly in the student affairs section, to provide specific skills and continuity in survey deployment, to enhance data retrieval and analysis, to track transition, student progress and attendance and to routinely assist the Committee referred to in 3 above.

### ***Physical Environment***

8. **(P2 U, Adm, Estates)** Make provision for the refurbishment of classrooms in the Henry Grattan building including provision to bring technology within the building up to a level comparable with other teaching buildings across campus.
9. **(P2 U, Adm, Estates)** Make provision for the refurbishment of the Street and consider the provision of other social spaces (indoor and outdoor) for students.
10. **(P1 Adm & Estates)** Provide clearer external signage across campus and revise the campus map with a view to making it more readily comprehensible to new students.
11. **(P2 Adm & Estates)** Consider the relocation of the Disabilities Office in any future redistribution of space.
12. **(P2 U, Adm, Estates)** Review the layout of the fees office with a view to enhancing student service provision.

### **Administrative Services**

13. **(P1 Sup)** Co-ordinate existing and/or new orientation activities to provide a sustained schedule of orientation events, potentially including a “reorientation” programme at the beginning of second semester.
14. **(P2 Sup & Adm)** Ensure that members of staff who provide first point of contact functions – whether in central or school/faculty offices - are appropriately briefed and trained in the provision of student focused service, including the appropriate referral of students to other units.
15. **(P1 Adm)** Implement technological and student support improvements to the on-line registration process, aimed particularly at those students who are registering for the first time.

### **Student Support**

16. **(P2 Adm & LIU)** Examine how other universities have used tools such as Moodle to communicate with and prepare applicants for entry into higher education.
17. **(P2 Aca, Adm, Sup)** Examine the extension of the BEST Orientation Programme on a university wide basis.
18. **(P2 Aca & Sup)** Develop a university wide, curriculum based strategy to improve student skills in order to assist them in making the transition to self directed learning at third level. Consideration might be given to the development of a “college and life skills” module delivered to first year students during their first four to six weeks on campus, such a module to assist students in their transition to third level.
19. **(P1, Sup – Student Affairs)** Explore the reasons for long waiting lists for the Counselling Service and take action, accordingly, to reduce waiting times.
20. **(P2 U)** Review the continued location of Disability and Access Offices outside Student Affairs.
21. **(P1 Sup/U)** Ensure any decision in respect of the post of Student Activities Officer does not adversely affect engagement with Clubs and Societies.
22. **(P3, Adm, Sup, CSD, Students’ Union)** Investigate the establishment of a DCU web-based, student-led support forum addressing student concerns and issues, but linked to all DCU Web resources.

### **Student Facilities**

23. **(P2, Adm, Estates, Trispace)** Identify additional area(s) where students can consume their own food and drink and consider provision of access (supervised, if required) to microwave facilities and hot water.
24. **(P1, Adm & Accommodation Office)** Prioritise the allocation of on-campus accommodation on the basis of distance from the university in the first instance – international students and students coming from farthest outside Dublin and first year students.
25. **(P2, Accommodation Office, possibly SU)** Explore the establishment of a system of university approved, off-campus accommodation provision and assign a staff member at the start of the year to help students, particularly first year and international students, to find accommodation.

26. **(P2 U, Crèche Management Committee)** Review the limited number of places available to students and consider university subvention of costs associated with those student places and/or the provision of a specific child care fund to which students may make application to assist with costs.

### **Academic Environment**

27. **(P1 U)** Clarify the role of the personal tutor or academic advisor, adopting a universal definition of the role, applying a selection process to identify suitable staff for this purpose, providing appropriate training to those staff and providing recognition for the role within workload distribution and promotions criteria, and appoint a university officer to oversee the operation of the personal tutor/academic advisor system when revised.
28. **(P2 Aca, Sup, including LIU)** Develop a practicable “2 Way Code of Conduct” between students and the university (lecturers and university responsibilities) building on the findings of the Student Learning Agreement Pilot of 2006.
29. **(P2 Aca & Sup)** Match lecturers to the challenge of large group teaching, in particular, and provide appropriate training in this regard.
30. **(P1 Aca & U)** Make the Student Survey of Teaching (SSOT) compulsory and consequential for all first year modules.
31. **(P2 Aca, Sup, LIU)** Moodle should be used to at least a minimum defined level by all lecturers, and relevant guidelines and supports should be provided for lecturers.
32. **(P1 U)** Postpone the suggestion to move to a four day week in the context of the challenges of maintaining standards through a mix of contact hours, lecture attendance, academic learning and social and cultural life on campus.
33. **(P2 U)** Appoint a Mature Students’ Officer and support the mature students in establishing a Mature Students’ Association.