EUA (European University Association)
Institutional Evaluation Programme

INSTITUTIONAL QUALITY REVIEW OF THE DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY

EUA REVIEWERS' REPORT

February 2005

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1.   Introduction

Irish universities are required under the 1997 Universities Act to establish and implement procedures for quality assurance, and arrange for a review of the effectiveness of these procedures "from time to time and in any case at least every 15 years". For this purpose, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and all seven Irish universities represented by the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) engaged the European University Association (EUA) to undertake this review with the participation of experts from Europe, the USA and Canada.

The review of all seven Irish universities took place in a coordinated manner during the calendar year 2004, using the EUA institutional review methodology and guidelines. These guidelines were specially fine-tuned to meet the specific requirements of the Irish quality review. The process is designed to ensure that each individual university, the university system as a whole, and its stakeholders gain maximum benefit from comprehensive reviews by teams of experienced international quality assurance experts. This methodology also ensures that the procedures and processes in place in Irish universities are reviewed against best practice internationally.

The EUA has a strong international reputation in quality assurance having conducted institutional reviews of some 135 universities in some 33 countries during the past ten years. The tenth anniversary of the EUA programme was celebrated during 2004.

Under the joint IUQB/HEA commission, the EUA was requested to report on the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures in each university and the implementation of findings arising out of the application of those procedures, in the context of the university's overall institutional decision making and strategic planning.

It was further requested that these key elements should be placed within an institutional analysis, allowing the review teams to comment on institutional obstacles and success factors for an effective internal quality management.

EUA institutional reviews are usually based on an agreement between the university and the EUA, although there have been cases where the state authorities have accepted an EUA evaluation or review as part of a national quality assurance programme, without any special terms of reference. In the case of the Quality Review of Universities in Ireland, the HEA is clearly also an interested party in the process.

Following the formal request from the President of Dublin City University (DCU), the Steering Committee of the EUA institutional review programme appointed a team for the review of quality at DCU. This team was composed of:
- Jarmo Visakorpi, former Rector, University of Tampere, Finland, former Chair, Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council, as chair;
- Julio Pedrosa, former Rector, University of Aveiro, former Minister of Education, Portugal;
- Robin Farquhar, Professor Emeritus and former President, Carleton University and former President, The University of Winnipeg, Canada;
- Janet O'Sullivan, executive development officer at the Haute Ecole de Commerce, Paris, France, as secretary.

The team came to DCU for a preliminary visit from 25 to 27 April 2004 and for a main visit from 3 to 6 October 2004. Lewis Purser, Programme Manager at the European University Association,

stood in as team secretary for the main visit, Janet O'Sullivan being unfortunately obliged to withdraw for reasons of health.

The team met the President, Deputy and Vice-Presidents; representatives from Governing Authority, Academic Council, Student Union; staff and students of many Faculties and Schools and staff from a number of support units; and representatives of external stakeholders from business and industry as well as from the local community.

The team also had special meetings with persons representing DCU Schools and units which had been reviewed as part of DCU's Quality Review process (QRP), and read the reports to Governing Authority of Quality Reviews and of the Implementation of Recommendations at several Schools and units.

2. Process

The EUA quality review methodology is guided by four central strategic questions. These questions, which have also been taken adopted by the IUQB in its Framework for Quality in Irish Universities, are:

- What is the university trying to do?
- How is the university trying to do it?
- How does the university know that it works?
- How does the university change in order to improve?

The EUA team used these questions as its framework when reviewing the quality assurance process at DCU, within the wider institutional strategic setting. This approach was obviously familiar to those the team met during its visits since it is very similar to the quality review process adopted by DCU from the year 2000 on.

The process for the review of quality assurance at DCU started after the preparatory seminar for all Irish universities on 20 January 2004. During this seminar, the EUA review team members were able to meet the DCU President, Deputy President and Director of Quality Promotion and set the timetable for the work. DCU then appointed a steering committee according to the EUA guidelines. The DCU steering committee was chaired by the Deputy President. It appointed a further four sub-groups to discuss the main issues: teaching and learning, research and commercialisation, quality assurance processes and strategic planning, decision making and communication. The final draft of the DCU self-evaluation report (SER) was approved at the end of March, and received in good time by the EUA team before its preliminary site visit, which was the first of these visits to the Irish universities. This calendar shows that the process of preparing for the EUA review was an intensive one and well managed.

Although the preparation time was short, the SER was an honest and critical document, written from an analytical and problem-solving perspective. The report was clearly derived from the basic discussions in the four issue groups and their subgroups, the reports of which were also included. The SER followed the EUA guidelines and answered the core questions in each chapter. The open and participatory nature of the self-evaluation process, and the frankness of the SER were both commendable.

During the EUA team's visits, discussions were fruitful and were conducted in a very transparent way. The university was well prepared for the EUA visits, with the background to the team's presence and tasks well explained. The process at DCU was well prepared and well organized.

The EUA review team would like to thank the DCU President, Prof. Ferdinand von Prondzynski, and Deputy President, Prof. Albert Pratt, and all the staff, students and external stakeholders for their warm welcome and for many helpful and open discussions during its preliminary and main review visits. The team especially wishes to thank Dr. Padraig Walsh, Director of Quality Promotion, and his staff for their untiring interest and support and great efficiency in liaising with the EUA team.

3. DCU Profile

DCU is one of the youngest university institutions in Ireland, established as the National Institute for Higher Education Dublin in 1975. With approximately 10,000 students today it is a medium-, some might say optimum-sized institution, located on a modern campus on the north side of Dublin city. The university has also some important institutional links, e.g. to St. Patrick's College, the largest primary teacher training college in Ireland.

From the beginning, the university has had a clear strategic vision of what it wants to do: to fulfil the national requirements for a highly-trained workforce in the areas of business, science and electronics, computer technology and communication and languages. Although these goals were originally formulated when the statutory basis of the Institute was signed into the law in the early 1980s, they still fit very well in the contemporary society of the early 21st century. This vision has been providing a clear guideline for DCU for almost thirty years now, and even in the current strategic plan "Leading Change" (2001-2005) is clearly visible.

As part of this initial vision, DCU has been a pioneer in introducing work placement schemes as an integral part of its study programmes; likewise, its degree programmes were among the first in Ireland to be explicitly interdisciplinary. DCU has traditionally tried to differentiate itself from other universities by creating niches and offering programmes that are not available in other institutions. As such, the university has established a strong brand and reputation, particularly among students and the younger professional generations.

4. Mission and Vision

The EUA methodology uses the university's mission and vision as starting points in reviewing what the university is trying to do. However, the EUA team noticed that at DCU the words "mission" and "vision" are not often used. These concepts are incorporated implicitly into the strategic plan "Leading Change", to which frequent reference is made by a wide cross-section of the university community. The main lines of "Leading Change" could in fact be written as mission and vision statements but are not.

"Leading Change" was developed after the appointment of a new President in 2000 and in-depth consultation with staff and other university stakeholders. This plan was adopted by the Governing Authority in 2001 for a five year period, and outlines how the university aims to maximise DCU's distinctive values, based around the following characteristics:
- collaborative and networked
- accessible and open
- developmental and supportive
- innovative and flexible.

In the strategic plan the university also presents six academic themes or priorities for reaching its goals. The fact that it has been possible to agree on such priorities is in itself a very fine achievement: in traditional universities it is usually very difficult to identify and agree on such themes because discipline-based collegiality prevents prioritization. DCU's success in this may also be due to the fact that it has had a consistent vision from its earliest beginnings, as already mentioned. In the opinion of the EUA team, the choice of the six academic themes was also a wise one: they are interdisciplinary and problem based, covering all five Faculties at DCU in a variety of ways. The team also congratulates DCU for having included, along with the frequently addressed priorities in the fields of life sciences, engineering and business, some less typical themes involving communications, arts and culture, social development and, most importantly, education and learning.

These academic themes are designed to be interdisciplinary and operate on a matrix structure across the Faculties and Schools. New positions - theme leaders - are being created and filled to develop the work in these fields. These theme leaders will work together as a team and report to the Deputy President. They will join the Deans in the Academic Strategy Committee.

DCU is a specialised institution and wants to obtain a high national and international reputation in the fields of these themes. Prioritisation is therefore an important and necessary part of the university's strategy.

There would appear however to be some tension between DCU's work and reputation at national and international level, and its desire to contribute to local development. North Dublin has traditionally been a disadvantaged area and local participation rates in third-level education are low, particularly at universities. Local stakeholders would like to count on DCU as an interface on behalf of the North Dublin area. Of course, for DCU to act as the local university for the entire community, it would have to offer much the same array of courses as the other universities in Dublin, which makes no sense in a medium-sized city with so many other higher education providers. This would obviously also work against the specialisation which DCU is keen to achieve.

It is not easy to be a good regional university and at the same time to develop top class specialisations at national and international level. This dilemma, resulting from the success of DCU since its foundation, merits further in-depth discussion when developing the university's next strategic plan for the second five year period. This might also be the moment to consider developing a specific mission and vision for the university. As part of this process, DCU might also consider developing linkages with other avowed "urban universities" in both Europe and North America for the purpose of benchmarking and sharing best practices.

5. Student Issues

The admission of traditional students is obviously well organised in Ireland through the Central Applications Office (CAO) system. Although the right to choose its own students is one of the main elements of a university's autonomy, it is well recognised that national cooperation in this respect is necessary and often better than full individual autonomy. However, the EUA team considers that the systematic recruitment and admission of non-traditional and mature students needs a better organisational framework. DCU has so far been a leader in these fields but would also benefit from a more coherent national approach.

DCU is obviously very concerned about the decline in first preferences for its courses among incoming first year students, and the corresponding decline in the CAO point scores. This kind of

change has however happened across Europe in similar ways to Ireland, especially in the various fields of engineering, and more recently in computing. There is currently a tendency across Europe for students to look for "softer" and less intensive science and arts subjects. DCU should therefore be aware that its current experience is part of a wider European trend, and it may be worth collectively exploring some of the broader issues linked to this phenomenon within a group of likeminded universities. The challenge at DCU is however compounded by the fact that 94% of its first-year students come straight from school and that the age cohorts of school leavers are now getting smaller and will continue to do so.

DCU has ambitious research objectives. In order to reach these it will need to increase research capacity. One important way of achieving this is to train greater numbers of young researchers. Such a move would also fit well into the emerging Irish strategy for a creating a knowledge economy. Ireland has changed radically over the last ten or fifteen years, but the numbers of PhD students and post doctoral researchers still remain low, drawing the attention of bodies such as the OECD. Part of the change in Ireland has been the increasing internationalisation of many aspects of economic, social and cultural life, and the universities too have played their part in this. But if Ireland and DCU are to develop as envisaged, this international component will need strengthening at DCU, in both quantity and quality.

The EUA team would therefore suggest some changes in the student profile at DCU:

- More taught masters students, aiming at higher levels of specialisation for professional purposes and at the re-orientation of graduates towards new higher-level qualifications and skills. DCU currently has, in relative terms, the highest number of these students in Ireland, but this is still lower than in many other European countries;
- More Research Masters and PhD students for developing the research capacity and profile at DCU: the number of PhD students is generally low in Irish universities but especially low in DCU. One reason for this lies in the fact that the Business School, with over 2000 students, has less than thirty students in research based programmes. The situation at the School of Nursing is somewhat similar. The EUA team accepts that this is typical for these academic fields but nevertheless change is needed here also;
- In the future, adult education will become more and more important. DCU is already a key player in this field, with the National Distant Education Centre and other initiatives. One objective in "Leading Change" is to become the national leader in the provision of lifelong learning. For this to succeed, DCU will need further development of adult education and better integration of these initiatives into the "regular" educational programmes. A change in national policy regarding part-time students would also help encourage lifelong learning;
- More international students. Current numbers are already reasonably high but the possibilities for an English speaking society and university are excellent, both with respect to EU and non- EU students. This is also true for students from the developed as well as the developing world. DCU sees itself as a pioneer in promoting the international exchange of students. For internationalisation, it is however also important that increasing numbers of DCU's Irish students undertake part of their studies in other countries.

The EUA team would like to note the important effort that the university is putting into the Access programme. This experience will certainly also prove relevant in preparing DCU for dealing with a more diverse student population, as will certainly be the case in the near future.

6. Teaching and Learning.

The SER states that DCU has a "strong teaching and learning ethos". There are numerous indicators that the quality of teaching and learning is a priority concern at DCU which lead the EUA team to agree with this statement. Among these indicators, the team noted that, for example:

A Vice-Presidency for Learning Innovation has recently been established, along with Associate Deanships for Teaching and Learning in all Faculties. The appointment of a Head of Teaching and Learning, reporting to the Vice-President, was pending at the time of the EUA team's visits. A Learning Strategy Committee, not yet appointed at the time of the EUA visits, will report to the Academic Council and will submit matters to the Executive (via the Budget Committee) in relation to resourcing commitments. Teaching and Learning Committees are being created in each Faculty. The Faculty committees will be chaired by the Associate Deans for Teaching and Learning, who will also be members of the University's Learning Strategy Committee.

Programme Boards oversee the operation and monitor the quality of education in their respective programmes. Advisory Councils also exist through which external stakeholders can have input to quality improvements in certain programmes, e.g. in the Schools of Business and Communications. New programme proposals and major curriculum revisions are reviewed rigorously both internally and externally, according to a variety of significant criteria, before being authorized for implementation. These encompass the progressive stages of validation, accreditation, and approval. Periodic accreditation reviews of programmes in certain professional fields are also carried out by external bodies. A traditional system of external examiners, similar to that in British and other Irish universities, ensures that course contents and assessment procedures are reviewed regularly.

DCU undertakes surveys across the entire university of student opinion about teaching and learning quality at the levels of schools, and individual modules, as well as student experience surveys. A process of "structured discussions" also exists, involving focus groups in which students are encouraged to share concerns and suggest improvements regarding the quality of teaching and learning. Informal feedback is also garnered from the supervisors of students on work experience placements; the work placement programme organised by the INTRA office is a feature of most DCU programmes and constitutes one of the university's distinctive strengths. The university also solicits formal feedback from recent graduates and, to a lesser extent, their employers.

A variety of support services exist for students to help improve their learning capabilities – including, in particular, an Access programme for those who do not meet the normal admissions criteria due to various disadvantages. In terms of staff development, a teaching resource centre exists, through which a variety of services and programmes are made available to staff who wish to improve their teaching performance in specific fields. These services include enabling options such as e.g. sabbatical leaves, conference attendance, study opportunities, and certain other incentives to encourage excellence in teaching, such as prizes and awards. A dedicated fund also exists through which various initiatives to improve teaching and learning may be supported on a competitive basis.

It is also worth noting that DCU was recently chosen to become a pilot institution in Ireland for the full implementation of ECTS and the Diploma Supplement, key elements of the Bologna Process.

The above illustrations leave the EUA team in no doubt as to the seriousness with which DCU takes its teaching and learning responsibilities.

There are, however, several matters that have come to the team's attention which constitute potential concerns worthy of consideration as the University's current restructuring and strategic planning proceed. Among them are the following:

- While all of the examples listed above generate information and influence activity related to the quality of teaching and learning, it was not clear to the EUA team that these were well integrated with one another, or well articulated with the review process managed by the Quality Promotion Unit.

- Although the ultimate indicator of quality in teaching and learning is the performance of individual teachers, there does not seem to be a robust system of performance appraisal in place capable of assessing, rewarding and sanctioning behaviour in the instructional domain. This area also includes the possibility of teaching track promotions.

- The relationship between teaching and learning may need re-examining as part of the university's ongoing development. Many students apparently consider that there is too much formal contact teaching. The applied nature of many DCU programmes has traditionally required a heavy course load for students and relatively high numbers of contact hours compared to programmes offered in other universities. The Learning Strategy Committee at university level and the Teaching and Learning Committees at Faculty level can play a central role in assessing whether this should continue to be a characteristic of DCU and what alternative options might be suitable in the various fields.

- The complete modularisation of all study programmes is now underway at DCU. The EUA team would like strongly to endorse this move and encourage DCU to ensure that this is fully implemented without delay. This will be a crucial step for developing more flexible and interdisciplinary education, and will also prove important in facilitating non-traditional mature and international students, as well as the further development of adult education.

- Obtaining student feedback and opinions about the teaching and learning quality of overall programmes and individual modules currently depends on Faculties and Schools and is not mandatory. When such feedback is obtained, the methods for doing so are not applied consistently across the university's academic units. It would appear essential for DCU to have a more reliable and vigorous system in place across the institution to ensure such coherent feedback is obtained – at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels - and is used systematically to improve the quality of teaching and learning. This will require a certain amount of staff training in such feedback gathering techniques. It would also be desirable to provide greater and more regular feedback to the students themselves on the results of this work.

- There is widespread understanding that a strategic priority at DCU is to become rapidly recognized as a research-intensive university. The EUA team perceived a risk that the recognition of this objective may diminish the salience of the institution's teaching and learning mandate in the minds of some stakeholders, as well as among an important number of DCU staff.

- The team encountered two groups of students who were concerned that there seemed to be no administrative office at DCU to address their needs. These groups were:
    a. mature students who were not registered under the Access programme
    b. post-graduate, especially doctoral, students who were not international students

Both of these groups are reportedly of priority interest to the University. Indeed, regarding the post-graduate group and DCU's desire to increase substantially the proportion of its students at these levels, it may be worthwhile to consider establishing the position of Dean of Graduate Studies as many universities in western countries, including some others in Ireland, have already done.

- The University's success in promoting the development of more interdisciplinary programmes will depend, to a considerable extent, on the effectiveness of the new Executive Dean functions currently being implemented. However, the EUA team was not convinced that the appointees to these positions had as yet been given adequate authority regarding the allocation of resources, or a sufficiently clear understanding of the roles they are expected to play, in order to exercise this responsibility effectively, especially in the teaching and learning arena. The recent creation of the Faculties must result in genuine value added, where the whole is greater and better than the sum of its respective parts. This will require proactive leadership, and not only responsive coordination.

- Excellence in teaching and learning depends to a considerable extent on state-of-the-art infrastructure, including facilities, equipment and materials. This is an area where the EUA team noted some shortcomings and deterioration in some locations visited on campus; these weaknesses will need to be adequately addressed if the University is effectively to deliver on its commitment to teaching and learning quality.

Notwithstanding these possible concerns raised for consideration, the team wishes to emphasize that in all its discussions with students, staff members, external stakeholders, etc., it encountered virtual unanimity in commitment to high-quality teaching and learning, satisfaction and indeed pride in the educational experience offered at DCU, and optimistic enthusiasm for its prospects of attracting excellent students in the future.

7. Research and Commercialisation

Research Strategy and Governance

DCU considers itself to be a research led university and adopted a strategy in the mid-1990s that has been producing impressive outcomes over the last five years. In fact, through the University Designated Research Centres Programme, DCU has promoted the creation of critical mass in chosen strategic areas. In this way the institution has positioned researchers and units to seize, with success, the opportunities created through the recent development of research funding in Ireland. This is the case concerning the governmental Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTLI), the Irish Research Councils, the Health Research Board and Science Foundation Ireland (SFI), in the areas of ICT and Biotechnology.

A Research Committee of Academic Council is responsible for the development of research policy and strategy development, with the assistance of a Research Advisory Panel. This Panel has responsibility for allocating part of the annual internal DCU research budget, approximately € 430,000 per year. The majority of the internal research budget, approximately € 1,380,000, is allocated by the Research Committee.

The creation of the position of Vice-President for Research has allowed this strategy to be driven at the highest level and is a signal of the importance given to this sector of activity at DCU. The recent move to Faculty structures at DCU has also helped gain a better strategic grasp of research activity,

facilitating synergies and rationalization. The introduction of the six cross-cutting academic themes through the strategic plan is also a new and demanding challenge for the governance of research. The on-going appointment of the theme leaders is especially important here and is intended to help ensure the relevance of research to the main strategic thrusts of the university. The need for these different layers to mesh well together calls for the careful attention of the leadership in order to ensure continued success in the years to come.

Research Organization

Research is organised in two types of centres at DCU, although obviously much research also takes place outside of any such centre:
- University Designated Research Centres may receive (through competitive bidding) funding from the DCU Research Advisory Panel which is responsible for assessing them and has the power to dissolve them if they are not meeting expectations.
- National Research Centres are the flagships for DCU's research. The successful development of a research strategy since 1995 has led to the financing of four National Research Centers. This is a recognition of the quality and high potential of the research developed at DCU.

All research centre staff and students must also be affiliated to a School. Research centres have their own budgets, up to 30% of which may come via the Faculties from the university. The organization of research in these centres and the creation of Faculties have brought additional complexity to the structure of the organization. This issue and the apparent lack of communication about the research strategy and ongoing developments of the Faculties are raising some concern among the academic community.

The sustainability of the research infrastructure is a matter of utmost importance at DCU, calling for adequate State and institutional resource policies, where overheads must be considered as an integral part of the research funding. This is a new concept in Ireland. The inclusion of overheads in SFI funded projects (30%) shows some understanding for this essential aspect of the financial organization of research, which should be shared by other agencies also. Overheads will allow the freeing up of other resources, thus allowing DCU to increase its discretionary budget for research. This funding can then be distributed to selected units in order to provide an incentive to bring in additional funding.

At a time when executive Deans and theme leaders are being selected and appointed, the preparation of a new strategic plan is also under way. This is an excellent opportunity to reinforce communications and develop a sense of ownership concerning all these innovative and challenging research developments.

Postgraduate Research Based Programmes

The development of the research base of any university is strongly dependent on its capacity to attract postgraduate research students at PhD level as well to involve postdoctoral fellows. In DCU the number of PhDs is low by international standards, and the structures for encouraging these students not fully developed. The EUA team was not surprised to see recommendations for an increase in MSc student numbers, both taught and research, in the quality review reports of some Schools. Post graduate research work has until now been dominated by individual activity and small projects, but with the desired growth in numbers and importance of this activity, it seems essential to introduce a more structured approach, where individuals and projects would be part of larger

programmes, bringing together students for some taught modules but also in order to meet, stimulate and learn from each other. The EUA team was told of recent positive experiences in this respect in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Indeed, postgraduate research based structures and systems nationally do not appear to be very well organised. Clearer and more explicit structures and systems at national level would certainly be of benefit to DCU and probably to the other Irish universities also. The need to double the numbers of PhD students, highlighted in the OECD report as a national challenge, is an indication that this matter needs to be taken seriously. This development, however, may need the same level of forward looking policies for scholarships as those adopted for research infrastructure. The EUA team is aware that some work has started in this field and would encourage DCU and the other universities to ensure it is followed through.

Another issue raised and needing consideration by due authorities is the employment situation of researchers and research technicians. When the financial basis for developing research is being increased, as is the case in Ireland, the strategy and policies for human resources need to be pursued with the same determination and sense of priority. The development of a career track for research which the university is currently promoting should be commended and deserves appropriate support.

Research Commercialization

The recognized tradition in DCU of cooperation with industry has led to a number of innovative approaches aiming at stimulating knowledge transfer, including via spin-off companies. A campus company, Invent, has been founded with the mission to stimulate the commercialization of research and to assist researchers in the management of Intellectual Property Rights. The adoption of the "National Code of Practice for the Management of Intellectual Property from Public Funded Research" is an encouraging development in creating a transparent framework for progress in this area. The excellent facilities that Invent provides for developing knowledge based businesses and the support given to other technology transfer initiatives will certainly increase DCU's capacity to contribute to the development of a knowledge based economy. The team was pleased to note that entrepreneurship courses are already well embedded in the culture of the university. However it came as a surprise to learn that Invent has not been associated with the current procedures for quality reviews at Schools. It might be useful to ensure that, in the relevant cases, Invent systematically informs the QRP process relating to the work of the Schools concerning research commercialization, IPR, and related matters.

The network of relations with industrial partners which has resulted from the long standing placement of students is certainly one very valuable instrument for developing cooperation in research and related areas. DCU can build on this strong network of contacts. The university appears to be considered by companies as willing to engage with industry, happy to collaborate and not trying to dictate the fields of research. This perception helps to facilitate a two-way relationship where the benefits are evident on both sides. Work placements and other contacts have led to master and PhD programmes with private partners. Companies have also given capital funding in return for priority access to equipment when needed. However, it was suggested during the team's visits that DCU's work in developing such relations would benefit from greater planning and setting of goals. This may be one area in which the new theme leaders could play an important role.

8. Governance and management

Governing bodies at the central level

The principal governing body at DCU is the Governing Authority (GA). The size of the GA was recently reduced to 26 members. The GA membership includes representatives of different categories of DCU staff, a number of external representatives, two representatives from the Students Union and one postgraduate student. The composition of the GA is defined in great detail in the 1997 Universities Act. However, the recent OECD report suggests a general reduction in size of such governing authorities at all Irish universities, and proposes a maximum of twenty members, a majority of which should be lay members, that is from outside the university. The EUA team agrees in principle with the OECD recommendation, although there were few signs at DCU that the current structure was unworkable.

The 1997 legislation also gives an overview of the GA's formal functions; as in other universities with such a body, these are essentially supervisory. It might prove useful for DCU to revisit these basic functions of the GA, since the EUA team learned that much time in GA meetings tended to be spent on rather operational matters. The GA external members whom the EUA team met were of the opinion that it would be more useful and productive to concentrate on strategic issues during meetings; they also welcomed the suggestions of the OECD report.

The internal governance structures at DCU consist of two strands: an executive and an Academic Council. The composition and business of the Academic Council is also laid down in the Universities Act and follows a traditional governance model. The organisational chart shows 21 committees at university level.

Given the size of DCU, the EUA team wonders whether this kind of governance with so many committees can really work effectively. This may also be one of the reasons why many members of staff consider that the university has become rather top heavy and unwieldy. Restructuring this system and reducing the number of committees could certainly be achieved even in the current legal framework.

Faculties and Schools

DCU has five recently created Faculties, covering a total of thirteen Schools. The Schools are larger than discipline based departments, which is an important aspect of DCU's identity and academic culture. A new organisational structure is currently being put into place, placing the real decision making responsibility as far down inside this structure as possible. This is being achieved through the establishment of the positions of Executive Dean with resource management responsibilities in each of the five newly defined Faculties. As a result, funding is moving away from Schools and towards Faculties. This is because there was a feeling that there had been too many cost centres to be efficient. This change has not been fully executed, and the Faculties therefore have not yet reached their potential in terms of effective and efficient academic management.

In order to facilitate the devolution of powers to the Executive Deans, human resources structures have also been streamlined. The EUA team understood that the role of the Human Resources Office will now be to focus on HR development issues while the Deans will assume a more managerial and operational role. The HR office will be there to support them in this task.

The SER states that "DCU is committed to developing radical and creative approaches to organisational and decision-making processes". The EUA team would like to encourage DCU to follow through with this idea and ensure these plans are implemented in all Faculties. It would appear that not all Faculties are as yet fully prepared for this.

In a relatively small university such as DCU, it is important to keep the organisational structure as flat as possible and to avoid making decisions at many different levels. The optimum would be decision making at two levels: the grass roots level as close as possible to the unit where the process takes place, then one at a more centralized level, i.e. at Faculty or University level. The EUA team observed many examples at DCU where decisions on one issue appeared to be needed from a multitude of different levels and bodies, resulting in very slow processes and ineffective management.

9. Finances

As in the other Irish universities, DCU's funding is based on a block grant and the funding of student fees by the State. The block grant is received as a lump sum, and the university can decide on how it uses this.

Based on the data provided, the EUA team estimates that 97% of DCU's current income, excluding research income, comes from the State. Recent cuts have proved that this cannot be relied on in the future. There is a fear that if fees are reintroduced, further cuts may be expected. The university is seeking to consolidate its future by attracting non-traditional and foreign students as well as by a drive for commercial funds.

Given the move to Faculty-level cost centres, the university is currently redesigning its budget allocation system, moving from a cost allocation system to an income system. Income targets are being established for Faculties, with a predicted surplus or deficit. The Faculty should then be free to manoeuvre within these targets. Concerns about the distribution of the budget between the central administration and Faculties were expressed in such terms that the EUA team would strongly suggest that this issue should be given close attention.

The external funding of research, based on national competition, has expanded rapidly since the late 1990s. It is important to repeat that there must be a well functioning overhead policy as part of this research funding, otherwise it will inevitably draw money away from the teaching and learning activities of the university.

10. Quality assurance

Background

The Universities Act from 1997 requires that all Irish universities must create an internal QA system. This law also lays down the basic framework for this system:
- the evaluations should be conducted at regular interval and not less than once in 10 years
- all Departments and, where appropriate Faculties, and any services provided by the university should be evaluated
- teaching, research and the provision of other services should be the subjects of evaluation.

DCU adopted this type of Quality Review process as a basis for statutory quality assurance in the year 2000. In adopting the national framework, DCU has chosen to evaluate only Schools and

service units, which has made it possible to set a six year cycle for the reviews. This means an average of three schools and three units per year. This sounds very reasonable and is also a result of the rather low number of schools in DCU. Since the start of the review operations in 2000, eight schools and four service units have been reviewed.

Process

In DCU the Quality Review process is overseen by the Quality Promotion Committee, which is a subcommittee of University Executive. Members are nominated by the schools and units. The executive unit is the Quality Promotion Unit which has its own director and staff. This unit functions under the umbrella of EOLAS and reports to the President.

Although all universities operate under the same law and follow the same IUQB guidelines, there are also internal adaptations of the method. However the basic method, as a cyclical quality review, involves similar steps. The procedure is as follows:
- Self-assessment
- Visit by a peer review group
- Report by the peer review group with recommendations for improvements
- Development of an implementation plan
- Publication of the outcomes

In preparing for the self-assessment phase, the unit in question appoints a co-ordinating committee. The self-assessment takes about one year. The self-assessment reports are not published, since these are confidential to the unit and the peer review group.

The EUA team asked to see a number of SERs. These appeared to be well written documents going into considerable detail regarding the operations of the unit and the work of its staff. A noticeable feature was the size of these reports, some of which contained huge amounts of archive material, CVs, academic profiles etc. The team was worried that in some cases the essential analytical elements of a self-assessment might get lost in the accumulation of information regarding the unit. The EUA team would also encourage DCU to ensure that SERs are kept to a maximum length of 25-30 pages. Annexes can of course be added to this.

The Peer Review Groups (PRG) which come to DCU are composed of five members: three of these are external and two are internal. The Chair of the PRG is selected from among the external members of the group during the visit. One of the external members is from outside Ireland. One of the internal members is always a member of the QPC and acts as rapporteur for the group. The PRG produces a final report with recommendations for improvement.

Some concern was expressed about the standard composition of the PRG. While it is certainly useful to have both internal and external members of the group, especially during the first cycle of reviews, the EUA team learnt that more flexibility may be needed in assembling these groups. The choice of internal and external members can sometimes be problematical. Given DCU's size, as well as its distinctive profile in Ireland, it may on occasion be better for more of the PRG members to come either from outside DCU or from outside the country. The expertise available locally or nationally may not always be suitable.

The PRG report then goes to the Executive to prepare a university response, which is addressed to the Governing Authority. Recommendations emanating from the PRG report should be treated at a local level, School level, Faculty level and institutional level. The Executive response establishes

what issues should be addressed, at which level and by whom. The whole process, following the finalisation of the PRG report, includes some six to eight different steps and takes between four to ten months.

The PRG report and the Executive response both go to the Governing Authority. This body has been known to return the university's response if it is felt that the issues have not been fully addressed. For example, the need for refurbishment emerged strongly in the School of Communications' report but the Executive did not address this in its response. The Governing Authority returned the response.

Other quality monitoring procedures

In addition to this statutory periodical quality review process there also exist a number of other mechanisms for quality assurance in the university. These include:
- The Student Experience Survey and Student Opinion of Teaching are centrally operated on a rolling basis within DCU
- Employers feedback through work placement (INTRA)
- Reviews of the Research Centres conducted by the Research Advisory Panel
- Individual review of teachers, schools and programme boards outside of the formal processes
- Internal accreditation and validation of all new programmes
- External accreditation of certain programmes by the relevant professional bodies on a regular basis
- External examiners who look at the teaching programmes and assessment procedures
- Various internal competitive funding opportunities to reward excellence

These and other mechanisms are referred to in the SER. However, during the QRP within units, it may be useful to make the links between the process and these other mechanisms more explicit, as part of a general move towards an overall quality culture at DCU.

Observations on the quality review process

The QRP system at DCU enjoys a high level of constructive acceptance among the university community. The President has encouraged a healthy and open climate for the quality reviews and would like the units to use the exercise to engage in frank assessment, as part of developing a quality culture at DCU. The process is generally considered effective, with many important benefits to be obtained, especially during the self-assessment period. The work of the Quality Promotion Unit was universally praised by those whom the EUA team met, and the entire process was considered to be well managed.

The EUA team considers that the QRP in DCU is well planned and thoroughly executed. DCU has made a wise choice in using this method to review the basic units, Schools and service units. The relatively small number of units makes it possible to have a shorter interval between reviews than some other Irish universities. However, six years is still too long a time to wait to comment on a system which effects a unit's daily operations, or for a follow-up for any particular unit, and evidence is lacking regarding the university-wide use of results.

It is also difficult for the EUA team to understand why the QR process at each unit takes such a long time – even 18 to 24 months in total. In the team's opinion, the time for self-assessment is far too long, and the university process following the delivery of the PRG report is very complicated,

going through several committees and likewise taking many months. The length of the process could mean that the initial self-evaluation work and the quality improvement plans proposed by the Schools are out of date by the time the university has responded.

DCU staff from the reviewed units felt the PRG reports to be critical in a constructive sense, and helpful in seeing how problems could be resolved. The role of the international reviewers was seen as very important in ensuring the validity of the process. The heavy workload was often mentioned but the process itself is clearly respected. The undergraduate students are however generally unaware of it; when they do notice something they often confuse the QRP with course evaluations and feed-back.

Expectations resulting from the process are therefore high. Many improvements have been proposed as a result of the QRP which did not require any funding; very often, these improvements have been implemented. However, many units are disappointed because the resource allocation resulting from the QRP has not followed as expected, and the outcomes have not influenced subsequent budget allocations. This may be due to recent budgetary cuts and the difficult overall financial situation. Although DCU has built up a fund to address the issues emerging from the reports, this fund is very small. It has nevertheless brought some satisfaction. However, the EUA team heard several times that it was difficult for units to say that as a result of the QRP they received this or that investment, and there was a general feeling among many members of staff that the overall results emerging from the implementation phase were rather minimal. There is therefore a major risk of demotivation that could compromise the whole approach. The exercise could then be perceived as a paper one and nothing more.

Some dissatisfaction was also expressed at the response by senior management to the quality reviews. This was sometimes seen by the units as inadequate. There is concern that by just focusing on Schools, the review processes might not address the changes that are really needed. Senior management must ensure that it has an overview of the QRP outcomes and prioritise accordingly, in order to enable the university to learn collectively from the review cycle and draw lessons. No regular analysis of the results of the QRP would appear to be made at university level, although such an analysis should be important for the work of the Quality Promotion Committee, the Academic Council and the Governing Authority.

Thus a better management of expectations among staff is needed, as well as a more explicit link by the university executive between the QRP outcomes and strategic management.

Likewise, although the recently established research centres may need their own QA processes, with slight variations in procedure because of the external financial and other inputs, explicit links between the various forms of QA at DCU should be strengthened.

Finally, in seeking to establish a quality culture at DCU, care must be taken to ensure that there is not an over-emphasis in reviews on prescribed procedures and established structures to promote quality, at the expense of developing a responsive capacity to facilitate timely change as opportunities, needs, and priorities arise. The danger of concentrating on quality assurance at the expense of promoting quality improvement must be foreseen and avoided.

Suggestions for the future

Once the first full round of reviews is over, which is currently foreseen for 2006-7, there will be plenty of scope for discussing the future of this process. However, based on its observations so far, the EUA team would like, at this early stage, to suggest the following changes for the second round of the QRP at DCU:

- During the second round, the SER and PRG reports of the first round should serve as good background documents, so that the second round could be seen as a follow-up in those cases where the unit is still working in more or less the same structure and context;

- The methodology should be also made lighter, more flexible and less time consuming. There is no reason to spend a whole year on the self-assessment. This gives a wrong signal to staff since the review should be part of a normal planning process and not a heroic event to be experienced once or twice in a lifetime. Shortening the process can also be achieved by using the university database more effectively, with agreed performance indicators as a basis for the evaluation. The SERs should be shorter and more analytical, based on SWOT analyses;

- The PRG report should initially go to the Dean, in addition to the Head of School and President as is currently the case. The Dean should then have the responsibility to discuss it in the Faculty executive board and to link the results to the plans of the respective Faculty through which the implementation should happen. In addition, the Dean should be linked to the process during the planning period also. Both these suggestions could help shorten the reporting phase, thus rendering it more effective and useful.

- The follow-up to the quality improvement plans appears generally to be inconsistent. The team understood that as one measure to improve this, it has already been decided that quality improvement plans will be discussed directly between the head of unit and the executive. This is a good proposal. It may also be useful for presentations on quality improvement implementation to be made to the executive after a fixed period, and for an overview of quality improvement activities to be presented to the Governing Authority on a regular basis.

- The interval between reviews should be shortened so that it corresponds to the period of strategic planning, i.e. four or five years. In this way the outcomes can be more closely related to other developments across the university.

11. Strategic Planning and Quality Review

The present strategic plan "Leading Change" is the result of a very inclusive process and there is a high level of ownership among the university community. The EUA team felt however that the plan was rather aspirational and was struck by the slow implementation of the strategy. Elements have been introduced but not executed completely, and along the way a number of variations have been accepted. A common comment to the team's questions about the status of the reforms and changes was that things were "ongoing". These situations cause uncertainty among staff, which again can feed many kinds of comments about hierarchy, poor communications etc. The implementation of the plan is now complicated by the preparatory phase for a new strategic plan.

The link between the QRP, the executive and the strategic plan was not clear to the EUA team. It did not appear that the quality process was aligned with the university strategic processes. In the opinion of the team, quality should be pivotal to the strategic planning exercise. One potential link could be through the growing importance of the Faculties and the new powers of the executive Deans. The QRP reports should in any case go to the Deans as part of the Executive. The team understood that in future the Faculty boards will also receive the results and recommendations

emerging from the QRP process and that through the Faculty these should be linked with the institutional strategic plans. The new role of the Deans will give them the responsibility to allocate resources and the power to influence the implementation of recommendations.

However, the reform of the internal managing structure linked to "Leading Change" is also underway but has not yet been implemented completely. The roles of the Executive Deans versus the roles of the heads of School and theme leaders need to be clarified. Deans, heads of School and theme leaders will have to work together on strategic planning, but their respective responsibilities should be clear, as well as their respective authority over resource allocations. For the Faculties to achieve their essential objectives it will be crucial to ensure the new role of the Deans is clearly defined for all involved, especially so with the concurrent introduction of theme leaders into DCU's organisational structure. Consequently, the team was pleased to learn of plans to arrange some professional development workshop experiences for the executive Deans.

Vertical and horizontal communications at DCU have been identified by the university as areas where improvement is needed. It is clear that communication on planning is not fully shared among DCU staff. The President indicated that steps had already been taken to remedy this.

For the purposes of promoting and assisting strategic planning at institutional level, the EUA team would like to suggest an additional way to proceed which may also produce interesting results. This would be to identify university-wide issues for review and not only units. Experience already exists at DCU of this kind of sectoral review, since a number of the university-wide services have already been evaluated. This model could be used more widely when needed for strategic purposes, for instance to review teaching methods, PhD programmes, etc. across the whole university.

It is important not to forget that, as already mentioned, there are plenty of other quality assurance and quality monitoring processes going on continuously at DCU. They are usually not as explicit and as well structured as the statutory quality review process, but they are also most important for safeguarding the quality of the university processes and important also for ongoing incremental improvement. These other methods also need regular attention and development.

12. Recommendations

In terms of mission:

- Given DCU's recent rapid development and the growth in its range of activities, use the next strategic planning phase to develop an explicit mission statement, outlining succinctly what the university is trying to do;

- As part of DCU's ongoing development and also in response to the changing nature and needs of Irish society, broader the student profile further to include greater numbers of post-graduate, international, non-traditional and mature students;

In terms of teaching and learning:

- Implement fully the ongoing modularisation of all study programmes at DCU;

- Put in place a more reliable and vigorous student feedback system, so that the quality of all courses and modules is monitored and that this is used systematically to improve the quality of teaching and learning;

- Re-examine the relationship between teaching and learning in DCU's programmes, so that this fits well with the desired learning outcomes of each programme;

- Explore available options for implementing a robust system of performance appraisal, capable of assessing, rewarding and sanctioning staff teaching performance;

In terms of research:

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

- Examine possible strategies for developing more systematic research links with DCU's extensive network of industrial and other partners;

In terms of quality assurance:

- Strengthen the explicit links between the various forms of quality assurance at DCU, as part of the university's ongoing development of a quality culture;

- Align the quality review process with the university's strategic processes;

- INVENT should systematically inform the quality review process of relevant Schools concerning research commercialization, IPR, and related matters;

- Adopt a flexible approach when putting together peer review teams, in order to ensure that the collective expertise matches DCU's strategic needs

- Ensure that the length of time allocated to the self-assessment phase is kept as short as usefully possible. The same applies in preparing the official university response to the peer review group's report;

- Apply strict limits of 25-30 pages, excluding annexes, to the length of self-evaluation reports;

- Make more systematic and effective use of the university's database. This will also help reduce the length of time needed to compile reports;

- Reduce the overall length of the quality review cycle to match that of the strategic planning cycle. Six years is too long. Extra reviews can comfortably be fitted in each year to make this possible;

- Use relevant reports from the first round of quality review as good background documents for the second round, to ensure that this builds on the previous outcomes;

- Identify university-wide issues for review which could contribute to the ongoing development of quality at DCU;

- Put in place mechanisms to ensure undergraduate students are more aware of the quality assurance process and contribute to this;

In terms of management and governance:

- Develop a more explicit link between the quality review outcomes and strategic management;

- Ensure staff expectations regarding the quality review process are more realistic and long-term;

- Clarify the respective roles of the executive Deans, the heads of School and the theme leaders;

- Ensure that peer review group reports also go to the relevant Dean, who should then have the responsibility to oversee implementation;

- Linked to this, develop further mechanisms to ensure a more consistent follow-up to the quality improvement plans across the university;

- Identify possibilities to simplify decision-making processes, aiming for decisions on any one topic to be made at two levels only.

Envoi

The EUA team wishes to thank DCU once again for the excellent arrangements provided for the review team. It was a pleasure to be in Dublin and to explore the strategic lines of the university and its quality assurance system with staff, students, and external stakeholders. This review has taken place during a rather turbulent time for Irish higher education, with a number of other important initiatives also underway. The team trusts that DCU will find its comments and suggestions helpful, and wishes this young and vigorous university all the best for the next stage of its development.