Quality Assurance / Quality Improvement Programme for Academic Units

2005-2006

Peer Review Group Report
for
Oscail

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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. An internal team in the Unit being reviewed completes a detailed self-assessment report (SAR). It should be noted that this document is confidential to the Unit and to the Review Panel and to 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 Unit and conduct discussions with a range of staff, students and other stakeholders.
3. The PRG then writes its own report. The Unit is given the chance to correct possible factual errors before the Peer Group Report (PGR) is finalised.
4. The Unit produces a draft Quality Improvement Plan (QuIP) in response to the various issues and findings of the SAR and PGR Reports.
5. The PGR and the Unit draft QuIP are considered by the Quality Promotion Committee.
6. The draft QuIP is discussed in a meeting between the Unit, members of the Peer Group, the Director of Quality Promotion and Senior Management. The University's responses are written into the QuIP, and the result is the finalised QuIP.
7. A summary of the PRG Report, the QuIP 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. Profile of Oscail

Location of the Unit

Oscail – The National Distance Education Centre is located in the Bea Orpen Building on the southern side of the DCU Campus.

Staffing

Table 1.1 Grade Structure of Oscail

Academic Staff	Permanent	Number of staff
	Director	1
	Senior lecturer	2
	Lecturer (above bar)	2
	Lecturer (below bar)	1
	Temporary full-time	
	Lecturer (above bar)	1
	Lecturer (below bar)	1
Administrative Staff	**Permanent**	
	Grade 5	2
	Grade 4	2
	Grade 3	3
	Grade 2	7
	Temporary full-time	2
	Temporary part-time	4
Technical support staff	**Permanent**	–
	Temporary full-time	4

Oscail currently employs 120 Academic specialists that include Subject Leaders, Writers Freelance Editors, Tutors and Project Supervisors on a contract basis. A further 80 external personnel serve on a voluntary non-paid basis as Course Teams/Programme Boards.

Programmes / Outputs

The following table show the current student enrolment for Oscail programmes over the last 5 years. Oscail students design their own study pathway and select the number of modules they wish to take in an academic year. Oscail students can therefore determine the pace at which they study and when they will complete their studies/qualify. The first year enrolments (Table 1.3 & Table 1.5) over the last 5 years identifies a significant issue for Oscail in terms of student recruitment.

Table 1.2   Number of undergraduate enrolments by programme, 2002–2006

Description	Year				
	2002	**2003**	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**
Diploma/BA in Humanities	872	871	839	831	740
Bachelor of Nursing Studies	168	199	245	229	189
Diploma/BSc in Information Technology	893	723	559	443	332
Total undergraduates	1933	1793	1643	1503	1261

Table 1.3   Number of first-time undergraduates by programme, 2002–2006

Description	Year				
	2002	**2003**	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**
Diploma/BA in Humanities	251	260	210	217	159
Bachelor of Nursing Studies	63	85	102	35	36
Diploma/BSc in Information Technology	224	173	101	96	65
Total first-time enrolment	538	518	413	348	260

Table 1.4   Number of postgraduates by programme, 2002–2006

Description	Year				
	2002	**2003**	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**
Grad Dip/MSc in Man./Appl. of IT in Accounting	142	91	74	40	29
Grad Dip/MSc in Operations Management	110	103	90	76	60
MSc in Internet Systems	103	110	93	95	71
Total postgraduates (taught)	355	304	257	211	160

Table 1.5   Number of first-time postgraduates by programme, 2002–2006

Description	Year				
	2002	**2003**	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**
Grad Dip/MSc in Man./Appl. of IT in Accounting	30	19	15	7	10
Grad Dip/MSc in Operations Management	46	21	23	25	18
MSc in Internet Systems	37	33	24	21	16
Total first-time enrolment	113	73	62	53	44

2.   The Self-Assessment Process

The Co-ordinating Committee

Oscail's Quality Coordinating Committee was appointed in November 2005. This committee, which was selected to be representative of the functions and grades within Oscail, held its first meeting on 1st December 2005. The following is the committee membership:

Dr. Liam Boyle (Lecturer) - Chair
Ms. Francesca Lorenzi (Lecturer)
Mr. Paul Moore (Administration)
Ms. Deirdre Mooney (Administration)
Ms. Shirley O'Brien (Administration)
Ms. Maree Ralph (Administration)
Dr. Ronnie Saunders (Director)
Ms. Michelle Smyth (Administration)

Dr Kay MacKeogh (Senior Lecturer), Acting Director, acting for Dr Ronnie Saunders during his illness

Methodology Adopted

An initial briefing on the DCU quality process and on the Oscail Quality Review was held with Oscail campus staff on 29th June 2005. This explained the process generally and presented the key dates to staff members in relation to review of Oscail.

At the first meeting the Quality Committee drew up a list of tasks and allocated responsibility for these tasks. Progress on tasks was monitored and reported on at subsequent meetings of the Committee. There were a total of 12 meetings for the Quality Committee. Questionnaire surveys were conducted with students, graduates and tutors and information on Oscail's operational procedures were gathered.

An Away Day for all campus-based staff was organised for Thursday 23rd February, facilitated by an external. In advance of the Away Day staff attended a further briefing session on the quality process on Monday 20th February. The major outcome from the Away Day was the development of a SWOT analysis of Oscail. In addition, external subject leaders contributed individual SWOT analyses via email. Additional meetings were organised with Oscail academic staff to consider the academic dimension of the quality review. The Quality Committee used Moodle as an information repository and a discussion board during the production of the Self-Assessment Report. This provided visibility for all committee members to the material gathered and produced and was especially valuable for final editing of the Report.

3. The Peer Review Group Process

Overall Comments on the Visit

The site visit was somewhat unusual in that it commenced with a meeting with the Senior Management Group rather than the normal briefing session with the Director for Quality Promotion. This meeting with the Senior Management Group was useful in setting the context for the Oscail Quality Review within the strategic developments that are being explored generally by Dublin City University.

The overriding sense during the meetings with staff was the degree of commitment and enthusiasm evidenced by their contributions. This was complemented by the positive feedback from Oscail students, and tutors and from DCU staff external to Oscail. Staff within Oscail and within DCU frequently referenced the lack of clarity regarding Oscail's status, and relationship to DCU, generally.

The PRG felt that the early scheduling of the Exit Presentation to Oscail staff did not allow sufficient time for the formulation of conclusions and preparation of a presentation. The re-scheduling of this presentation was readily agreed to. As a result of overruns on Thursday morning the PRG decided to forego the visit to Oscail's core facilities and the campus tour.

Site Visit Programme.

Day 1 (Wednesday 26 April 2006)

14.00 – 14.45	1st meeting of the Peer Review Group with Senior Management Group (President, Deputy-President, Vice-President for Research, Vice-President for Learning Innovation/Registrar, Director of Human Resources, Director of Finance)
15.00 – 16.30	Meeting of members of the Peer Review Group Briefing by Director of Quality Promotion.
16.30 – 17.30	Consideration of Self-Assessment Report with Oscail Quality Co-ordinating Committee
19.30	Dinner for members of the Peer Review Group, the Director of Quality Promotion and Oscail Quality Co-ordinating Committee

Day 2 (Thursday, 27 April 2006)

09.00 – 12.00	Further consideration of Self-Assessment Report and other inputs from other Oscail staff.

The Peer Review Group meet the following administrative and technical Groups:
- 10:00 Programme Support
- 10:15 Information and Advisory Service
- 10:30 Course Materials Production
- 10:45 E-Learning Support

Individual Staff:

	• 11:30 Kay MacKeogh and Seamus Fox
	• 11:45 Deirdre Mooney
12.00 – 13.00	Visit to core facilities of Oscail and Campus Tour - QPU *(Not undertaken due to meeting overruns)*
13.00 – 14.00	Brief Discussion with the Director of Quality Promotion
14.00 – 15.00	Meetings with Oscail academic staff/coordinators:
	• 14:00 BA Coordinators
	• 14:15 BSc. Coordinator
	• 14:30 BNS Coordinator
	• 14:45 Postgraduate Programmes Coordinators
15.00 - 17.00	Meetings with students, graduates and tutors and student conference calls:
	• 15:00 Students/Graduates
	• 15:30 Tutors
	• 16:00 DCU Staff focus group
17.30 – 18.30	Meeting of Peer Review Group to identify remaining aspects to be clarified and to finalise tasks for the following day
19.30	Working private dinner for members of the Peer Review Group

Day 3 (Friday, 29 April 2006)

09.00 – 09.45	Meeting of Peer Review Group to finalise arrangements for the day
10.00 – 10.30	2nd Meeting with Senior Management Group
10.30 – 11.00	Meeting with Vice-President for Learning Innovation/Registrar – Professor Maria Slowey
11.00 – 12.30	Visit to Mater Hospital to meet with Oscail Director, Dr. Ronnie Saunders to provide an opportunity for his input to the process and clarify any outstanding issues
12.30 – 13.00	Brief Discussion with the Director of Quality Promotion
13.00 – 15.30	Preparation of 1st Draft of Final Report
15.30 – 16.00	Exit presentation to <u>ALL</u> staff of the Oscail by the Chair of the Peer Review Group summarising the principal findings of the Peer Review Group

<u>Methodology</u>

Prior to the site visit the PRG had familiarised themselves with the SAR. During the site visit the PRG followed the timetable of meetings described above, meeting initially with the Senior Management Group. Following a briefing from the Director of Quality Promotion the SAR was discussed. The PRG met with the large School Quality Committee and discussed the process and the contents of the SAR. Unfortunately the Director was unavailable for this meeting, as he had been admitted to hospital, and some issues had to be

referred. The meeting was followed by an evening meal with members of the PRG and the School Quality Committee.

On the second day the PRG met with Oscail staff, Students, Graduates, Tutors and DCU staff working with the Centre. These meetings allowed the PRG to review and validate the main points made in the self-assessment report. Each member of the PRG took the lead in raising agreed issues with each group. This approach worked well and allowed the Group to focus on particular issues/area of interest during the limited time allocated for these meetings. The meeting and conference calls with students, and the meeting with Tutors were particularly insightful. The PRG was impressed by the positive feedback received from these two key groups. The visit to the core facilities of Oscail and the campus tour was abandoned as there was a significant overrun on time and the PRG was keen to ensure the afternoon sessions commenced on time. Some members of the PGR were familiar with the facilities, which are primarily office accommodation for Oscail staff and not a base for student learning. In the evening there was a working private dinner for the members of the PRG during which the Group's initial recommendations were formulated. Unfortunately, due to the arrival on site of an international visitor, the internal academic member of the PRG was not able to attend meetings on the second day.

The schedule for the third day was modified to allow the three external members of the PRG to visit the Director of Oscail in hospital. This was considered extremely important by the Group as it afford the Director the opportunity of meeting with the PRG, contributing to the process and providing clarification on a significant number of important issues. The second meeting with the Senior Management Group was also particularly useful providing the PRG with an opportunity to validate their understanding of particular issues enabling recommendations to be firmed up or amended accordingly.

View of the Self-Assessment Report

The self-assessment report prepared by Oscail was full, frank and honest although it was perceived to be at times defensive by the PRG. The report includes a comprehensive SWOT analysis that was compiled from contributions from campus–based staff at an Oscail Away Day and from external staff via e-mail and questionnaire.

4.   Findings of the Review Group

Background and Context

Oscail was established as a pilot project in 1982 as a response to prevailing conditions in Ireland that saw higher education restricted to relatively few individuals, quite a low proportion of adults with degrees or other third level qualifications, and an under-developed provision for access to degree level qualifications through part-time or adult education.   Oscail receives annual funding from the HEA, which together with income from student fees and research supports Oscail activities.

The SAR outlined the context in which Oscail operates. It described its mission as 'extending to learners the opportunity to take part in higher level education regardless of location, employment, domestic or personal circumstances'. Oscail is seen as having a faculty equivalent status but not faculty status in the same sense as other faculties within DCU. This has worked to the benefit of both DCU and Oscail up to now but the working arrangements are not seen by the PRG as sufficiently efficient or effective to allow for the future development of Oscail.

Oscail develops and presents distance learning and e-Learning programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. There are currently six academic programmes on offer from Oscail as follows:

Undergraduate:
- Diploma/BA in Humanities (BA) (accredited 1993 by DCU, NUI Galway, NUI Maynooth, TCD, UCC and UL)

- Diploma/BSc in Information Technology (IT) (accredited1986 by DCU)

- Bachelor of Nursing Studies (BNS) (accredited 1997 by DCU)

Postgraduate:
- MSc in Internet Systems (MSIS) (accredited 2001 by DCU)

- Graduate Diploma/MSc in Information Systems for Managers (MISM) (formerly the MSc in Management and Applications of IT in Accounting (MAIT)) (accredited 1990 by DCU)

- Graduate Diploma/MSc in Management of Operations (MOPS) (accredited 1997).

These programmes are not available in a campus-based format

Students within Oscail do not follow the usual year-on-year progression of full-time students but can design their own path of study by choosing the number of modules they wish to study in each year of registration. This was identified as one of the major factors for students who decided to study through Oscail.

Oscail staff have a valuable mix of skills, experience, knowledge and understanding of distance learning and e-Learning. Recent fall in recruitment onto programmes together with student retention issues are causing concern and seen as critical to the future viability of Oscail.

Overall management of Oscail lies within the remit of its Management Committee chaired by the Director of Oscail. The SAR identifies issues with the way students are recruited and managed, the allocation and management of administration tasks, the delivery of learning/teaching services and the need for research opportunities. Discussions between the PRG and staff confirmed that there is an openness to, and recognition of, the need for change.

DCU is currently engaged in a strategic review of its operations and this is seen as an opportune time to examine how Oscail's activities and those of the wider DCU might be better integrated to mutual benefit in the future.

Organisation and Management

The SAR identified five main administrative functions:

- Advertising and promotion
  The SAR described the various channels and media used to promote Oscail. The overall perception is that promotion and marketing is not as effective as it needs to be. Oscail is not seen to be making the most of the opportunities available in terms of brochure design, DCU literature and various websites.

- Registration
  It was acknowledged that the process for the Registration of Learners and the handling of subsequent follow-up inquiries is not trouble free. Discussions highlighted how differences in documentation and procedures give rise to difficulties between DCU, other Colleges and Oscail and their students. A need to manage the interactions with Oscail students to avoid the perception that they are being 'given the run around 'or treated as 'second class' learners was also identified.

- Tutors and tutorials
  The administration of the tutorial system was of concern to both tutors and learners. Learners believed that the procedures are not sufficiently learner focused with some tutors not supplying telephone contact numbers. Learners reported frustration in some case where only email addresses are supplied, as tutors do not always respond to queries. Both staff and learners identified a need for standardise contact protocols, that are uniform across the courses and are supportive of the learner.

  Tutorials are an important part of the blended learning experience, however, some students were unhappy with the way these were delivered, managed or arranged. They identified the need for an 'Oscail' presence in the colleges to 'meet and greet' learners arriving for tutorials etc., answer queries, direct them to the designated locations, ensuring that they are open and that where they are promised, services are available.

- Production of course materials and despatch to learners
  Course materials production and despatch is recognised as an important but demanding service to students. Great care is taken in ensuring the timely preparation, printing and despatch of texts for undergraduate programmes. Learners recognised the efforts involved but identified some issues that require attention:
    - need for proof reading of text at the highest standard,
    - reading lists to be accurate and current.

- Handling assignments and examinations
  The following issues were identified during the course of meetings with staff, student and tutors:
    - the library needs to be included in Oscail processes and stock required books;
    - a requirement for faster responses to queries;
    - explore the possibilities of extending the option to submit assignments online;
    - maintain website references to ensure they are relevant and up to date;
    - learners experiencing feelings of isolated when mistakes or concerns not remedied or addressed.

Staff and students identified shortcomings in the feedback, advisory and support arrangements between tutors/learners/co-coordinators/IT staff/admin etc. and suggested better utilisation of Academic Boards, Staff Meetings, Management Meetings, inter Faculty meetings to develop/enhance feedback and service improvement loops.

The funding arrangements were discussed and the group identified a need to clarify whether changes to Oscail would have a negative impact on future HEA funding or a possible loss of income/revenue from other colleges. The budget for Oscail is approximately €3,800,000 per annum, €1,000,000 from HEA and the balance from fees and research income.

Programmes and Instruction

The SAR and subsequent discussions with staff, as well as current and former learners, indicate that the following changes and improvements have to be initiated if Oscail wish to continue to be an important player within the Irish HE arena.
- Oscail must broaden the range of programmes on offer, including the provision of programmes offered by other DCU Faculties in an e-Learning or distance learning format. The current range of programmes is too limited and not in accordance with the demand and expectations of the potential learners. This is particularly evident with the three MSc-programmes where the number of first-time applicants has decreased significantly over the last five years. Student numbers on these programmes have now reached a level where they may be seen as uneconomical and a drain on Oscail's resources. A warning signal is that some postgraduate students felt that the courses were 'not hitting the spot' and would not recommend them to potential students. The presentation of Oscail's programmes in the DCU prospectus and other promotional material is focusing on the wrong items. Too much space is given to the orientation on how studies at a distance are organised and run and almost no relevant information on the learning outcomes and competencies acquired through the programmes.

- Oscail must become more flexible in programme design and delivery modes. The programmes today are too rigid and not sufficiently open to

electives and options. In many cases students cannot easily transfer to mainstream DCU programmes and receive credit for Oscail modules. Why not offer Oscail programme modules as short courses at a distance? There is a growing demand for short courses today. A supply of only full programmes will definitely restrict the number of applicants. The rules on how and when a student can re-sit an exam also needs to be revised.

With regard to delivery modes, Oscail needs to re-evaluate their approach to introducing e-Learning using a blended learning approach, i.e. web-based interactive learning supported by tutorials and workshops face-to-face, as compared with wholly online delivery. Interviewed learners identified a need to assist students with the formation of study/work groups to help with their learning and mutual support. It is also worth noting that most learners and tutors welcomed e-Learning, however, some were not attracted to 'stand alone' e-Learning. Some tutors see Moodle as complementary to and not as a replacement for existing contacts. They also identified a need for better preparation by students prior to engaging in e-Learning, a service that Oscail staff have also identified is in need of improvement. Availability of facilities for those studying at home or at work and the educational design of the materials for online delivery are still at such a level that it is not always possible to create an inviting and supporting learning environment for distance learners.

- Oscail needs to reduce the number of revisions currently engaged in for course material. More than 50 course modules are revised annually with a requirement for three annual revisions part of the terms of the Oscail contract with writers. Where possible 'course literature' should have a life cycle of more than one year. Some students were of the view that some course materials included content that was out of date or no longer relevant. As indicated earlier in this report some reading lists included books that were not available in the DCU library and/or were out of stock and could not be purchased. There was also a lack of clarity in at least one module as to which books were core and which additional reading.

- Oscail has to structure and deliver programmes and services in a more learner centred way. The PRG noted comments from the learners which included '…good content let down by poor student support', '…is DCU serious about distance learners?, 'What is the complaints procedure? How are they logged, dealt with and who is responsible for giving feedback to students?'. Issues such as these indicate a serious gap between the perception of Oscail and the perception of the learners regarding the services delivered by Oscail to learners.

- Oscail needs to investigate seriously the benefits of strengthening the link to the DCU 'brand' and explore closer working relationships where the possibility of offering DCU courses in a distance learning format could be explored. Improved access to other faculties will enhance the Oscail offering and meet the strategic objectives of both DCU and Oscail. A more collaborative relationship and more synergy with DCU would undoubtedly lead to mutual benefit for DCU and Oscail.

- Oscail has lately decided to follow the academic year recruitment pattern. Some students questioned this move. A model that allows ongoing, flexible access to learning is attractive to learners. Life-long, open and flexible learning models are today on the agenda at all e-Learning institutions in Europe. It is important to consider how these features might be incorporated into a business model that supports the objectives of both Oscail and DCU.

- Oscail has to review the responsibility of the tutors as well as their role in the learning process. Learners had mixed views on the value of tutorials ranging from being described as very positive and vital, to indifference and non-attendance. Most learners would like to see summaries of tutorials put online as a learner support for all to review. The tutors are very important both for the learners and for Oscail since they support and engender 'collegiality' between students, foster a favourable view of Oscail, feedback learner requirements to Oscail and they have an understanding of what is involved for new students. The tutors would like to see more industry links, practical assignments, and workplace related topics as assignments.

- Oscail also needs to review the role and the responsibilities of the co-ordinators. There appears to be a lack of clarity regarding who within Oscail is responsible for ensuring quality and relevance of programmes. There are also issues relating to the co-ordinators' workload in respect of administration which occasionally can be seen as divisive and an unwelcome distractions and can lead to conflict between academic and administrative staff. Both staff and students expressed concerns regarding the negative impact of differences between programmes as to how they are administered, e.g. handling of marks for late submissions of assignments. The role of research and the perceived lack of opportunity to engage in research are issues that appear to conflict with the role of co-ordinator. Consequently, the time and interest given to programme management may have a negative impact.

- While there is contact between the advisory service, co-ordinators, tutors and learners there was evidence that this was in some case limited. It was clear to the PRG that each party desired more contact and interaction but needed assistance in facilitating the process. All see a need for briefings and communications as a means to enhance the learning environment at Oscail.

Scholarship and Research

The primary function of Oscail Academic staff has been that of programme development and management. Individual staff interests and commitment have driven research activity within Oscail. A number of staff have carried out research on aspects of e-Learning and distance education, in particular, pedagogy, assessment, policy, analysis, evaluation and technology. Oscail Academic staff publish books and refereed journal articles and attend

research conferences to deliver papers. Some staff members have acted as external examiners.

The PRG found that there are no formal policies for the organisation of research at Oscail or for incorporating it into the greater research infrastructure of DCU. While individual academic research does occur it is not in the context of a structured and sustained research environment. Research active members of staff in Oscail are committed to continuing their internationally recognised work, however there is recognition that current research efforts are not sustainable without a review of strategy and support for this activity.

The PRG believe that there needs to be an institutional review of whether and how a research contribution in Pedagogy in distance and E-Learning by academic staff in Oscail should be encouraged as part of DCU's research strategy. If as part of a broader research output in learning and teaching and e-Learning, Oscail staff can make a contribution beyond that of scholarship as something in which all staff necessarily engage then appropriate support should be made available. Academic staff within Oscail were appointed to co-ordinate the Oscail Programmes, however there is disagreement within Oscail as to the entitlement of such staff to undertake research. Research undertaken by Oscail staff should contribute to a dedicated research unit that is recognised as a University Designated Research Centre.

Oscail staff can contribute considerably to the University educational mission through reflection and analysis of its educational practice. Needs analysis of the different student cohorts that Oscail attracts (or might wish to attract) is another important area for development. It would also be important to maintain Oscail at the cutting edge technologically in terms of computer-assisted learning.

The PRG argue, in brief, for a review and reconsideration of scholarship and research at Oscail as part of the broader consideration of closer integration of its mission as a distance education provider with DCU's overall activities.

Social and Community Service

Oscail operates in a dynamic education and training market with increasing emphasis on accreditation of learning and acquisition of up-to-date vocational skills and knowledge. In part this arises from the social partnership model in place at national level and implies that state funded services and agencies will engage with local businesses and communities and take account of local needs as well as national skills requirements. The objectives are to promote 'inclusivity' and 'employability' in the context of implementing Active Citizenship and Lifelong Learning policies.

This focus is encouraging new learners to engage in training and education. New learners appear to be interested in courses that give them access to skills and knowledge required by employers, are in demand in the voluntary sector or linked to their chosen career paths. While there is an increase in the

number of people in employment interested in becoming new learners, at the same time, Oscail is encountering competition from other providers who have tailored their courses to the demands of the current labour market and voluntary sector and who aim to meet student expectations in terms of their careers. The PRG found that the Oscail range of programmes is limited and in need of updating. There are concerns about the efficacy of the procedures that maintain currency of course content, retires old programmes and introduces new ones.

Oscail has contacts with Industry, the state sector, the community, with other colleges and its students. It draws on academics from colleges north and south of the border, engages with DCU, other colleges, the community and its students in pursuit of its outreach strategy. For example, it contributes to the development of the DCU community of faculties and is represented on the various university committees. Oscail is involved as a founding member of EADTU and an institutional member of EDEN. It works with Fasttrack to IT, the Irish Software Association, FAS and the Prison Service. It also collaborates with other universities here and abroad in promoting distance learning and its BA in Humanities programmes is jointly accredited. It cooperates with professional bodies and the Bachelor of Nursing Studies was developed with the relevant professional body An Board Altranais. It was noted that Oscail was involved in the Taskforce on the Supply of Technicians, an innovative initiative to increase the supply of IT Technicians a few years ago when there was a shortfall in the supply of these skills. Access and outreach programmes have been developed and completion of these allows access and exemptions to related degree courses.

The PRG concluded that these activities, relationships and networks equip Oscail to expand its partnership and alliance-forming activities. However the Group felt that the base is narrow and Oscail should improve its partnership and alliances strategies by examining those adopted by other colleges e.g. DIT ThinkTank approach, and by benchmarking its performance against best practice elsewhere.

In the context of the DCU campus it is recognised that Oscail is well placed to contribute to DCU's learning innovation strategy. It has the potential to become a key contributor and is clearly keen to make its experience and skill set available in that regard. The unit is also seen to have the potential to contribute to the DCU research strategy and its wider community engagement initiatives. In addition Oscail students are seen to be different from traditional third-level students, they are older and generally more mature, usually in part-time but mostly full-time employment with family and personal commitments beyond the course pursued. A small number are retired. They sometimes have to juggle these commitments to complete the course and many do not stay the course. Most students pay their own fees, approx. 30% are subsidised or fully paid for by employers. The Review Group felt this is a new market for DCU who have limited experience of part-time students and Oscail has a unique contribution to make. However, Oscail staff must describe more fully how this relationship will work and what they want from it in the future.

An 'Assisted Studies Programme' providing financial assistance is available, on a limited basis, to eligible students in Humanities and Information Technology. Oscail staff would like to see this programme survive and be extended to allow other disadvantaged groups to benefit. As noted above the Review Group would like to see more work done in the area of social and community linkages

<u>Staffing, Accommodation and Resources</u>

It was evident from all meetings conducted by the PRG that the staff in Oscail are highly committed to the work they do. The staffing complement of Oscail is clearly described in the SAR. There are a relatively small number of staff on permanent contracts: 6 Academic and 14 Administrative. There are 2 Academic staff on temporary contracts and 10 Administrative staff on temporary contracts based in Oscail but there are a further 120 subject specialists on a variety of temporary contracts and operations rely on another 80 voluntary contributors to activities in terms of representation on boards. There is, however, no rationale given for the staffing structure or division of status and role. Oscail's mission is to provide adults with access to third level education regardless of location, employment domestic or personal circumstances and its two primary activities are developing programmes with associated learning materials and supporting distance learning students. These are not the traditional roles of University staff. Management of such a flexible, varied group involves a significant administrative effort that currently involves Academic and Administrative staff from Oscail but also relies on central DCU functions such as HR and Finance. There is concern on the part of some staff within Oscail about the distribution of workload, the way in which some tasks are conducted and where various responsibilities should lie. Some Academic staff are very research active but others are less so. Some contended that additional academic staff would result in more sustainable research output. This seems at odds with the fact that academic staff spend a majority of their time in administration and are not themselves tutors. The PRG consider that a formal, facilitated process reengineering project should be undertaken to review and revise the definition and allocation of tasks in order that Academic staff undertake only those tasks that require academic judgement and that management of processes is led by senior Administrative staff. The PRG recommend that this process should be undertaken within the broader context of a recognition by both Oscail and DCU senior management that there is an opportunity at this time to increase the gain to both DCU and Oscail through closer integration of Oscail's activities with those of DCU as a whole.

The accommodation currently occupied by the Oscail team is fit for purpose, providing as it does well equipped office space and larger rooms equipped for meetings and presentations. Student tutorials are held both at DCU and at other locations and there is some concern on the part of students and Tutors that these are not always open when they arrive. Since tutorials are held outside normal office hours tutors are left without support in gaining entry. The same is true of students wishing to use facilities such as the library and

catering. While the PRG heard that changing the academic year to match that of full and part time programmes will improve this situation, attention to meeting the needs of students and tutors in this regard would be greatly appreciated by those concerned.

Some students expressed concern at the move to putting so much of their study material online as they did not have unlimited access to computers or in their opinion sufficient IT skills not to be at a disadvantage. Either specifying IT skills as an admissions requirement or providing IT training will be needed if the move to increase online components increases. There were no issues raised with respect to resources required for staff to perform their duties.

5.   Overall Analysis of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Concerns

<u>Organisation and Management</u>

Strengths
- The commitment of Oscail staff to its mission and students
- The existing expertise and experience in supporting distant learners particularly within the Information and Advise service
- The commitment from the majority of staff that constitute Oscail's adjunct faculty (the network of Subject Leaders, Writers, Editors, Tutors Project Supervisors)
- The existing good working relationship between Oscail staff and staff from support service areas within DCU.

Weaknesses
- The lack of a single point of contact for ALL Oscail students
- No Marketing strategy and marketing activities that are not as effective as they need to be
- Differences in registration documentation and procedures across programmes and institutions
- Procedures that do not appear to be learner focused
- Difference in procedures across programmes within Oscail, e.g. late submission of assignments

Opportunities
- Identify opportunities for contributing to the achievement of DCU objectives in terms of Distant and E-Learning
- Use student. Tutor and staff feedback to improve processes and procedures and make them more learner focused
- Exploit the expertise within Oscail and elsewhere in DCU to maximise the use of Moodle as an E-Learning tool and in the support of particular processes, e.g. Assignment submission.
- Use the web as a communications mechanism

Concerns

- The decreasing student numbers

- The lack of a strategic focus and proactive approach to addressing current issues
- The ability of all staff within Oscail to work together as a cohesive group
- Availability of HEA funding on the existing basis in the long term

Programmes and Instruction

Strengths
- The leading provider of distance and e-Learning programmes with partners in institutions throughout the country.
- Experience in developing programmes in partnership with internal as well as external bodies.
- A good record of research into technology and pedagogy of open and flexible learning.

Weaknesses
- Inabilities to change the programmes and their content in order to meet market requirements.
- The poor visibility of Oscail within DCU.
- There is no clear strategy on how to implement and use e-Learning as a means to enhance the learning environment.
- Oscail students cannot easily transfer to mainstream DCU programmes and receive credit for Oscail modules.
- 80% of programme material updated annually with no planned review of modules by co-ordinators.
- Review process for writers does not include a mechanism for the incorporation of feedback from students or input from Oscail.
- Tensions between the academic and administration divide.

Opportunities
- The possibility to offer programme modules as short courses at a distance through e-Learning.
- Abandon the yearly revision of course material and concentrate on course literature that has a longer life cycle.
- Develop the blended learning approach.
- A more collaborative relationship and more synergy with DCU would strengthen Oscail's position. Developing programmes using other faculty 'offerings' would be a merit for Oscail.
- A closer integration of the tutors in the whole learning process.
- Redefining the role and the responsibility of the co-ordinators would develop a more effective organisation.

Concerns
- The decrease of the number of first-time applicants in the three MSc-programmes will lead to a drain of Oscail's resources.
- The programmes are too rigid and not sufficient open to electives and options.

- The structure and delivery of programmes and services are not in accordance with the expectation of the learners.
- The hierarchical organisation will constrain the internal development and ultimately the satisfaction of the learners.

Scholarship and Research

Strengths
- The considerable experience of Oscail staff in this regards
- The breadth of knowledge of Oscail staff
- The commitment of Oscail staff to scholarly endeavours

Weaknesses
- The small size of the Oscail staff group
- The competition offered by cognate units within and without DCU
- Lack of a coherent vision of Oscail as a unit of assessment in terms of research

Opportunities
- The scope for collaboration within DCU and nationally
- The growing market for experience in this area of educational provision
- The opportunity to rethink the Oscail mission in terms of research

Concerns
- The ability of DCU to boldly rethink the Oscail mission
- The ability of Oscail staff to proactively reorient their vision
- The competition from UKOU and other providers in this area

Social and Community Service

Strengths
- Oscail staff identified themselves as recognised leaders in the field of distance and e-leaning, incorporating worthwhile working partnership with community groups and other leading colleges in the country making its products widely available and applicable to the Irish market.
- There are strong linkages with nursing and accounting bodies, government departments, semi-state agencies and European partners and projects.
- There is a large alumni base available from which to draw support, and act as a recruitment source for tutors. It has a strong research and teaching reputation at home and abroad.

Opportunities
- Delivery of blended learning and hybrid programmes co-operatively developed in partnership with other DCU Faculties and industry/professional bodies are now feasible.
- The national drive to encourage up-skilling in the workplace presents Oscail with the potential to access new funding and new learners.

- Oscail has competences and skills sets that match the emerging technical/delivery requirements and is well placed to capitalise on the new opportunities presented.
- Oscail has the competences to offer consultancy services based on its proven ability to manage an e-Learning and distance learning service to post-graduate level.
- Oscail currently has in place a 'system' to recruit tutors in diverse locations. There is an opportunity for Oscail to develop further this network of learner support services and support other programmes alongside their current offerings. This would add value in future closer working arrangements within DCU and with Employers/community/other providers.
- Oscail Programmes are modular and together with access to DCU online library material have the potential to allow flexible responses to different client needs.
- Business and community markets are emerging for new, flexibly learning programmes backed by accreditation from reputable colleges. The Review Group felt that these opportunities were within the capability of an Oscail/DCU partnership given appropriate leadership and resources.

Weaknesses
- The narrow base of current partnerships coupled with a lack of strategic alliances is a weakness in Oscail's leadership position.
- In the context of Oscail's mission to deliver distant learning, the PRG found that Oscail had developed some elements of its relationship with DCU, state agencies, community groups, business interests and professional bodies more fully than others. On the whole the group would have liked to see more evidence of systematic networking and developmental contacts. The Group felt that these need to be strengthened and more collaborative arrangements put in place to protect Oscail's position as a market leader and become the preferred provider and developer of distance and online courseware.

Concerns
- There is no shared vision of the role of Oscail in the community, in the business sector or with other providers/players in the market. Current focus is on tactical moves as opposed to strategic directions.
- There is a lack of pro-active engagement with potential partners/allies to carve out a defensible niche/area of expertise or forge alliances and partnerships.

Staffing, Accommodation and Resources

Strengths
- The commitment of all staff to the students
- The range of expertise of staff in the skills necessary to develop and administer distance learning programmes and to support students

- The enthusiasm of former students who have subsequently become tutors
- The national and international reputation of Oscail staff
- The knowledge and skills in aspects of e-Learning
- The accommodation for Oscail staff

Opportunities
- Greater sharing of expertise between Oscail staff and those in other parts of DCU
- The understanding on the part of DCU colleagues outside of Oscail for the potential isolation of Oscail and their willingness to work towards greater integration
- Potential to review and more closely define staff roles to allow for less duplication of effort, more efficient working systems and enhanced services to students
- Potential to put the advice and guidance team at the centre of a greater focus on the student learning experience
- The willingness of all concerned to review the current position
- The improvement of access to facilities for students resulting from the rationalisation of the academic year between Oscail and the rest of DCU
- The established relationships with other Universities as the basis for further activities

Weaknesses
- The lack of integration of Oscail staff into the wider DCU community
- The lack of clear definition of roles and responsibilities within Oscail and between Oscail and support services in DCU
- The reliance on fixed term staff in Oscail
- The number of contract staff external to Oscail
- The lack of a system to ensure that accommodation for tutorials is open when needed

Concerns
- The lack of a shared understanding of the contributions made by the various groups of staff to the success of Oscail students
- Poor internal communication both within Oscail and between Oscail and the wider DCU community
- Poor current financial position
- There is a danger that service levels will be reduced through loosing better tutors and the network of locations currently in place will be lost due to lower recruitment levels.

6. 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 in the School.

Additionally, the Review Group indicate the level(s) of the University where action is required by using the following:
- O: Oscail
- U: University Executive/Senior Management

Background and Context

1. P1-U The University Executive / Senior Management need to clarify and communicate the legal status of Oscail.

Organisation and Management

2. P1-O Include Management Information, Statistics and Strategy on the standing agenda for regular meetings of the management group;
3. P1-O Develop internal, intra (DCU) and external communications strategy;
4. P1-O Review work practices to ensure responsive, student friendly environment;
5. P1-O Review and re-engineer processes to ensure consistent student focus and equality of opportunity;
6. P2-O Encourage contributions from all staff who communicate with students, and from students themselves, in the interest of quality improvement;
7. P2-O Develop the web site to the benefit of potential students, students, staff and internal contacts;
8. P2-O Proactively build on the existing good relationships with support units across DCU;
9. P2-O Seek further opportunities to exploit the expertise and experience of the Information and Advisory Service

Programmes and Instruction

10. P1-UO Re-evaluation of the concept of e-Learning and its opportunities and limitations in supporting student learning;
11. P1-UO Be more proactive in engaging in the exploration of learning activities currently being undertaken within DCU
12. P1-O Undertake market research to identify distance learning opportunities and develop a strategy to work in partnership with academic schools to exploit the joint expertise;

13. P1-O   Initiate a process for programme review to retire, update or develop new programmes;
14. P2-UO   Clarify the status of existing partnerships and consider opportunities for new and different types of partnerships;
15. P2-UO Revise entry in DCU Prospectus and other promotional material.
16. P2-UO Review programme structure to introduce a common credit system for modules that is consistent across DCU and Oscail

Scholarship and Research

17. P2-O Oscail should seek out opportunities to engage in joint research with others within DCU, and in conjunction with the OVPR with outside bodies.
18. P2-O Oscail should review administration tasks undertaken by academic staff and develop policies on work allocation that encourages and supports research.

Social and Community Services

19. P1-UO Review and justify current social, community and other involvements in the context of, and with a view to, closer co-operation with DCU.
20. P1-UO Identify a range of new, more focused strategic partnerships and alliances in consultation with DCU.
21. P1-O Agree an implementation plan to put these in place within an agreed timescale.
22. P1-O Develop appropriate reports and indicators to allow the management team monitor actual social and community performance levels against targets and take corrective action to address concerns.
23. P2-O Initiate a benchmarking exercise to assess Oscail position vis-à-vis similar operations and keep in touch with developments in the distance learning/e-Learning sector.
24. P2-O In consultation with staff investigate achieving recognised external quality accreditation for Oscail.
25. P2-O Be proactive in devising approaches which support, encourage and motivate partners/students using Oscail.
26. P3-O Examine ways in which Oscail alumni can be engaged in the future development of Oscail in the Business and Community sectors

Staffing, Accommodation and Resources

27. P1-O Oscail staff should collectively develop their own positive, practical proposals for future operations in advance of the broader review
28. P1-UO DCU and Oscail should undertake a broad ranging process re-engineering exercise to establish: those tasks that require academic judgment, those processes that are better managed by senior administrative staff and how best to provide a single reliable responsive contact point for student communication.

29. P2-O Review the number and variety of fixed term and temporary contracts with a view to rationalization to reduce costs
30. P1-O Work with Library staff to establish a review process for reading lists that ensure currency and availability
31. P2-O investigate opportunities to provide a contact point for tutors and students arriving for tutorials especially when they are out of normal teaching hours

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