Quality Assurance / Quality Improvement Programme for Academic Units

2002-2003

Peer Review Group Report for the School of Communications

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Introduction

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

1. An internal team in the School/Unit being reviewed completes a detailed self-assessment report (SAR). It should be noted that this document is confidential to the School 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 School/Unit and conduct discussions with a range of staff, students and other stakeholders.

3. The PRG then writes its own report

4. The School/Unit produces a School/Unit Quality Plan in response to the various issues and findings of the SAR and PRG Reports.

5. The PRG Report and the School/Unit Quality Plan are considered by the University Executive, which makes a formal response to both, after consultation with the School/Unit and the Director of Quality Promotion. The School/Unit Quality Plan and the Executive Response become incorporated into what is termed the Quality Improvement Plan (QuIP)

6. A summary of the PRG Report and the QuIP is sent to the Governing Authority of the University, who may approve publication in a manner that they see fit. The summary report will then be published on the Quality Promotion Unit website.

7. Following the approval of the summary report by the Governing Authority, the full text of both the Peer Review Group Report and the Quality Improvement Plan are published on the Quality Promotion Unit website.

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

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1.   PROFILE OF THE SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATIONS

Location

The School of Communications is a constituent school of the Faculty of Humanities at Dublin City University. The School was one of the original elements of the National Institute of Higher Education (later Dublin City University), at its foundation in 1981. The School is located in the Henry Grattan Building, occupying one of the older sites on the DCU campus. Specialist teaching for the School's programmes take place in the Henry Grattan, with more generalist lectures dispersed in accordance with the need to share lecture rooms with other units of the University.

Staff

Table 1: Staffing complement

Staff	Permanent	Temporary	Part time	Total
Academic	23	4	14	41
Administrative	1			1
Technical	2	1		3
	26	**5**	**14**	**45**

The management style of the School is collegial, with the Headship rotated. The Head is supported in the decision-making process on strategic issues by the School Executive Committee. The Executive Committee in turn is supported by committees dealing with Teaching & Learning, Research and Technology Resources. The School is supported by a School Secretary and also receives administrative support from the Faculty Office.

Programmes and Activities

The School delivers three undergraduate and six postgraduate taught programmes, as well as having a number of postgraduate research students. The following table provides a detailed breakdown of student numbers, together with the year the programmes first ran.

Table 2: Current programmes and student numbers

Programme	Abbreviation	Start year	Students (2002- 2003)
BA Communications Studies	BACS	1980	193
BA Journalism	JR	1992	144
BSc Multimedia	MMA	1999	184
MA Communications and Cultural Studies	MCS	1989	17
MA Film and Television Studies	MTV	1991	19
MA Journalism	MAJ	1982 (Grad Dip); 1990	26
MSc Science Communication	MSC	1996	19
MA Political Communication	MAP	1999	24
MSc Multimedia	MMM	1999	25
MA/PhD Research Students			31
			691

The School also provides modules on the MA International Relations. This programme started in 1997 as a joint initiative between the School of Communications and the Business School, but with the establishment of the School of Law and Government in 2002 the programme became the responsibility of that School.

The MSc in Science Communication was until recently delivered jointly with Queen's University Belfast, the latter withdrawing as part of an overall rationalisation of its Masters programmes and collaborative and outreach activities. The School of Communications now has sole responsibility for this programme.

Research

The School currently has one University Designated Research Centre (UDRC) in the form of the Centre for Society Technology and Media (STeM). The Director of STeM holds an endowed chair in multimedia. The School's research strategy contains a commitment to establish a second such centre focusing on issues of media policy and professional practice. The BioSciences and Society (BSS) Group, based in the School of Communications, employs a research assistant and a graduate research student. These are funded through the National Institute for Cellular Biotechnology, a PRTLI-funded national research centre in DCU. The BSS Group represents an unusual interdisciplinary connection between the natural and social sciences.

The School also seeks to facilitate individual researchers who are at critical stages in research activity through sabbatical leave or through reduction in teaching workload.

2.   THE SELF-ASSESSMENT PROCESS

The School Quality Co-ordinating Committee

Mr Brian Trench (Chair)
Prof. John Horgan
Prof. Pascal Preston
Mr Patrick Kinsella
Dr Roddy Flynn
Dr Miriam Judge
Dr Pat Brereton
Ms Pauline Mooney

Methodology Adopted

The Quality Committee was formed during Spring 2002 but the School was very soon thereafter immersed in a major review of its undergraduate programmes. The Quality Committee was reconstituted in December 2002 and quickly set about the work required to prepare for the Quality Review. Data were requested from various University offices, surveys and focus group meetings with students were conducted, a focus group meeting with graduates was held, and surveys and interviews with staff took place. A staff away day was held in January 2003 to allow discussion of the options and issues facing the School. In February 2003, the data available were compiled and analysed and the Self-Assessment report prepared.

3. THE PEER REVIEW GROUP PROCESS

Methodology

For the Peer Review Group (PRG) the Review process consisted of three discrete activities:

i)   familiarisation with the main Self Assessment report and its associated annexes

ii)   a comprehensive site visit over a period of two days to review, discuss, analyse and validate the details contained in the Self Assessment documentation

iii)   the preparation and delivery of a Review Report documenting the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the Review team

Schedule of Activity

Preliminary Meeting (Wed 26th March 2003)

An initial meeting of the PRG was held on Wednesday 26th March to receive a briefing from the Director of Quality Promotion. This meeting provided the opportunity to raise any general issues, to allocate key tasks to members of the Group and to agree the schedule of activities for the site visit. At this stage, a Chair and Rapporteur were appointed.

Site Visit (Thursday 27th – Friday 28th March)

Day One began with a meeting of the PRG with the School Quality Committee to discuss key elements of the Self Assessment Report. This meeting was essentially exploratory in nature and helpfully provided elucidation for the PRG on many issues raised in the Report. A meeting with other School staff followed, which was equally open and informative. There then followed a visit to the core facilities of the school, in particular the specialist equipment, facilitated in a very enthusiastic manner by a member of the technical staff. In the afternoon, a series of meetings was held with undergraduates, taught postgraduates and research students. Members of the PRG also met with a number of chairs of the School's academic programmes.

On the second day, the PRG met with the President and other senior officers of the University. This provided the opportunity to raise the main issues of strategic importance the PRG had identified from the Self Assessment report and from the various meetings the previous day. There then followed a meeting with senior members of the Library staff and a tour of the Library facilities. Following this the PRG met with the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and the Vice President for Research.

In terms of the many meetings held, the PRG was impressed by the open and honest way the many stakeholders put their views forward. The staff and students treated the Review very seriously, clearly seeing it for the quality improvement opportunities it presented. The President and other senior officers provided clarification on a number of issues and impressed the PRG with their stated commitment to the future development of the School of Communications. In conclusion, the range of meetings

organised, together with the openness of those involved, made for a very successful site visit.

View of the Self Assessment Report

The documentation provided was informative and candid. The main Self Assessment report was supported by two annexes, the intention clearly being to provide the PRG with as much detail as might be required. In the few instances where omissions were evident, for instance in terms of details of staff workloads, it became evident that they related to ongoing discussions in the School, with the result that no definitive information was available in that area at the time of the Review.

The Self Assessment report was well crafted, being impressively and perhaps refreshingly self-critical and analytical. To its credit the School did not seek refuge in ambiguity when dealing with difficult issues, preferring to acknowledge areas of concern and setting out plans to deal with such issues. From the Self Assessment report, it is clear that the School has much to congratulate itself on, not least its high standing in its academic area, but the School avoids – perhaps overly so - any kind of self-congratulatory stance.

The PRG therefore highly commends the Self Assessment report, and was pleased to note the intention of the School to build upon it in the next phase of its strategic planning.

4.   FINDINGS OF THE PEER REVIEW GROUP

Organisation and Management

The PRG noted the positive way the School had approached the Review process, and in particular the level of participation by staff and students in the preparatory stages. Evidently, much valuable work had been done in documenting the present state of the school, its major ambitions and its various concerns and anxieties. In this regard, the main Self Assessment report contains numerous policies and proposals for improvement in the various areas of the School's activities. Such proposals will doubtless contribute to plans for action and strategic statements to be formulated in the future.

The PRG found that the dispersal of declarations of strategic intent throughout the Main Report and its annexes made it difficult to formulate an overall view of the core strategic mission of the School. The PRG recommends that all these strategic statements be collated, reviewed and re-presented as a coherent and concise expression of the School's *raison d'etre*, together with its principal aims and objectives. This exercise is urged to answer the linked questions: where is the School going and how will it reach that destination?

The PRG found the School to be vibrant and was impressed by the committed professionalism of all staff and the articulate enthusiasm of the students. The President and other senior officers of the University confirmed that the School of Communications and the Faculty of the Humanities are key development areas for DCU and that they constitute one of the significant opportunities for its future success.   This is all the more reason for clarity in setting objectives and planning

managerial and administrative support for the School. This is not an argument for another layer of administration: rather the proposal is that the School should identify and play its proper part in managing its daily work and its strategic development.

The PRG welcomed the intention of the School to build upon the Self Assessment process to assist in short and longer-term curriculum and strategic planning. There are acknowledged difficulties in the area of workload allocation across the staff in the School, which will need to be addressed by the provision of transparent workload allocation information.

The PRG recommends that the School engages as fully as possible in the development of the new organisational structures that are emerging, and in particular the move to a devolved Faculty model, with an Executive Dean. A new organisation dynamic is emerging, and it is important that the School is actively involved and influences its development. The PRG also recommends that the senior management of the University satisfies itself that the impact of the devolved Faculty, with an Executive Dean, is fully articulated to the School, including the role of the Head of School in the new arrangements.

In light of the major curricular changes introduced in Spring 2002 – for pedagogical reasons as well as the need to re-engineer existing staffing structures – the PRG recognises the difficult period the School has been through. The PRG hopes that, after a period whereby a number of staff have occupied the Headship over just a few years, there will now be a period of stable leadership.

Programmes and Instruction

The School offers three undergraduate and six postgraduate taught Masters programmes. The PRG was satisfied that the programmes were well designed and kept under review in terms of structure and module content. The Masters programmes, in particular, were judged to be intellectually demanding and relevant. This impression was confirmed by the broadly positive endorsement that emerged from discussion with a group of the current taught masters students. The PRG noted the high CAO points of students on the undergraduate programmes. The PRG was highly impressed by the students it spoke to during the site visit, finding them to be articulate and committed, and caring deeply about the quality of their respective courses. These undergraduates did express their concerns about the scale of the curricular changes in Spring 2002, although on the other hand the PRG noted that in the Student Surveys conducted, the message was that students were coming to terms with the changes and were now beginning to appreciate the underlying rationale. The PRG understood the reasons for the changes, and recognised the hard choices that faced staff in terms of curricular coverage. The PRG noted that the self-evaluation exercise had helped to highlight existing gaps and overlaps.

The PRG commended the move to new teaching and learning methods, in particular the team teaching on the 'mega modules'. This team teaching, in particular, has provided a new avenue to staff for intellectual exchange and is seen to have added value to programmes.   This approach has also given the staff involved an overview of the contents of their colleagues' modules, which ensures that content overlap is avoided.   The availability of up to date modular information across the School would further minimise the potential for content overlap. The PRG also recommends that in planning programmes and teaching allocations an adequately broad range of lecturer input should be sought.

The PRG was impressed by the dedication of the School to a student-centred approach. This was evidenced by the school's commitment to the retention of undergraduate theses/projects and the value placed on the INTRA programme. The flexibility available in terms of transfer between programmes for undergraduates at the early stages of their study was also seen as a positive factor. Students studying at postgraduate level felt well supported by the School, particularly through the provision of dedicated study space, scholarship funding and the opportunity to contribute on the teaching programme.

The PRG recommends that any further expansion of programmes, particularly at postgraduate level, should be carefully considered to avoid the School being over-extended. A period of consolidation, during which the School comes to terms with the level of resources now in place, would seem sensible. The PRG is aware that the School, in light of the increasingly competitive marketplace, is devising a new marketing strategy, and recommends that the University support and facilitate the School in implementing such a strategy.

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

Scholarship and Research

The PRG recognises the commitment of the staff to scholarship and research across a broad range of subject areas and types of research. Creative production from a professional practice perspective and participation in public life are also well represented in the range of staff activities that complement teaching and research. The PRG sees these as an important component in the work of the school. At the same time, the PRG recognises that some School staff believe that because their creative work does not easily fit into institutional categorisations of research, their work remains unrecognised.

The PRG appreciates the efforts of the School to stimulate research and to develop appropriate structures for co-operation and concentration of effort. The formation of STeM as a designated research centre has been beneficial in this respect. The PRG was impressed by the number and size of research grants that had been attracted by members of the School since 2000.

In respect of future research planning the PRG sees advantages in the effort to profile the School more clearly in terms of its main foci of research interest. This should also play a part in the selection of PhD students. Discussions with current PhD students led the PRG to conclude that they are well served by current arrangements in terms of facilities and supervision. Consideration should however be given to more structured provision at the start of the PhD process on matters of methodology and work practices especially in the light of the diversity of academic backgrounds.

The idea of a Centre for media policy and professional practice is commendable as it further acknowledges the increasing importance of collaborative research and the benefits of a strong themed research identity. However, planning for such a Centre must take into account Faculty restructuring and the institutional commitment toward developing more integrated relationships across Schools and Faculties.

The PRG notes that the School, through its range of undergraduate and graduate programmes, delivers a large number of high calibre students to the University. These students, on graduation, have high employability skills.   The PRG believes that this places the School in an excellent strategic position to enhance its profile both within and outside the University.

The PRG notes that the current research climate dictates that collaborative research must become an integral part of the School's research programme.   The PRG recommends that the School takes a more proactive stance in advertising its research strengths and that it actively seeks to further develop synergetic relationships with cognate Departments within and outside the University.

Staffing, Access and Resources

The PRG found it commendable that the School has retained a small-class teaching structure. The team-teaching approach has created a vehicle for closer collegial collaboration and intellectual exchange. There is a very good match between staff specialisms and expertise, and the academic programmes offered by the School. The adequacy of the staffing complement could not be evaluated in the absence of clear staff:student ratios for the School of Communications and comparative Schools in the University.

Given the very diverse forms of productivity in the School under the research remit, there are ongoing concerns about the validation of research and teaching work, related promotional opportunities, and their impact on career trajectory. These concerns, if left unchecked, could weaken staff morale in the long term.   The PRG recommends that the Head of School initiates a dialogue with the Vice President for Research and other senior University personnel to address concerns about the measurement of 'research output' and the recognition of 'professional practice'.

The library facilities are excellent. There is a high degree of motivation on the part of Library staff to support school staff and students. The subject librarian is keen to contribute actively to the planned Writing and Research module in year one, which the PRG would endorse.

The technical facilities on the audio were judged to be good, capable of providing adequate training for students wishing to pursue a career in that sector. The Television facilities are 'basic' and the PRG welcomed the current proposals for updating these facilities. The procedure for providing student access to technical resources was identified as a major problem. Loan service hours are insufficient and bottlenecks can arise when class-groups who have received an assignment come together looking for relevant equipment on loan. Furthermore, constant breakdowns in equipment in the general computer laboratories cause major disruptions to the teaching programme. While acknowledging the contribution of existing technical personnel, there should be a dedicated technical support person on-site to service, maintain and trouble-shoot the technical equipment. The PRG also supports the School's case for an additional member of staff for the loans facility. There are also ongoing difficulties in terms of the security of the technical equipment, although it was noted the School is working to improve the security situation.

There needs to be clarification at the earliest opportunity on the future of the building that houses the School, as uncertainty in the absence of such a decision has an ongoing effect on the morale of staff. The physical environment does not compare

well with other Schools on campus. The building is poorly maintained, conditions are cramped and there is heavy daily traffic throughput.

Social and Community Services

The PRG noted and commended the School's long record of interaction with the local community of North Dublin and with many elements of the public, non-profit and corporate sectors through advice, consultancy and committee membership. Members of the School have undertaken various forms of public service as members and senior officers of public bodies developing policy for media and communications.

The PRG also commended the School for its involvement, over several years, in a community employment scheme, under which long-term unemployed people were engaged part-time in various support roles to School staff. The School's intention to offer a Certificate/Diploma in Information Media and Internet for community and voluntary organisations was also noted with interest by the PRG.

5. OVERALL ANALYSIS OF STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES AND CONCERNS

Organisation and Management

Strengths
- Collegial management style where staff generally feel valued.
- The committed professionalism of the School staff, with many staff enjoying a national profile.
- High calibre students who care deeply about the quality of their programmes.
- High standing of the School's programmes in the wider industry context.

Weaknesses
- The absence of a School strategic plan with the consequent lack of an overall view of the core strategic mission of the School.
- For a variety of reasons the School to date has not adequately capitalised on its position as a flagship department within the University. Furthermore, the School has not always engaged with the decision-making apparatus of the University, which renders it open to isolation.
- Some discontinuity of headship responsibility (although this may now be resolved).
- Lack of transparent workload allocation information

Opportunities
- The Review process has confirmed to the School its importance to the future development of the University – the School thus now has the opportunity to significantly raise its own profile internally and externally, and in so doing raise the profile more generally of Humanities /Social Sciences endeavour in DCU. The School should not feel any lack of self-confidence as it faces into the future.

Threats
- The possibility of further resource reductions, bearing in mind the funding difficulties now facing all Irish universities.
- Any failure to follow through on the self-critical aspects of the Quality Reviews and the strategic intentions outlined, which could lead to unfocussed and unrewarded effort in the future.

Programmes and Instruction

Strengths
- Well-designed, intellectually demanding and relevant programmes taught by a highly motivated staff complement.
- High-calibre, articulate and committed students.
- Willingness to embrace new teaching methodologies, eg team-teaching on 'mega-modules'.
- Dedication of the School to a student-centred approach.

Weaknesses
- Despite the attempts to articulate the rationale for recent changes in the undergraduate curriculum, there is a residual problem of disaffection among some students.
- There is a perception among some staff that workloads across the school may be inequitable.
- A possible over-commitment to varied courses, with resulting strain and possibly some duplication of effort.

Opportunities
- The intention to ensure all module information is available to all staff, thus ensuring content overlap is avoided.
- Further curricular review, for instance the continuing relevance of a four-year, as opposed to a three-year, undergraduate Journalism programme.
- The opportunity in planning programmes and teaching allocations to ensure that an adequately broad range of lecturer input is sought.

Threats
- Any possible pressure from outside the School to increase the portfolio of courses, when a period of stability and consolidation is needed by the School.

Scholarship and Research

Strengths
- The commitment of staff to scholarship and research across a broad range of subject areas and types of research.
- The importance the School attaches to creative production from a professional practice perspective, and to participation in public life.
- The number and size of research grants attracted by School members.

Weaknesses
- The perception that the School is not regarded as academic by peers in other disciplines, and lack of clarity about status of activities that do not fit the traditional profile of academic publications/research.
- The feeling among staff that skills are utilised but are not valued in the overall University context.
- Lack of internal communication mechanisms for disseminating information about staff research work and interests.

Opportunities
- To seize the advantages of profiling the School more clearly in terms of its main foci of research interest.
- The formation of STeM as a designated research centre.
- To provide more structured provision at the start of the PhD process on matters of methodology and work practices.
- To develop further the idea of a Centre for media policy and professional practice.

Threats
- The possibility that School staff may not engage fully in Faculty re-structuring and/or not embrace the more integrated and collaborative research focus favoured by the University.
- Possible overload from teaching, thus not leaving adequate research time.

Staffing, Access and Resources

Strengths
- The very good match between staff specialisms and expertise on the one hand, and the academic programmes offered by the School on the other.
- The ethos of a small-class teaching structure.
- Excellent library facilities.
- Good audio facilities.

Weaknesses
- The absence of clear staff:student ratios for the School.
- The current 'basic' television facilities.
- Inadequate student access to technical resources.
- Constant breakdowns in equipment causing major disruptions to the teaching programme.
- The generally poor condition of the building housing the School, together with the cramped conditions that prevail.

Opportunities
- To build upon the goodwill and motivation of the Library staff, including involving the subject librarian in the planned Writing and Research module in year one.
- To build upon the closer collegial collaboration and intellectual exchange fostered by the team-teaching approach, into other spheres of School activity.

Threats
- Failure to update the television facilities, which would undermine the ability to deliver key elements of academic programmes.
- Lack of University-level support for a dedicated technical support person to act as a local 'technical trouble-shooter'.
- The failure to address the poor physical environment of the School, with the negative impact this would have on the morale of staff and on the ability of the School to fulfil its potential.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Organisation and Management

1.   The PRG recommends the development of a School strategic plan, which should include the prioritisation of teaching and research and articulate the Mission of the School. The PRG also recommends that documented processes for strategic planning and operational administration are maintained. This will help to ensure that clear and published procedures are adopted and followed in planning the future of the School and in managing its daily business.

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

Programmes and Instruction

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

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

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

Staffing, Accommodation and Resources

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

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

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

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

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

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

Scholarship and Research

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

End.