

**University College Cork  
National University of Ireland, Cork**

**Quality Improvement/Quality Assurance**

**Peer Review Group Report**

**B.Comm. Degree Programme**

**Academic Year 2005/06**

**15<sup>th</sup> June 2006**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The purpose of the visit to the Faculty of Commerce, University College Cork on Monday 20<sup>th</sup> to Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2006 was to conduct a peer review of the B.Comm Degree Programme as part of the University's formal Quality Improvement/Quality Assurance procedures.

1.2 The Peer Review Group comprised:

Professor Julia Kennedy, School of Pharmacy, UCC (Chair),

Professor Charles Daly, Department of Food and Nutritional Sciences, UCC

Mr. Michael Geary, Chief Executive Officer, Cork Chamber of Commerce, Cork

Dr. Gerard McHugh, Head, School of Business, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

Professor John McGee, Associate Dean, Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, UK.

1.3 The assessment was chaired by Professor Julia Kennedy, UCC. The reviewers acted as a group throughout the site visit. All reviewers were present at all meetings and participated in the tour of the facilities. The external reviewers took particular responsibility for leading the discussions on the teaching, scholarly activity and research elements whilst all reviewers took responsibility for the aspects relating to management and governance of the Programme.

1.4 The reviewers conducted their review over two and a half days on 20<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2006. During the visit the PRG met with faculty teaching on the Programme, with students (present and former), with representatives of senior management of the University, with key external stakeholders and toured the facilities in the O'Rahilly Building and in the Boole Library. The reviewers were satisfied that, whilst time did not allow a visit to all facilities of the University used by the students on the Programme, the site visit encompassed all necessary elements to ensure an understanding of the conditions and facilities and of the reflections contained in the Self-Assessment Report.

1.5 The reviewers agreed their core recommendations and findings during the site visit and the Report was finalised using electronic communications following the site visit. All reviewers have agreed the final Report.

1.6 The PRG were aware of the introduction of new academic structures in the University, and noted that the references in this Report to the role of 'Dean' and of the 'Faculty of Commerce' may need to be re-interpreted in the context of the new University structures.

## **2.0 OVERALL ANALYSIS**

### **2.1 Introduction**

2.1.1 The PRG would like to open this Report on the B.Comm Degree at UCC with an expression of its appreciation of the amount of thought and effort that was devoted to the preparation of the Self-Assessment Report (SAR). The Group would also like to record its positive impressions of the dedication shown by Faculty/Department members to this Degree. This is evidenced in many ways such as student care, attention to academic standards, and preservation of alumni links. This has clearly been a successful undergraduate Degree Programme in the Irish market, well respected externally and highly prized internally.

2.1.2 From a customer (student) perspective the PRG received much positive commentary. Opinions volunteered suggest:

1. the quality of intake to the programme has been and continues to be good;
2. graduates of the programme proceed to very good careers in business and management;
3. the Programme is seen as a very good launching pad for a management career;
4. graduates display adaptability in the face of considerable changes in the business environment;
5. graduates endorse the generic format of the Programme (i.e. its focus on general business rather than more specialised subjects);
6. the generic nature of the Programme reflects the multifaceted nature of business;

7. the B.Comm Degree Programme from UCC enjoys a good brand reputation that should be supported and developed.

2.1.3 Undergraduate degree programmes are also about education and the transmission of knowledge. The PRG was impressed by the attention paid by individual Faculty members to the design of their course modules, to content and to delivery. There is an evident concern with the quality of education and an obvious attachment to teaching, research and scholarship. The favourable commentary on the generalist nature of the Degree suggests that the offering of a specialisation beyond the current major-minor model would not be very advantageous in the market.

## **2.2 The Self-Assessment Report (SAR)**

2.2.1 The PRG found the SAR to be comprehensive and thorough, and commended those responsible for organising and preparing the SAR and for the accuracy of the data provided to the reviewers. The PRG recognised that the complexity of the Degree Programme, involving as it does a number of Departments and a very large number of teaching staff, made the preparation of the document an onerous task. The PRG found the document to be helpful in their consideration of the Programme.

2.2.2 The SAR made four key recommendations:

1. that the Programme requires a Director with designated funding and administrative support;
2. that there needs to be a resourcing model that links the income generated by the Programme with its budget;
3. that a review of the major options available to students needs to be undertaken;
4. that there needs to be an improvement in the physical and training facilities for both students and staff.

2.2.3 The panel was sympathetic with the general tenor of these recommendations and the next section of the Report explores these and their implications in more detail.

## **3.0 DETAILED ANALYSIS**

3.1 The detailed analysis in this Report is organised under five headings:

- Market and Competitive Environment
- Programme Design and Delivery
- Research and Scholarly Activity
- Structure and Management
- External Relations and Support Services.

### **3.2 Market and Competitive Environment**

3.2.1. The PRG agrees, in general, with the assessment of the market in the SAR, but believed that the situation is even more challenging than is realised. Markets in Ireland are already mature and competitive. Cross-border competition from universities across Europe is already evident and will undoubtedly develop strongly in the near future. UCC faces two challenges – (i) a challenge for the Programme to be properly positioned against this growing competition, and (ii) a challenge for the Faculty of Commerce to present itself more convincingly to its external markets and stakeholders (including its alumni, its corporate recruiters, and before long, the Higher Education Authority).

3.2.2 The PRG suggests that UCC must further define and develop the B.Comm's brand with particular emphasis on creating an international dimension (to the curriculum) that will reassure its Irish markets and be attractive to new European markets.

### **3.3 Programme Design and Delivery**

3.3.1 Although the reaction of students, past and present, is generally favourable, the PRG believes that the Programme urgently needs to be reviewed in the context of more modern designs being adopted and promulgated elsewhere. There are a number of characteristics of the current design that indicate the nature of the problem:

1. the degree classification is based primarily on final year results with negative consequences for student incentives and attitudes in earlier years;
2. students reported that some course material is repeated in successive years and that the courses are insufficiently integrated;

3. systematic comments, both in the SAR and made to the PRG directly, concerning over-large class sizes and the need for more tutorials;
4. students were unable to describe the logic of the course structure and it is their experience that marking standards are inconsistent across different subjects;
5. the academic elements and the personal skill elements of the Programme have not been systematically designed (evidenced by the experience of students): there was universal dislike expressed by the students of what they judged to be poorly planned group projects, but it was difficult for the panel to understand why there was such universal hostility given the prevalence and popularity of similar projects in other institutions across Europe;
6. the lack of linkage to business and to employment was frequently criticised and expressed in the SAR, with the lack of work placement opportunities being frequently referred to. This deficit may well be addressed once the Work Placement is introduced but careful monitoring of this Work Placement needs to be carried out to ensure it is achieving its objectives;
7. there is an unusual range of Departments and subjects (eight) participating in this Programme potentially leading to an excessively diverse Degree without a clear and distinct knowledge base;
8. there is a singular lack of an integration of knowledge, skills and understanding in the final year.

In the process of the Board of Studies undertaking a thorough and comprehensive review of the Degree, its market, structure and learning outcomes, the PRG are of the opinion that examples of points 3.3.1.1. to 3.3.1.8. will be self-evident to the Board.

3.3.2 The criticisms about delivery are not major in themselves but gain in significance in that the PRG did not receive any systematic briefing about how the present management intended to deal with them. The design issues are more problematic. Of most concern is the very broad nature of this Degree, a characteristic that the earlier review in 2003/4 tackled when it introduced more opportunities to 'major' in the third year. The present position is a 'political' compromise that can be made to work quite well, but there is a risk that potential students will be more attracted to degrees that offer a more integrated knowledge structure accompanied by clearer links to the business world. The lack of an integrative capstone module in the

Final Year was, for the PRG, an indication of the extent of the lost opportunity. UCC graduates are obviously capable and intelligent students, good ambassadors for the University but it was very marked how little they are able to relate the nature of their Degree and the learning that it represents. Clearly there is an opportunity here to rethink the basic mission of the Degree and to reposition it. This is a reasonably urgent task but one that needs to be conducted with care rather than haste. The basic Programme is sound because of the strength of the Departments, but the practical difficulties stem largely from the sheer number of Departments that have an interest.

3.3.3 There are a number of ways forward and the PRG did not have time to formulate a view about preferred ways. The following are examples of some possible ways:

1. The range of subjects in the first two years could be restricted to a top five (for example, management, marketing, business economics, accounting/finance, business information systems) with other Departments being able to offer electives in Years Three and Four.
2. Students could be offered a stronger choice of major such as 70 credits out of 120 in the final two years, *or* a major/minor option in the same years.
3. Students could be counselled more directly about their choices with their transcripts reflecting a designed choice (this and similar possibilities reflects a move towards self-design of degree courses). In this regards, the reasons for the choice of subjects/options among the Third Year/Final Year students should be carefully examined with particular reference to the relatively low uptake of modules in Management and Marketing.
4. More planned integration between individual courses from separate Departments should be considered: this would help differentiate the offerings of the differentiated Degrees from the general B.Comm Degree avoiding the 'weaker sister' problem.
5. The boundary line between a differentiated Degree and the general Degree would benefit from review and restatement – the PRG was not able to consider this in any detail because of time constraints, but experience elsewhere suggests the need to delineate the scope of competing degrees carefully.



### **3.4 Programme Structure and Management**

3.4.1 Managing an interdisciplinary Programme always presents issues and difficulties not encountered where a single Department offers a Programme. In the Faculty of Commerce eight Departments contribute to the B.Comm Degree Programme and some of these Departments also run their own specialised degrees. Under present arrangements the Board of Studies is comprised of relatively junior staff members and lacks real authority. In these circumstances it does not seem possible to deliver any major change to the structure of the B.Comm Degree nor does it seem to be easy to make the continuous improvements that are necessary during the life of any programme.

3.4.2 The experience of introducing the module on Transferable Skills is a case in point. This was presented to the PRG as a major and fundamental change. The PRG considered that, in reality, this is a modest change when compared with the major changes taking place elsewhere. Moreover, this innovation has been carried forward with only the most limited assessment of resource implications and with no (as far as could be ascertained) cross-referencing to parallel academic subjects.

3.4.3 More generally, given the pace of change in the economy, in business and management, the B.Comm Degree Programme should be reviewed on a continuous basis. There is no evidence of this happening at present – for example, the Chair of the School of Mathematics, Applied, Mathematics and Statistics confirmed to the PRG that the contribution of the School of Mathematics, Applied Mathematics & Statistics, to the B.Comm Degree Programme has not been reviewed for at least seven years.

3.4.4 The PRG viewed the absence of a Programme Director as cause for major concern and considered that such an appointment is clearly necessary. However the PRG did not believe that this will be a solution to the lack of dynamic programme development. The B.Comm Degree aspires to be the flagship Programme of the Faculty of Commerce and its strategic management and operational excellence should be of paramount importance. The PRG were of the opinion that this can best be achieved if, in the immediate future, the Dean of the Faculty were to act as Director with full responsibility for all the strategic and operational issues, especially the

delicate questions of faculty resourcing and coordination across departmental boundaries to achieve a modern and effective Programme. The current organisational arrangements within the Faculty make it difficult for any one of the participating Departments to act as the “lead player” in managing the Degree. Indeed many of the Departments have very substantial programmes of their own that require close management attention.

3.4.5 In due course it may be sensible for the task of Programme direction to be partly delegated to an Operational Director with an appropriate team but it will still remain important for the Dean to remain responsible for the strategic development of the Programme and its long term funding and resourcing

3.4.6 The PRG was also concerned with the overall resourcing of the Programme as a necessary condition for improvement and development. The quality of information presented in (and presumably that available to the authors of) the SAR is frankly inadequate. The PRG was not able to make any sensible assessment of the viability of the B.Comm Degree or of any of the recommendations for improvement. There is a very real sense of division between the operation of the Programme and its longer term funding. There cannot be any fully informed analysis of the strategic opportunities available without knowing the financial context.

3.4.7 The PRG was also very struck by the sharp differences of opinion about resourcing, funding and costs at different levels within the University. Opinion among senior Faculty members seemed to be that the Programme is treated by the University as a cash cow and that investment funds are withheld. At the University level the view was expressed that the Programme is fully costed and producing only a modest surplus. The trigger for the many comments the PRG received was always in relation to academic staff/student ratios, which, on the face of it, are alarmingly low. In addition it seemed that the ratio of senior academic staff to junior academic staff is very low. The reviewers considered this to be a very unhealthy situation that has led to deteriorating morale within the Departments and major disagreements about the future of the Degree. Moreover, it has the potential to destabilise the Programme. The PRG recommends that these matters be resolved as a matter of urgency and as a prerequisite to the further development of a good Programme into an excellent one.

### **3.5 External Relations and Support Services**

3.5.1 The recent benchmarking exercises carried out prior to the review were quite limited in scope, focussing on traditional Irish and British competitors, and ‘producer-focussed’ rather than ‘customer-focussed’. The PRG recommends that the Faculty should look further afield and should consider Business Schools and Management Departments in Europe and in the USA, where competition is already more intense than in Ireland. There is an opportunity now to innovate but it requires a sharp appreciation of what is best in class Programme designs.

3.5.2 The SAR recommended that membership of the Board of Studies should be extended to include representatives of the business community and students. The PRG identified two separate issues here. The PRG recommends that students should be directly represented on the Board of Studies, and welcomes the statement that the minutes of Staff-Student Liaison Committees are a regular agenda item for the Board. The PRG were unclear as to the present arrangements for Staff-Student Liaison Committees, and its understanding was that these have only recently been established.

3.5.3 With regard to external representation, the PRG recommends that an External Advisory Board be established. This should be done carefully and with due consideration for the way in which UCC wishes to build the B.Comm brand. The recommendation is that this Board should be established at the Faculty of Commerce level and should, therefore, advise on the overall Programme portfolio, links with professional recruiters and other external stakeholders. The Board should be chaired by an outside appointee and should report to the University President.

## **4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

### **4.1 Recommendations for improvement made in the SAR**

The PRG considered very carefully the recommendations for improvement made in the SAR. These are incorporated into the recommendations for improvement made by the PRG below.

## **4.2 Recommendations for improvement made by the PRG**

The PRG recommends:

1. That the uncertainties and controversies about funding and staffing within the Faculty of Commerce be resolved as a matter of urgency, in particular as applies to the B.Comm Degree, so that effective long term financial planning and management of the B.Comm Degree can be undertaken.
2. That the B.Comm Degree should have a Programme Director, formally appointed, and that this role should be undertaken by the Dean of the Faculty initially, in order to ensure appropriate strategic and operational development of the Programme, and proper integration of the Faculty and courses required.
3. That the B.Comm Degree should be re-assessed for its place in changing markets, for its intellectual coherence and potential for more integrated design of modules and practical assignments.
4. That the curriculum of the B.Comm Degree Programme should be aligned with the curricula of leading Western European and North American universities and should aim to broaden its base of student applications to reflect this.
5. That an External Advisory Board for the Faculty of Commerce be established.
6. That there needs to be an improvement in the physical and training facilities for both students and staff.

## **5.0 CONCLUSION**

The PRG would like to thank the staff of the Departments for their cooperation with the review and their honesty in their meetings with the reviewers. The PRG hopes that this Report will be of use to the staff of the Departments, the Faculty of Commerce and the University in progressing and advancing the Degree Programme and that the recommendations for improvement made in this report will be of assistance in going forward.

The PRG expressed their gratitude to the staff of the Quality Promotion Unit for their facilitation of the review and the excellent organisation of all aspects of the review visit.

**Timetable for conduct of Peer Review Visit**

**B.Comm. Degree**

***Monday 20<sup>th</sup> February 2006***

- 17.30 Meeting of members of the Peer Review Group  
Briefing by Director of Quality Promotion Unit, Dr. N. Ryan.  
Group agrees final work schedule and assignment of tasks for the following 2 days.  
Views were exchanged and areas to be clarified or explored were identified.
- 19.30 Dinner for members of the Peer Review Group and members of the Co-ordinating Committee.

***Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> February 2006***

- 08.30 Convening of Peer Review Group
- Consideration of Self-Assessment Report
- 09.00 Dr. Ed Shinnick, Director of Board of Studies
- 09.30 Meeting with all staff involved in teaching on programme
- 10.45 Meetings of members of the Peer Review Group with members of staff.
- 10.45 Dr. Siobhan Lucey, Chair, Coordinating Committee
- 11.00 Mr. James Fairhead, Lecturer in Marketing
- 11.15 Mr. Michael Murphy, Lecturer in Marketing
- 11.30 Mr. Daniel Kiely, Lecturer in Economics
- 11.45 Ms. Geraldine Ryan, Lecturer in Economics
- 12.15 Ms. Maria Sobey, Learning Technologies Unit
- 12.30 Professor Neil Collins, Dean, Faculty of Commerce
- 13.00 Working private lunch for members of Peer Review Group
- 14.00 Visit to facilities, including the Faculty of Commerce Office, the Boole Lecture Theatres and the Department of Accounting, Finance & Information Systems.  
PRG escorted by Mr. Colman Quain and Dr. Ed Shinnick
- 15.00 Representatives of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Year Students
- Katie Cronin, Comm 1  
Aedin Curtin, Comm 1  
Robert Maher, Comm 1

Mark Murphy, Comm 1

Eoin Joyce, Comm 2

Maria Nugent, Comm 2

15.30 Representatives of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Year Students

Claire Conroy, Comm 3

Colin Hester, Comm 3

Aine Stafford, Comm 3

Jennifer Casey, Comm 4 (Economics)

James Deane, Comm 4 (Food Business)

Ann Marie O'Connell, Comm 4 (Government)

Melissa O'Gorman, Comm 4 (Management)

16.00 Board of Studies for B.Comm Programme

Mr. Seamus Coffey, Department of Economics

Mr. David Humphreys, Department of Accounting, Finance & Information Systems

Dr. Donal Hurley, School of Mathematical Sciences

Mr. Eamon Linehan, Department of Food Business & Development

Mr. Michael Murphy, Department of Management & Marketing

Mr. Colman Quain, Faculty Manager, Faculty of Commerce

Dr. Theresa Reidy, Department of Government

Dr. Ed Shinnick, Department of Economics

17.00 Representatives of recent graduates, employers and other stakeholders

Ms. Margaret Barrett, Graduate

Ms. Mary Doherty, Employer, Schering Plough

Mr. Brian Glanville, Graduate

Mr. Michael Magee, Employer, JB O'Sullivan

Ms. Pamela Lafferty, Graduate & Centre for Policy Studies

Mr. Michael Nolan, Employer, Welch & Co.

Mr. Joe O'Shea, Employer Price Waterhouse & Cooper

Ms. Aoife O'Sullivan, Graduate

Mr. Shane Thornton, Graduate

Ms. Cathriona Whelan, Graduate

19.00 Meeting of Peer Review Group to identify remaining aspects to be clarified and to finalise tasks for the following day followed by a working private dinner for members for the Peer Review Group.

***Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2006***

08.30 Convening of Peer Review Group

09.00 Professor Paul Giller, Registrar & Vice-President for Academic Affairs

- 09.30 Professor Neil Collins, Dean, Faculty of Commerce
- 10.00 Visit to Boole Library, meeting with Ms. Margot Conrick, Head of Information Services and Ms. Rosarii Buttiner, Social Sciences Subject Librarian
- 10.45 Mr. Colman Quain, Faculty Manager, Faculty of Commerce
- 11.15 Ms. Carmel Cotter, Finance Office
- 11.30 Heads of Departments contributing to B.Comm Programme
- Professor Connell Fanning, Head, Department of Economics  
 Dr. James Grannell, Head, School of Mathematics, Applied Mathematics & Statistics  
 Dr. Donncha Kavanagh, Department of Management & Marketing  
 Professor Ciaran Murphy, Head, Department of Accounting, Finance & Information Systems  
 Dr. Seamus O'Reilly, Department of Food Business & Development  
 Dr. Clodagh Harris, Department of Government
- 12.00 Professor Caroline Fennell, Acting Head, College of Business & Law
- 13.00 Working private lunch for members of the Peer Review Group
- 14.00 Preparation of first draft of final Report
- 17.00 Exit presentation made to all staff responsible for teaching on the Degree Programme by the international external member of the Peer Review Group, summarising the principal findings of the Peer Review Group.
- 16.50 Professor Sebastian Green, Head, Department of Management & Marketing
- 19.00 Working private dinner for members of the Peer Review Group to complete drafting of Report and finalisation of arrangements for speedy completion and submission of final Report.

***Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2006***

Externs depart