



UNIVERSITY COLLEGE CORK

QUALITY ENHANCEMENT UNIT

GUIDELINES FOR PERIODIC REVIEW (ACADEMIC)

“By embedding a strong quality-enhancement ethos, we will use our quality processes to ensure a culture and experience of best practice in the delivery of our academic mission, demonstrating our commitment to continuous evolution and improvement”

(UCC’s Strategic Plan 2017 – 2022, p.23)

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1. Introduction and overview

As an autonomous degree awarding body, UCC is responsible for and committed to, enhancing the quality of all education and training, research and services provided. Periodic quality review is undertaken in support of its objectives for quality enhancement, by engaging units¹ in a process of self-evaluation leading to a review by an expert peer review panel. The University's Quality Enhancement Committee (QEC), which is chaired by the President, is responsible for oversight of the University's quality processes which are developed and implemented through the Quality Enhancement Unit.

The Quality Enhancement Unit (QEU) at UCC develops and manages the University's quality processes to support its achievement of the strategic objectives for excellence and to enable a culture of quality based on a commitment to enhancement. Goal 1 of UCC's current Strategic Plan 2017 – 2022 is *“to deliver an outstanding, student-centred teaching and learning experience with a renewed, responsive and research-led curriculum at its core.”*

Reviews usually take place over the course of two to three days, depending on the size of the unit. The QEU organises all aspects of the review and provides professional support and guidance for the management of the reviews to both the unit under review and to the Review Panel. Following a briefing from the Director of Quality Enhancement, the School will be assigned an advisor from the QEU to support the preparation for the review. (Please refer also to section 3 for more details of support.)

1.2 What do we mean by quality enhancement?

An enhancement ethos both challenges and supports the systematic examination of what we do as a University to enable excellence in serving learners, stakeholders and our wider community in terms of our education, research and other activities. Our approach to quality is founded on openness, systematic self-evaluation, engagement with peer review processes and a commitment to enhancement-based outcomes that are responsive, creative, enabling and student-centred.

In our quality enhancement approach, we are committed to:

- Building and embedding a culture of quality which is engaged, reflective and connected
- Working collaboratively to develop effective evaluation approaches that allow critical reflection on achievement of strategic goals and objectives and an appraisal of the known and anticipated needs of stakeholders
- Engaging students as active partners in the quality enhancement process to embed a student-centred approach
- Developing quality processes that promote creativity, excellence and innovation
- Using peer review as an important reference point for confirming and developing the quality of the University's activities
- Undertaking institutional reflection on the outcomes of quality review processes to contribute to on-going institutional planning, resource allocation and institutional development
- Ensuring that quality processes facilitate the sharing of good practice internally and externally
- Developing our evidenced-based approach to quality enhancement informed by relevant research and good practice nationally and internationally.

¹ Unit will be used interchangeably to refer to the Department, School, Office, Unit undergoing review

2. Peer Review at UCC

The University is required by the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act (2012) to review it provision "at least once every 7 years."² The review process has been devised to align international, national and institutional good practice and processes. UCC's overarching policy for quality enhancement adheres to Quality and Qualifications Ireland's (QQI) *Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines (2016)*³ and to the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) in the European Higher Education Area (2015)*⁴. The primary objectives are to: "preserve our institutional autonomy through accountability and transparency which will enable the diversity of our activities; recognise and share good practice; increase our reflexive capacity; support institutional learning and development to encourage responsiveness across all our activities".⁵

2.1 Objectives of Peer Review at UCC

2.1.1 General Objectives

The overarching objectives of academic quality review at UCC are to enable Schools, through evidence-based self-evaluation, to:

1. Reflect on and promote the strategic enhancement of their academic activities to ensure an outstanding learning experience for all students (enhancement dimension)
2. Evaluate the effectiveness of their processes for assuring academic standards and provision, in line with the University's academic mission and strategy (assurance dimension)

By aligning with national and international legislation, policy and good practice, the quality review process will further enable the School/Unit to:

- Provide independent evidence on the quality of its activities to the university, its students and all of its stakeholders
- Engage in collegial, internal dialogue to appraise its activities and to garner the School's collective intelligence to respond to opportunities and challenges
- Engage in dialogue with students, as partners, to evaluate and enhance the quality of the student learning experience
- Avail of expert peer advice to enhance and support development and innovation
- Evaluate their relationships with, and contributions to, other areas within and beyond the University
- Provide a common framework for discussion with University administration and inform the strategic development of Schools, Colleges and the University.

2.1.2 Customised Review

From time to time, it may be in the interest of the School to link the University's internal review process with other related activity within the School, such as external or professional accreditation. In such a case, the QEU will work with the School to establish the terms of reference and structure of the review, to address the primary objectives and any additional objectives that might be identified as appropriate.

² This Act provides for Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) to publish statutory quality assurance guidelines, which providers must have regard to in the development of their own quality assurance procedures.

³ Quality Qualification Ireland's quality assurance guidelines can be accessed at <https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Core%20Statutory%20Quality%20Assurance%20Guidelines.pdf>

⁴ The European Standards and Guidelines can be accessed at http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf

⁵ UCC's Quality Enhancement Policy

2.2 Principles of Peer Review at UCC

2.2.1 Integrity

The integrity of peer review is of paramount importance. This means that any personal interests as a reviewer must never influence, or be seen to influence, the outcome. We would consider conflicts of interest arising, for example, where a relationship exists between the peer reviewer and the unit, or individuals within the unit under review e.g. a family relationship; an academic/employment relationship; or an acquaintance/friendship with a member of the unit under review. All reviewers will be required to read and sign a Conflict of Interest Form making a declaration of their interests.

2.2.2 Transparency

The QEU strives for openness and transparency in all of its activities through making available information to stakeholders in relation to its processes and procedures, this fostering trust, sincerity, honesty and professionalism.

2.2.3 Objectivity

The QEU's primary role is enabling the implementing the University's Quality Enhancement policy. As a conduit for organising and supporting the University's quality review process, the QEU remains objective and independent, treading the line of support for both the conduct of the Review process and for the Unit undergoing review.

2.2.4 Confidentiality

Confidentiality throughout the process, both for the University and the unit under review, is central to maintaining trust in the peer review process. Documents, including the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) and other sensitive information, may be shared with panel members. The information provided should not, however, be shared with anyone outside of the review process, nor should the information therein be used for any purpose other than that expressly outlined in the terms of the review.

2.2.5 Anonymity

Principles of anonymity underpin peer review at UCC. Care should be taken in the Panel Report that individuals (either panel members or members of the unit) are not identified. The QEU follows GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) principles and guidelines around the use and storage of personal information for all agents involved in the Quality Review process.

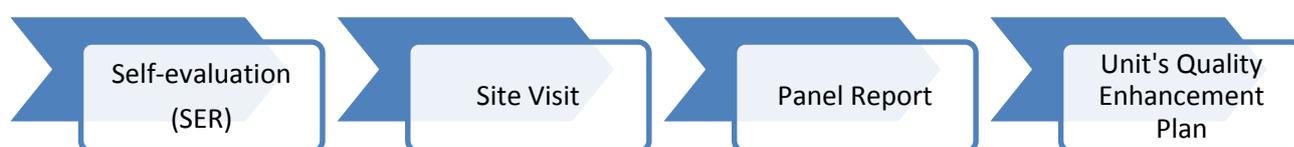
2.2.6 Inclusivity

UCC is committed to fostering an inclusive environment that mainstreams diversity and equality; the QEU operates a fully inclusive policy in relation to all of its activity and will ensure equal opportunity for access by all participants.

2.3 Process of Peer Review at UCC

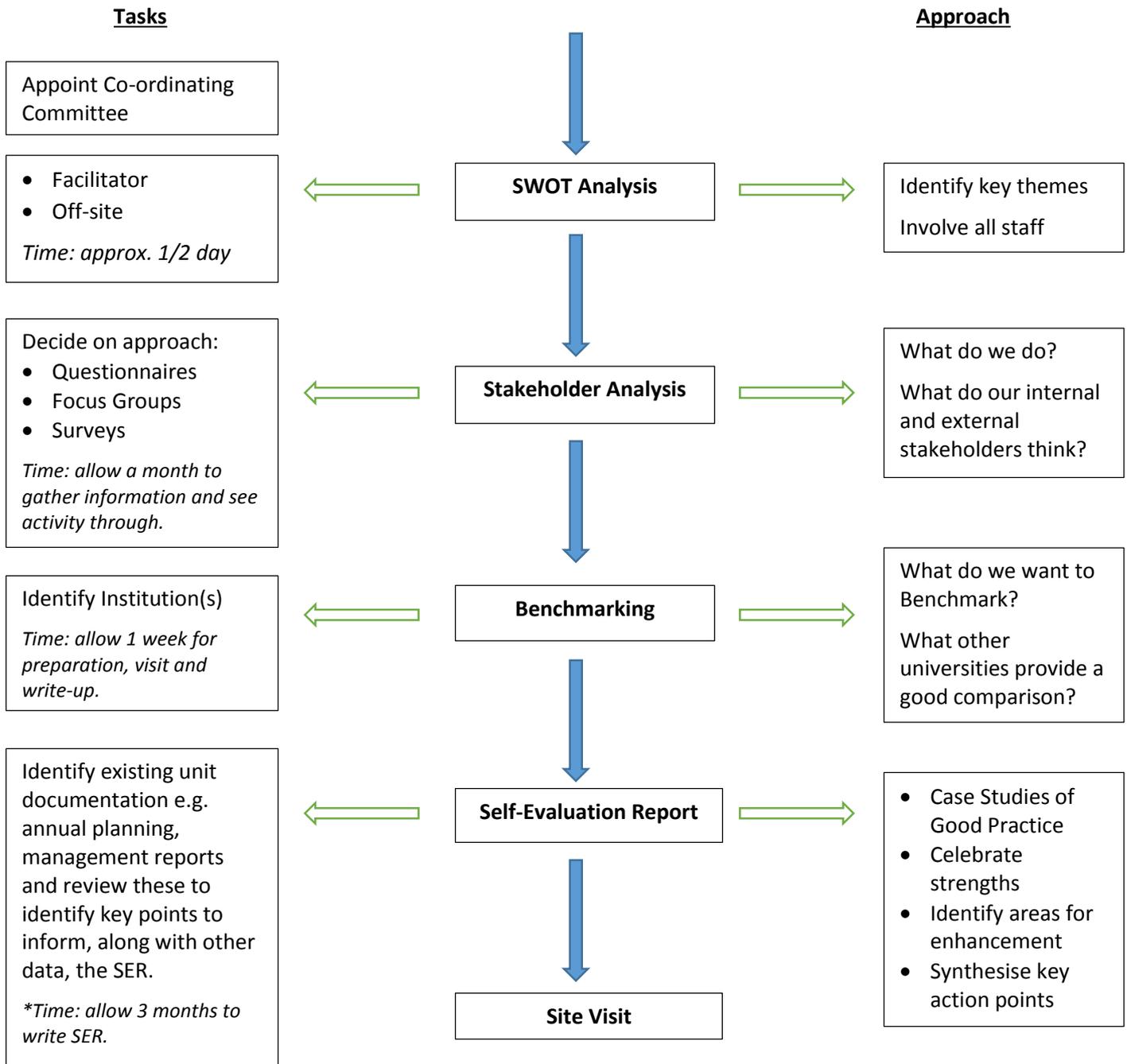
2.3.1 Four-stage Review Process

The process adheres to the four-stage model for review set out in the ESG and approved by QQI i.e.: self-evaluation report (SER); peer review and site visit; published Panel report; follow-up – including a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) from the unit. This model is as follows:



2.3.2 The School's Self-Evaluation Process

The self-evaluation process undertaken by the School, which leads to the development of a Self-Evaluation Report (SER), is one of the most important aspects of the process, offering a rare opportunity for Schools to take stock, reflect on and evidence, in a holistic way, its collective and individual activity. The self-evaluation process, usually led by a steering committee, should begin 12 – 18 months before the Site Visit to enable thorough consultation with all stakeholders. The following chart outlines the stages of the self-evaluation process:



**Time is indicative and is expressed in terms of period of time over which all elements of SER might be brought together and inform the drafting of the SER.*

2.3.3 The Self-Evaluation Report (SER)

The key document for the review will be the self-evaluation report (SER), which should typically be approximately 40 pages. The SER will inform an initial agenda which will be drawn up by the QEU in consultation with the School/Unit under review. The SER should be evidence-based, utilising the data available on the student life-cycle, and it should be informed by the evidence garnered through research the undertaken, by the School/Unit, for the purpose of the review; e.g. the SWOT, benchmarking, student focus groups etc. A Good Practice Case Study should be submitted with SER (see section 2.3.4 below for details of the Case Study).

Review documentation will be made available to all Panel Members **at least six weeks** ahead of the review. Panel Members will be asked to comment on the draft agenda, to provide brief contributions to inform the initial agenda for individual meetings and to consider if there is any further documentation they may need.

2.3.4 Good Practice Case Study

The Good Practice Case Study was introduced as a new initiative by the QEU in 2017 as an integral part of the self-evaluation process for academic quality reviews. Acknowledging and celebrating good practice demonstrates a mature approach to quality where the outcomes of self-evaluation balance successes alongside issues identified for further development. It allows showcasing of activity to academic peers, students and colleagues across the university and also externally. It also provides the opportunity for peer learning and the potential to encourage ongoing innovation and development within the university community, as a part of a wider institutional enhancement ethos. Overall the case-study is a synoptic account of the practice, 3-4 pages, or a digital or other artefact (such as video, podcast, blog), which illustrates its scope and impact in terms of enhancing the quality of the student learning experience. Panel members are expected to read and comment on the Good Practice Case Study in the final Panel Report.

2.3.5 The Site Visit

The Site Visit usually involves two-three days (depending on the size of the School/unit) during which the Panel meets with the School management; staff and students of the School; Senior Management of the University; and external stakeholders.

2.3.6 The Panel Report

During the Site Visit and in the weeks following, the Panel will draft a Panel Report, which will be approved by the QEC before being published on the QEU website. The Report should provide a comprehensive account of the present state of the unit under review in terms of the management and organisation of activities, the academic standards of its educational provision and the quality of the student experience provided. The Report will indicate commendations on the current activities of the School/Unit along with recommendations for enhancement. The School/Unit will receive a draft of this report for a factual check prior to it being presented to QEC for approval for publication.

2.3.7 Post-Review process and Quality Enhancement Plan

Following the approval by the QEC of the Panel Report, the School/Unit will be asked for a formal response to the recommendations, which will form the basis of the School/Unit's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). The QEP should take a SMART⁶ approach to indicate clearly how the recommendations of the Panel Report will be actioned. There will be a follow up meeting with the School/Unit approximately 18 months after the review to discuss progress on the recommendations.

⁶ Specific; Measurable; Achievable; Realistic; Time-bound.

2.4 The Peer Review Panel

2.4.1 Make-up of the Panel

The Peer Review Panel usually consists of 5 – 6, comprised of members drawn from the University and external specialists from other higher education institutions, from business and/or the professions, and all panels include a student reviewer. The Chair of the Panel is usually a UCC staff member who is often, but not exclusively, a member of the QEC. Secretariat support is provided to the Panel throughout the review by a member of the QEU.

2.4.2 Quality Enhancement and Student Engagement

The UCC model of academic quality review encourages self-evaluation on the quality of the student learning experience and academic standards, with an *enhancement* emphasis. In addition to the Review Panels meeting students of the School/Unit, the QEU advances UCC's commitment to student engagement by including a student reviewer on all Review Panels. The student reviewer is regarded as a full member of the Panel and this valuable student contribution is acknowledged by awarding a "Quality Peer Reviewer" Digital Badge to students to mark their participation.

2.4.3 Process for Nominating the External Peer Reviewers

The process of nominating external expert peer reviewers relies on a robust set of appointment criteria and a clear policy regarding conflict of interest. Initially, the QEU will ask the unit undergoing review to provide a long list of between six and ten names of potential reviewers, depending on its size.

The following *appointment criteria* must be taken into account when compiling the long list of potential reviewers:

- Breadth and depth of reviewer expertise in the discipline/unit area
- Extent of management experience in the area under review and/or at institutional level
- External reputation/profile within the area under review (e.g. representation on relevant national or international bodies)
- Gender balance
- A balance of national and international nominations (but preferably within the continent of Europe)
- At ease with reading and writing reports in English.

The following would constitute a *conflict of interest* and nominators should take these into account at the same time as the appointment criteria:

- Recently (in the last five years) acted as external examiner at UCC
- Recently or currently acting as a consultant or adviser to the unit under review
- Any relationship with the unit under review or its staff that could prejudice independence (including family or personal relationships with any member of the unit under review)
- Current partners in research collaborations or projects within the unit under review

Nominations are sent to the Director of the Quality Enhancement who will check to ensure that the appointment criteria and conflict of interest statements have been taken into consideration. The long list of reviewers will be sent to QEC and members will be asked for their comments and/or recommendations within one week. Reviewers will then be invited to participate in the review by the QEU. Other nominations on the long list will be used should the any or all of the initially selected nominations be unable to participate.

The final panel will be communicated to the unit under review for information prior to the review

3. Customised Supports for Schools undergoing Review

In line with the University's objective of enabling a quality enhancement culture and ethos which is engaged, connected and reflective, the QEU has introduced a series of customised supports for Schools preparing for review. The following table provides an indication of the supports available to the Schools and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) in relation to various aspects of these processes (self-evaluation, SWOT, benchmarking and support workshops) are provided in Appendices 2 to 5.

Table 1: Customised Support for Schools undergoing Review

Development Plan for School Supports				
Support Topic	With	Facilitated by	When (Duration)	Comments
Preparing for Quality Review	Coordinating Committee and Head of School	QEU	12 months (1.5 hours)	
SWOT Analysis Workshop	All staff, Coordinating Committee and Head of School	HR or external facilitator	10 – 12 months (1/2 day)	
Action Planning	Coordinating Committee and Head of School	QEU and School	9 months	Engage with College; high level issues
Student-focused TLA* – Case Study of Good Practice	Coordinating Committee and selected staff	QEU, CIRTL & TLA Head	6 - 9 months (2 hours)	Concurrent training for student participants will be organised, with potential for peer-to-peer discussions
Programme Focus: curriculum/delivery/structure/distinguishing features/placement/strengths/ challenges	Programme Directors and Programme Committees	QEU, CIRTL & TLA Head	6 – 9 months 2 hours	
Data Gathering	Benchmarking	School	6 - 9 months	Data informs self-evaluation
	Student focus groups/surveys	QEU and School		
	External surveys/employers/placement	School		
	Externs examiners' reports	School		
Expert Seminar	All interested staff	School & QEU – (possible external expert)	5 months 1.5 hours	
SER Submission			1 – 2 months	6 weeks before the Site Visit

*Teaching, Learning and Assessment