



UNIVERSITY COLLEGE CORK

QUALITY ASSURANCE/QUALITY ENHANCEMENT

OFFICE OF MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION

PEER REVIEW PANEL REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR 2017-18

JANUARY 2018

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List of Panel Members

Name	Position/Discipline	Institution
Mr Barry O'Brien (Chair)	Director, Human Resources	University College Cork
Ms Michele Power	Manager, Quercus Talented Students Programme	University College Cork
Miss Rachel Sandison	Executive Director, External Relations	University of Glasgow
Mr Alan Ferns	Associate Vice-President for External Relations	University of Manchester
Ms Kirsty Ellen Hayes (Student Representative)	Social Sciences	University College Cork
Dr Kay Taaffe (Secretariat Support)	Quality Enhancement Advisor, Quality Enhancement Unit	University College Cork

Context for the Review

“Invest in increasing UCC’s marketing and communications capabilities and support by: implementing a strategic approach to marketing and communications; implementing recommendations for improvement arising from a benchmarking exercise with comparator universities and completing a review of the function in 2017 – 2018; completing a reputation audit and implementing findings.” (UCC Strategic Plan 2017 – 2022, Goal 3, Action 18)

The Panel acknowledges the significance of the timing of this Review, following the recent publication of the University’s *Strategic Plan 2017 – 2022, Independent Thinking Shared Ambition*, which explicitly references a review of the marketing and communications function (cited above). The Review is taking place in the context of an “increasingly competitive Irish and international HE market ... [at a time when] the enhancement of the university’s reputation is critical”.¹ This confluence of events, along with a recent Reputation Audit conducted by the Knowledge Partnership², renders this an opportune time to align the conditions and make some changes to enable the delivery of a highly strategic Marketing and Communications function across the University. In that light, the Panel was concerned with establishing where the overall responsibility for development of the vision, mission and strategy for the brand and reputation of the University resides within the institution. This Peer Review, therefore, as well as focusing on the performance-level function of the OMC (Office of Marketing & Communication), presents the opportunity for broader consideration of the strategic M & C (marketing and communication) function within the University, with the benefit of expert peer advice.

¹ SER p. 60

² In April 2017, UCC commissioned an independent UK-based consultancy, The Knowledge Partnership, to conduct an audit of its current reputation, benchmarked against competitors.

Peer Review

Methodology and Timetable

The Panel met over three days from January 16th to 18th 2018; the timetable enabled broad engagement with the Vice-President of External Relations (VPER), the Director and staff of the OMC, internal (UCC) and external stakeholders of the OMC, and with Senior Management at the University (see Appendix 1 for a copy of the timetable).

The composition of the Panel brought together national and international expertise, with extensive experiential coverage of university-based M & C strategy and processes. Internal reviewers provided knowledge of the institutional and organisational structures within UCC, while the involvement of a student as a full Panel Member provided a valuable student perspective. The Panel particularly commended the insightful contribution made by the Student Reviewer to the review process. The entire Panel contributed to the production of the final Panel Report. Secretariat support from the Quality Enhancement Unit (QEU) was provided to the Peer Review Panel throughout, to facilitate the conduct of the review and support the Review Panel in formulating and agreeing the final Review Report.

Site Visit

The Site Visit was well-organised and while the schedule was very full, it did enable some flexibility when required by the Panel. The Site Visit included a tour of facilities which took in the Visitors' Centre, the main offices of the OMC in the East-Wing, and a much sought-after tour of the North-Wing tower, which is arranged by the Visitors' Centre for distinguished guests of the University. During a series of meetings with the staff, Panel Members had the opportunity to view marketing material which the OMC develops on behalf of the University.

Self-Evaluation Report (SER) and SWOT Analysis

The SER is detailed, providing clear information, evidence and analysis of the operations of the individual Units and functions within the OMC. Preparation involved a consultation process with OMC staff and external stakeholders, an internal (UCC) staff survey, and a SWOT analysis. Findings from these consultations were integrated in the SER and contributed to the overall self-evaluation and recommendations.

Benchmarking

Benchmarking took place against 6 other universities (4 UK and 2 Irish). The Panel questioned the appropriateness of some of the institutions chosen as they were not comparable in terms of scale and resources to the OMC at UCC. The objectives for the benchmarking exercise were not very specific; consequently, the outcomes did not provide useful data in relation to the effectiveness of the OMC by comparison with other national competitors. The Reputation Audit did undertake benchmarking in relation to sentiment and reputation versus national competitors, which was of more value. The Panel would recommend that the OMC continues to undertake on-going benchmarking of a more focused nature which provides data in relation to the comparative brand performance of UCC nationally and internationally.

Overall Analysis

The Panel was impressed with the commitment and professionalism of staff who bring a wealth of experience and a dedication to serving the University across the fields of activity. OMC identified its outward facing remit as their primary KPI (Key Performance Indicator) and there was evidence of highly successful external engagement and partnership-working with principal stakeholders in the city and beyond. Both internal and external stakeholders commented on the quality of many of the OMC's outputs which are of a very high standard.

The Panel sought to establish who has ownership for strategic planning for M & C and for the institutional brand and reputation. In meetings with Senior Management of the University, the Panel established that the responsibility for developing the vision, mission and strategy for the brand and reputation of the University, and associated KPIs, resides with Senior Management of the University.

It was evident that some resources for M & C are devolved and dispersed to different academic and professional service units across the University, and consequently there appears to be a somewhat disconnected approach in how these resources are utilised for maximum impact and the delivery of KPIs.

The Panel therefore recommends that, in the first instance, an audit of the marketing, media and communication resources across the University is undertaken, and that this audit should include expenditure on external suppliers in these areas. A key objective of this audit will be to discover and then optimise and unlock investment across the University in the area of M & C. This audit should provide oversight of the M & C resource and inform the development of an optimal model for ensuring greatest impact of this investment across the institution. The outcomes of this audit should then inform the Office's strategic planning and resource allocation. The Panel anticipates that this audit could satisfactorily be carried out without any additional spend, but rather be extracted from information already held by the Finance Office in the form of a "desk audit". It suggests that levels of activity in the area of M & C could be tracked by looking at the expenditure by cost code and by supplier (PR companies, graphic designers, press photographers, printers etc.) It might also be possible to search for relevant key words in UCC job advertisements over the past few years which would indicate the spread of the responsibility for the activity across UCC staff.

While stakeholders commended the responsiveness of the teams in the OMC – and this was an identified key strength in the SER – the Units appear to be operating predominantly at a transactional/operational level without strategic scaffolding. This means that the Office is often functioning in reactive mode rather than supporting a considered institutional agenda for the brand and M & C, in line with the agreed goals in the University's Strategic Plan. This can result in competing demands, a drain on resources and possible diversion from more strategic M & C activity. Consequently, there is a need to develop and implement an Operational Plan for M & C, to give effect to the University's Strategic Plan, with the OMC taking a lead role, but in partnership with other academic and professional services (principally but not exclusively: Admissions; Graduate Office; International Office; Development and Alumni).

The Panel was of the view that the OMC should play the key role and be encouraged to be ambitious and creative in developing an Operational Plan for M & C for the University. The findings of the Panel outlined in the following paragraphs are, therefore, intended to support the OMC in leading this initiative.

Findings of the Panel

Unit details including staff profile

The OMC, in its current formation, has been in place since 2014 when the role of Director of Marketing and Communication was established. It consists of four distinct Units (Marketing; Media and PR; Events; and Visitors' Centre) with a staff complement of 13 who report to the Director (with some part-time student help at the Visitors' Centre).

Unit organisation & planning

The SER identified – and the Panel supports the view – that the team's multi-site location does not contribute to a highly functioning integrated M & C team. The Panel recommends that at the earliest possible opportunity, the team should be co-located to ensure maximum effectiveness, which will facilitate integration and cross-team working. While the Panel recommends that the Office should consider strategy before structure, at the appropriate time the OMC should examine its own internal planning and this should incorporate: organisational structure; funding model; consistent University policy application; and clarity of purpose.

Internal communication across the Unit and University

Currently the OMC is externally facing and it is notable that none of the Units appear to have responsibility for the internal communications and market intelligence briefs within the University, which are key functions of M & C offices in other Universities. The OMC states that "its core purpose and mission [is] externally facing and the key stakeholders that it caters for are also externally facing"³; however, the SER also recognises that UCC's internal stakeholders are of significant importance with the potential to be the best advocates and communications' channel for the brand. The Panel therefore agrees that the OMC should have an increased internally-focused role – not least to build and support ambassadors for the University brand amongst staff and students, and to communicate a greater understanding of the functions of the Office across the University.

As part of its Operational Plan, the OMC should examine its own mechanisms and strategy for internal communication. There is an opportunity for greater communication and collaboration with other key internal stakeholders engaged in M & C to ensure maximum impact of overall resources across the University. The Panel therefore recommends that, following a review of structures, the Office considers the introduction of a service catalogue which clearly outlines the functions available to units within the University. In addition, the OMC should adopt a service-level approach to engage with its stakeholders around the functions of the Office.

Strategic planning

It was clearly established during the Review that the responsibility for shaping the University's brand and reputation resides with Senior Management. The University should, however, develop a stronger communications action plan with a particular focus on key areas of expertise across research and teaching to create more effective differentiation that capitalises on UCC's flagship areas of expertise. This would enable OMC to take a more thematic approach to campaigns and activities which would be consistent with the approach adopted by many UK universities, where there is now a focus on promoting research impact.

The role of the OMC is to strategically support, implement and strengthen the University's vision for its brand. In developing its Operational Plan the OMC should take account of the

³ SER p.23

University's mission for the Office as set out in the University's Strategic Plan 2017 - 2022 and provide a "roadmap" for the delivery of the University's strategic priorities and intent. This would include taking a lead role for developing policy and a "brand tool-kit" around branding and visual identity, which would apply to all units, subsidiaries, linked providers and partners of the University. The Panel would also recommend that the OMC puts in place a brand management forum to advise on policy and processes around the use of the University's brand, as recommended in the SER (page33).

Breadth and depth of stakeholder reach

External stakeholders spoke very highly of all the services of the OMC and their impact, particularly at local level. Stakeholders were of the opinion that communication "beyond the University gates" had been greatly enhanced in recent years. The University's role in promoting, not only the institution, but Cork city as a student and tourist destination is significant. In terms of marketing Cork as an "investment city", it was stated that UCC was a "fulcrum for this mission by legacy and geography".⁴

Stakeholders were of the opinion that there could be more clarity and consistency of messaging around the UCC branding and KPIs. While the brand may be translatable at local and regional levels, it is most important to identify what sets UCC apart for national and international audiences.

Impact on the student body

There are many opportunities for the OMC to engage more widely with the student body who are key stakeholders and ambassadors for the University. The OMC has a key role to play throughout the continuum of the student experience and should focus on maximising the institutional use of social media, developing effective methods of communication at each stage of the "student journey". To this end, the OMC should enhance the flexibility and agility of the team to respond in a timely manner to new and emerging social media platforms (Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter) and explore the possibility of leveraging student-generated content.

Staff development and workload

Reference has been made to the fact that there are opportunities for more integration and collaboration across the units of the OMC to increase capacity and to leverage skill-sharing across the teams. The Panel recommends that OMC reviews the operational structures within the team, including the role of leaders, managers and whole team dynamics. Each team member should have their own personal development plan and the Office should consider an externally-facilitated annual team development day to identify shared goals and priorities, build leadership capacity and to achieve the most effective LEAN team within OMC. In addition, the OMC should consider the development of a content marketing strategy to ensure that content is prioritised over channel and segmented appropriately for each key audience.

Resources (staffing, physical, technical, other)

As with other areas across the University, the OMC has been impacted by austerity and the reduction in state funding to the University sector. The Panel recommends that any business case to the UMTO for additional targeted financial and human resources should be linked to

⁴ Note from the meeting with external stakeholders

the findings of the proposed audit of M & C resources across the University and the resulting Operational Plan for the OMC.

There may, however, be more immediate opportunities for economies within the Office by reconsidering current resource allocation. There was, for example, universal commendation for the OMC's role in delivering the conferrings and graduations and the Panel would recommend that this function, and the associated resource, should remain with the OMC; however, a review of the multi-office processes involved in delivering these high-profile events should be undertaken to achieve efficiencies in terms of roles and objectives. Other recommendations for financial containment include: the development of a robust model for the procurement of contracted suppliers; considering the apportionment of the marketing spend, particularly in relation to *Independent Thinking*; and working with other functions across the University to increase purchasing power and deliver economies of scale. The Panel suggests that the OMC should increasingly move towards having a "digital first" approach for communications which may also deliver some economies.

In line with recommendations arising from the audit and Operational Plan, the Panel recommends that the Office focuses on the recruitment, development and retention of multi-skilled communication and marketing professionals. As a priority, it should seek to use the necessary HR processes to secure the employment of current staff on fixed-term contracts on to that of contracts of a permanent basis.

Local quality assurance and enhancement activities, including those for feedback and evaluation of services

The OMC should formalise its own internal evaluation processes – particularly in light of its multi-location – to provide increased opportunities for internal communication and creative collaboration. The OMC should continue to evaluate its activities in a reflective and reflexive manner by, for example, on-going benchmarking of its KPIs against national and international competitors.

Collaborative partnerships internally within the University

The Panel views this as a critical area where OMC needs to take the lead role and avail itself of opportunities to engage with committees across the institution. The OMC should be proactive in identifying and exploiting opportunities for publicity and promotion across the whole of the University.

Comment on the data provided through the annual monitoring processes (i.e. for measuring the quality and impact of the Unit's services and activities)

The Panel recommends that more effort should be put into measuring the ROI (Return on Investment) for the various marketing collateral produced and for events hosted.

Recommendations for Enhancement

Recommendations for the University

The Panel recommends that:

1. University senior management should identify their ambitions for the brand and the key features which they want to see promoted; these should reflect the goals and actions in the Strategic Plan and the challenges and opportunities identified in the Reputation Audit
2. The University Management Team should commission the OVP⁵ to undertake an audit of the marketing, media and communication resources spent across the University and to include external expenditure⁶
3. The OVP should present a report to the UMTO setting out the key findings of the audit and make recommendations on the optimal and most efficient model for delivery of marketing and communications across the University. The report should also identify the areas for targeted investment.

Recommendations for the OMC

The recommendations for enhancement to the OMC have been organised in three thematic areas: strategic; operational; and resource.

Strategic

The Panel recommends that the OMC:

1. Based on the findings of the OVP audit, develops an Operational Plan which should take account of the University's vision for the brand and mission for the Office, and provide a "roadmap" for the delivery of its strategic priorities and intent
2. Presents a business case to the University to resource its agreed Operational Plan
3. Takes the lead role for developing policy and a brand tool-kit around the use of branding and visual identity across the University
4. Considers its role in internal communications across the University to build and support ambassadors for the University brand amongst staff and students
5. Puts in place a brand management forum to advise on policy and processes around the use of the University's brand
6. Takes responsibility for on-going benchmarking and delivery of KPIs in relation to the comparative brand performance of UCC nationally and internationally

Operational

The Panel recommends that the OMC:

7. Reviews the operational structures within the team, including the role of leaders, managers and whole team dynamics, considering an annual team development day to build cross-functional strategy and collaboration. This review should assess the skills sets, capabilities and development needs within the team to build leadership capacity and to have an effective LEAN team within OMC

⁵ Office of the Vice-President for External Relations

⁶ The Panel anticipates that this audit could satisfactorily be carried out without any additional spend, but rather be extracted from information already held by the Finance Office in the form of a "desk audit". It suggests that levels of activity in the area of M & C could be tracked by looking at the expenditure by cost code and by supplier (PR companies, graphic designers, press photographers, printers etc.) It might also be possible to search for relevant key words in UCC job advertisements over the past few years which would also indicate the spread of the responsibility for the activity across UCC staff.

8. Considers a new approach to their marketing strategy which ensures that content is prioritised over channel and segmented appropriately for each key audience
9. Enhances the flexibility and agility of the team to respond in a timely manner to new and emerging social media platforms (Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter) to having a “digital first” approach and explore the possibility of leveraging student-generated social media content
10. Prioritises engagement with the other units involved in the delivery of external activities and other strategic priorities for the University (Admissions, International, etc.)
11. Adopts a service level approach to engage with its key stakeholders/partners around the functions of the Office and considers the introduction of a service catalogue which clearly outlines the M & C functions available to units within the University
12. At the earliest possible opportunity, the team should be co-located to ensure maximum effectiveness. This will facilitate integration and cross-team working

Resource

The Panel recommends that the OMC:

13. Works with other functions to deliver economies of scale in relation to purchasing power across the University and commits to reviewing multi-office processes, for example, conferrings and graduations
14. Develops a robust business model for the suppliers of services (e.g. graphic design, print, signage, PR agencies, photographers)
15. Considers the apportionment of the marketing spend, particularly in relation to the *Independent Thinking* publication
16. Focuses on the recruitment, development and retention of multi-skilled communications and marketing professionals and uses the necessary HR processes to consolidate the staff team on a permanent basis

Appendix 1 Timetable

PANEL SITE VISIT TIMETABLE

Tuesday 16 January 2018	
12.00 – 13.30	Convening of Panel members. Briefing by Director of Quality Enhancement and Quality Enhancement Advisor.
13.30 – 14.30	Private meeting of Panel <i>Panel agree issues to be explored in meetings with Director of Marketing and Communications, Vice President for External Affairs, and Stakeholders.</i>
14.30 – 15.30	Meeting with Director of Marketing & Communication <i>Discussion regarding developments to date, strategic priorities of the Department.</i>
15.30 – 16.00	Tea/coffee <i>Panel agree tasks and prepare for meetings with Vice President for External Affairs and Stakeholders</i>
16.00 – 16.50	Meeting with Vice President for External Affairs <i>Panel discuss Office strategy and priorities. The links between University financial resource allocations process, staffing resources and infrastructure.</i>
17.00 – 18.00	Meeting with External Stakeholders: Representative from Vermillion Design, Dublin Principal, St Marie's of the Isle Primary School, Cork Representative from Cork Opera House Representative from Cork Chamber of Commerce Representative from IMI Representative from AM O'Sullivan PR Ltd. Cork Representative from PRP, Cork City Council
19.00	Informal dinner for members of the Panel & staff members of the Office of M & C

Wednesday 17 January 2018	
09.00 – 09.15	Convening of the Panel
09.15 – 10.15	Meeting with all staff of the Office of M & C <i>Discuss issues such as strategy, communications, research & education, staffing.</i>
10.15 – 10.45	Tea/coffee

10.45 – 11.30	Meeting with Representatives of M & C Functions: <i>Opportunity for the Department to showcase good practice and enhancements.</i>
11.30 – 12.30	Tour of related facilities
12.30 – 13.30	Lunch and private meeting of the Panel
13.30 – 14.30	Meeting with Internal Stakeholders – (Professional Services): Representative from Admissions Office Director, International Education Executive Director, Development & Alumni Relations Head, Library and Information Services Head of Graduate Studies Office Representative from Glucksman Gallery Associate Vice President of Development, Development and Alumni Office
14.30 – 15.15	Meeting with Internal Stakeholders – (Academic): Representative from Department of Government Athena SWAN Project Officer Head of School of Education Representative from Microbiology Lecturer, Applied Social Studies Research Support Officer, INFANT
15.15 – 15.45	Tea/coffee
15.45 – 16.45	Meeting with Senior Officers of the University: Head, College of Business and Law Vice President for Research & Innovation Academic Secretary Vice President for Teaching & Learning President, UCC Head, College of Medicine and Health Head of College ICASSS
19.00	Working private dinner for members of the Panel to commence drafting the report.

Thursday 18 January 2018	
08.30 – 09.00	Convening of the Panel
09.00 – 10.00	Meeting with Director of Marketing & Communication <i>Clarification and discussions of main findings by Panel.</i>
10.00 – 11.00	Tea/coffee and private meeting of Panel

11.00 – 11.30	Exit presentation
11.30 – 15.00	Further work on drafting the final report