Fheabhsú Cáilíochta
Quality Enhancement

University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

QUALITY REVIEW

PEER REVIEW PANEL REPORT

OFFICE OF THE VICE-PRESIDENT FOR RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

"To support the University's mission and strategy for excellence in learning, research and related services through developing and embedding a culture of quality enhancement based on the outcomes of robust expert peer review and informed by ongoing analysis of key quality indicators."

(UCC Quality Enhancement Committee Aim)

May 2024

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Context

The current Vice-President for Research and Innovation was appointed in early 2021 and has played a pivotal role in building momentum for the prioritisation of research, innovation and enterprise as top strategic goal in the current University's Strategic Plan 2023-28, 'Securing our Future'.

As a result, the Office of the Vice-President for Research and Innovation (OVPRI) has recently undergone a restructuring and development of its operational structure with its staff complement doubling over the last two years. The re-organisation of the OVPRI (not concluded yet - twelve roles are still to be filled) has been accompanied by the ongoing digitalisation and upgrading of research information systems (the adoption of a new Research Information System - RIS - is under way, as well as a new Research Student Administration Project – RAP, the latter being under the remit of the Deputy-President and Registrar), the launch of the transformative 'UCC Futures' Framework and the elaboration of a Research Charter. These are part of a range of quality enhancement initiatives that are aimed at optimising the effectiveness of the services provided by the OVPRI to the research and innovation community by constituting an integrated ecosystem across the University.

The function of the Office of the Vice-President for Research and Innovation is to support UCC's vibrant and diverse research and innovation community in the successful delivery of broad-ranging transformative impact across key areas of social economic, cultural and environmental importance. This is in line with the University's current Strategic Plan, and vision to be the leading university for research, innovation and entrepreneurship in Ireland, a place of research-led teaching and learning, within a research-informed Connected Curriculum, and where excellent research is systematically translated into tangible impact to the benefit of society.

As shown in the diagram below, the current structure of the OVPRI is headed by the Vice-President (VP RI) and divided into four directorates, each headed by a director: three located within the Research arm (Research Support and Policy; Research Strategy and Projects; Biological Services Unit) and one within the Innovation arm. In turn, each directorate is divided into a number of sub-teams, specialised in supporting the R&I community throughout the various stages of their activities. Although the Biological Services Unit was only recently subsumed under the OVPRI's remit, it appears to have seamlessly integrated into the OVPRI structure, providing vital services to support research.
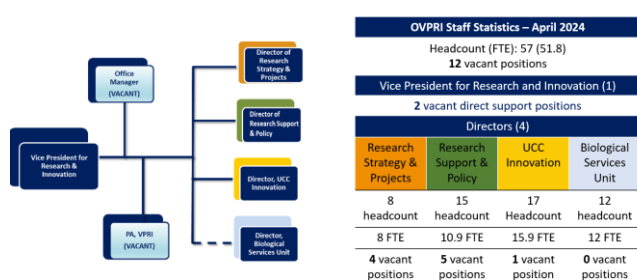
A diagram of the OVPRI's Directorates sub-division into specialised teams is provided below.
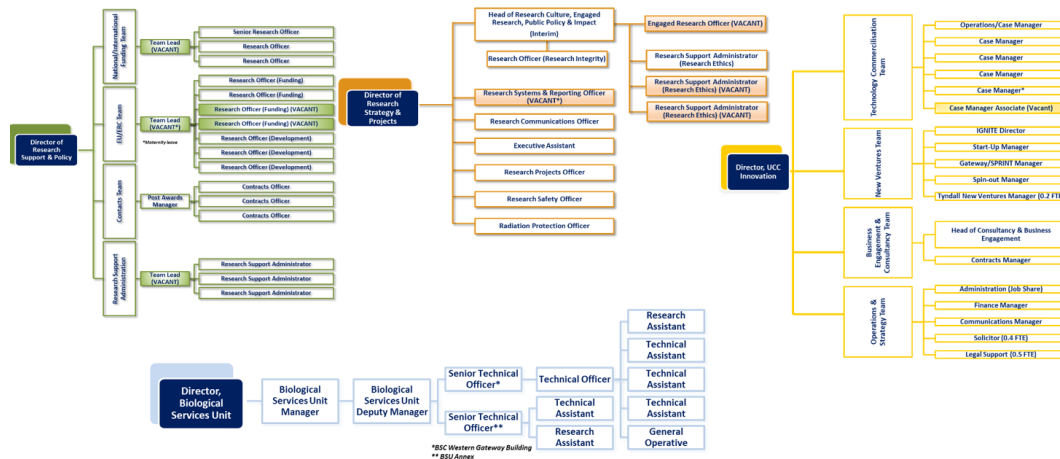
The completion of the current quality enhancement projects for the Office includes the review and introduction of a new Overhead Policy to guarantee stable financial streams and is essential to enable OVPRI to reach its full operational effectiveness.

However, a suite of strategic financial cost-saving measures (known as 'Project Alpha') was introduced at the beginning of 2024 by the University Leadership Team in the short- to medium-term, with potential implications for both the completion of the OVPRI's operational transformation and programmes, and, as a result, the fulfilment of the University's strategic prioritisation of research and innovation.

Methodology and Site Visit

A model for conducting site visits virtually was developed in 2020 to enable completion of Quality Reviews under the prevailing public health restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This model ensured continuity in the operation and delivery of quality review and enhancement activities. In 2022 the model moved to a hybrid review comprising of a 2 day on-campus site visit and 2 half-day virtual meetings.

This review took place under the hybrid review process over 2 weeks between the end of April and the beginning of May 2024. During the site visit the Panel met with staff, students, senior officers and relevant internal stakeholders. During the virtual meetings the Panel met external stakeholders and focused on writing the Report with a particular emphasis on the commendations and recommendations. The sequencing of meetings was organised to ensure coherence and progression in the conduct of the review. The platform used for the virtual meetings was MS Teams. The timetable for the site visit afforded appropriate time to engage with a broad variety of stakeholders. The timetable is included as Appendix B.

The Panel brought together internal and international peer reviewers (Panel profiles can be found in Appendix A). The internal reviewer provided knowledge of institutional and organisational structures with the external Panel members contributing their peer expertise. The student panel member brought valuable insights and perspectives on student issues and beyond. At the end of the site visit, the Panel presented its initial findings, both commendations and recommendations, to the OVPRI staff and UCC President, as the Unit's functional head.

To support the Peer Review Panel and facilitate effective engagement throughout the site visit, additional guidance and support was provided by staff of the Quality Enhancement Unit (QEU) in UCC. This included technical support, as well as briefing and advisory support prior to and throughout the review. Review coordination was provided throughout by a Review Coordinator to facilitate the review process and to support the Peer Review Panel in formulating and agreeing the final Panel Report. The Report was compiled collaboratively, with the entire Panel contributing to the production of the final document.

Panel Members

Refer to Appendix A for detailed Panel profiles.

Name	Position/Discipline	Institution
Ms Christine Brennan	Research Strategy & Policy Manager	University of Limerick
Dr Michael Byrne	Head, Student Health Service	University College Cork
Ms Paula Leocadio	PhD Scholar, Department of Management and Marketing	University College Cork
Dr David McBeth	Vice-Principal Enterprise and Economic Transformation	University of Dundee
Professor Mark Spearing (Chair)	Vice-President (Research and Enterprise)	University of Southampton
Dr Declan Weldon	Executive Director of Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Engagement	University of Glasgow
Review Coordinator		
Dr Silvia Brandi	*Quality Enhancement Advisor, Quality Enhancement Unit*	*University College Cork*
IT and Logistics Coordinator		
Ms Sheila Ronan	*Executive Assistant, Quality Enhancement Unit*	*University College Cork*

Objectives of Quality Review

The overarching objectives of academic quality review at UCC are to enable units (either academic or professional services ones), through evidence-based self-evaluation, to:

1. Reflect on and promote the strategic enhancement of their practices to ensure excellence and effectiveness of service delivery and, ultimately, 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).

Thus, peer review goes beyond quality assurance to also embrace continuous quality enhancement. The Peer Review Panel Report reflects these objectives in the recommendations and commendations outlined to support the Office of the Vice-President for Research and Innovation in further refining its priorities and optimising its activities in the pursuit of its ambitious drive for excellence within the international and national arena of higher education, research and innovation.

Commendations and Recommendations

Commendations

Based on the information obtained from the Self-Evaluation Report and meetings with multiple internal, as well as external stakeholders to the Office of the Vice-President for Research and Innovation, the Panel commends the Unit on the aspects listed below.

1. The Panel strongly commends the staff of the OVPRI for their dedication and professionalism in selflessly supporting the research and innovation community in the University and beyond. Their dedication and professionalism were reinforced by the feedback received by the Panel from a wide range of internal and external stakeholders, who commented on the strategic clarity, engagement, responsiveness, competence, trustworthiness and openness of the OVPRI staff.

2. The Panel commends the staff of the OVPRI and VPRI's leadership in raising the institutional ambition to be the leading university in Ireland for research and innovation.

3. The Panel commends the OVPRI's leadership for its success in gathering a high level of institutional support for the prioritisation of research and innovation within the UCC Strategic Plan 2023-2028, 'Securing Our Future', as well as widespread support and enthusiasm for the ambitious and transformative UCC Futures Programme.

4. The Panel recognises the strong performance in innovation and welcomes the expansion of the Innovation portfolio, including the creation of a support function for consultancy activities, which has been well received by the academic community.

5. The Panel commends the plan to establish a dedicated Entrepreneurship Hub for founders and promoters of new ventures from both research-led and student cohorts. Density and proximity are two key variables in establishing a successful space for entrepreneurship and the proposal addresses both elements well.

6. The Panel welcomes the establishment of the role of the Dean of Doctoral Studies as a strong signalling of intent in supporting the doctoral student experience.

7. The monthly PI Forum has been greatly appreciated by the research and innovation community at UCC as an effective communication and engagement opportunity for all staff involved.

8. The Panel acknowledges OVPRI's effective support in securing prestigious national and international Research and Innovation awards and clear pride in having helped academic colleagues grow the University's portfolio of awards so much in recent years.

9. The Panel commends the successful implementation of the move of the Biological Services Unit into the OVPRI's remit.

Summary Recommendations

The recommendations made by the Panel were signalled by a combination of elements, including recommendations by the OVPRI in the SER, combined with internal and external stakeholder discussions during the review. Considering this, the Panel has identified the key areas, listed below, for the OVPRI to focus on, to further enable the growth and success of the Unit and optimise its operational effectiveness.

1. The Panel recommends further refinement of aspects of the strategic ambition by adopting a phased approach to the implementation of 'UCC Futures' and leading on further exploitation of the Tyndall National Institute as a research and innovation driver across UCC.
2. The Panel recommends reviewing the resilience of key interfaces (between colleges and OVPRI support) in terms of staffing and the continuity of process flows to maximise effectiveness and reduce risks and inconsistencies across the research and innovation ecosystem.
3. The Panel recommends clarification of divisional services, customers and processes for all aspects of OVPRI, as well as the interfaces with other professional services – in particular Office of Corporate and Legal Affairs (OCLA), Finance Office (FO) and Human Resources (HR) – paying particular attention to the shared responsibilities for Doctoral Education and Support, Post-Award, Data Management, Clinical Research and Research Systems.
4. The Panel recommends making a comprehensive phased implementation plan for the deployment of a Research Information System as a critical system investment for UCC.
5. The Panel recommends persevering in requesting the allocation of dedicated funding streams to ensure continuity and security of financial support to strategic research and innovation activities.
6. The Panel recommends addressing the issue of its space in a phased manner, securing, as a matter of urgency, the acquisition of appropriate office space to meet the Research Team's needs.
7. The Panel recommends leading the development of comprehensive support services for PhD students through the empowerment of the Dean of Doctoral Studies' role, with appropriate support and other initiatives to enhance the quality of their experiences, including health and welfare.

Recommendations – Further Detail

The Panel grouped its top-level recommendations under thematic subdivisions. While it generally endorsed the key recommendation themes identified in the OVPRI's Self-Evaluation Report (SER), it has recommended a prioritisation among them. It also divided the recommendations according to their strategic or operational remits. Furthermore, the Panel distinguished recommendation areas where progress needs to be maintained from others where it advises the V-P and the OVPRI's leadership team to consider reviewing and modifying their approaches outlined in the SER. Below are listed the top seven recommendations.

The Panel considers the following as priority recommendations for the OVPRI to act upon.

Strategic dimensions

Research and Innovation Goal Implementation
1. **The Panel recommends the Vice-President for Research and Innovation to engage in further refinement of aspects of the strategic ambition.**
Specifically, the VP should:
o Undertake a phased approach to the implementation of the UCC Futures Framework, by prioritising themes among the ten;

o Further exploit the potential of the Tyndall National Institute to function as a driver of frontier research and innovation activities more widely across UCC.

While commending the Vice-President of Research and Innovation for his strategic ambition and leadership in building momentum across the University to place research and innovation at the centre of all its activities with signature initiatives such as 'UCC Futures', the Panel also recognizes the challenge of delivering successfully on ten significant interdisciplinary programmes simultaneously. A phased implementation is advisable, with each phase spread over several years, because of both the ambitious scale of the programme and the current financial circumstances of the University (i.e. impact of 'Project Alpha').

Another key strategic consideration centres around the untapped and masked potential of Tyndall − a recurring comment heard by the Panel during the site visit from both internal and external stakeholders, even though Tyndall manages its research activities separate to the Research Office. It also became apparent that intensifying UCC's Innovation efforts around Tyndall may be beneficial to both, Tyndall and UCC, with the potential to boost their respective innovation statistics such as commercialisation outputs (e.g. spinouts, licences and so on).

Operational dimensions
Among the top operational recommendations, the Panel considers the first four below – People, Services, Systems and Finances – to be strongly interconnected and of equal importance. Indeed, their implementation as priority recommendations is regarded as vital to ensure full operational efficiency of the OVPRI. In light of this, the Panel recommends that the V-P continues to seek the University's investment in people, services and systems, while securing also continuity of funding streams required to support the completion of the commenced OVPRI's upgrade, as well as the optimal efficiency of the recently restructured Research and Innovation ecosystem. The Panel considers that this is essential in order to lay the appropriate foundation for UCC to scale its research ambition. Without such an investment UCC runs the risk of eroding its strong position as a leading research-intensive University in Ireland and in the world.

People
2. **The Panel recommends the V-P and the OVPRI's leadership review the resilience of key interfaces (between colleges and OVPRI support) in terms of staffing and the continuity of**

process flows with a view to maximise effectiveness and reduce risks and inconsistencies across the research and innovation eco-system.

Specifically, the V-P and the OVPRI's Directors should:

- o Assess organisational resilience regarding how staff (especially research support staff) are managed across the organisation with a view to considering how best to succession plan, particularly at senior level. In undertaking this exercise, the Panel recommends serious consideration is given to a range of options including secondments, dual reporting lines and the creation of functional teams.
- o Establish regular periodic opportunities for staff from different teams within OVPRI to meet together, formally and informally, sharing ideas, developing collaborations and synergies against the risk of siloed working inherent to a Unit divided into highly specialised independently working stage-based groups.
- o Dedicate particular attention to the areas of contract development, legal services and staff recruitment – and related interfaces respectively with OCLA, FO and HR – with a view to streamlining processes and increasing agility.
- o Ensure that the role played by the OVPRI's support team towards the successful awarding of prestigious research and innovation grants, as well as in support of innovative and entrepreneurial activities, is widely recognised and celebrated across the University and beyond.

The Panel noted blurred lines in terms of the support offered at College and OVPRI level. While a seamless interface can be a signal of strong co-working, it also poses risks in terms of clarity of responsibility and flags an opportunity for greater integration and partnership to drive quality enhancements. This is understandable, considering the recent restructuring and expansion of the OVPRI. It also reflects the establishment of an integrated network connecting this core central function with the academic units. Furthermore, while generally the Panel noted strong relationships and interaction between OVPRI and other units within the research support ecosystem, this was not consistent in all areas.

Services

3. **The Panel recommends the OVPRI leadership team focus on clarifying their divisional services, customers and processes. Clarity of divisional service offerings for all aspects of OVPRI, as well as the interfaces with other professional services - in particular OCLA, FO and HR - is required and particular attention should be paid to the shared responsibilities for Doctoral Education and Support, Post-Award, Data Management, Clinical Research and the championing, implementation and maintenance of Research Systems.**

In undertaking the clarification of services of OVPRI, the Panel recommends that the OVPRI leadership team:

- o Re-examines their proposed divisional structure. In doing so, the Panel recommends seeking examples of best practice at other institutions (national and international), to inform the optimum divisional staff structure for the longer-term, which will enable OVPRI to grow to support UCC's ambitions as a research-intensive organisation. The Panel strongly recommends that this activity is undertaken within the next year.
- o Develops reference resources (e.g. a quality manual) clarifying the services of the division, as well as their customers and processes adopted.

- o Identifies the institutional policies and procedures that sit under the remit of the OVPRI and establishes a periodic schedule for their review, as well as identifying currently existing policy gaps and new emerging areas going forward.
- o Establishes systematic feedback-gathering from service users of OVPRI, which will inform quality enhancement activities as captured within the divisional quality improvement action plan. Additionally, specific actions being taken based on service-user feedback must be communicated to them to ensure transparency and continuous improvement.
- o Enhances internal communications materials relating to their services with a view to streamlining and guiding researchers navigating the complex research ecosystem. The Panel noted a number of effective engagement activities, particularly the PI forum, which could be built from to ensure better visibility and understanding of key policies, guidance and available support functions.

Systems

4. **The Panel recommends the OVPRI leadership, in conjunction with IT Services, to make a comprehensive, phased implementation plan for the deployment of the new Research Information System**.
   This should include the following elements:
   - o Development of a comprehensive Enterprise Architecture Map for the UCC research ecosystem, which identifies current systems, flags where systems may be at risk and identifies gaps and opportunities for interoperability with other institutional systems. This will then inform the Research Digital Transition Plan.
   - o Consideration of the need to invest in Research Computing (including High-Performance Computing and Research Data Storage) as part of the Enterprise Architecture Map and Digital Transition Plan.
   - o Within the OVPRI staffing plans, consideration given for the need of adequate staff to support systems across implementation and ongoing maintenance. Indeed, the Panel notes a potential risk in OVPRI's current structure due to its staffing level to support the critical area of research systems.

While the Panel welcomed updates regarding the status of the deployment of a Research Information System as a critical system investment for UCC, the Panel members raised concerns about the pace of the project, clarity around the leadership and resourcing of same and expectation management with stakeholders. The Panel is also concerned that a research information system may not "immediately" meet all of the requirements for end-to-end research and innovation management that are envisioned in the SER. An end-to-end workflow system for the research grants and contracts - including pre-award costing and pricing - would appear to be a key enabler of the Research Support Services team's work and, thus, would be advisable.

Finances

5. **The Panel recommends that the Vice-President should continue to request the allocation of dedicated funding streams to ensure continuity and security of financial support to strategic research and innovation activities.**
   While doing so, the V-P should give special consideration to the following aspects:
   - o Review the proposed new overhead policy in a thoughtful and holistic way before its introduction, reflecting upon potential unintended consequences at local level, by considering what research activities are currently being supported via overheads and the impact on these of a variation in treatment.

- Advise ULT of any foreseeable unintended consequences and ensure that the resource provided to OVPRI is sufficient to ensure the sustainability of its effective operation.
- Ensure that the overhead income is used, as much as possible, in a way that supports the scaling of key services to the prevailing volume of research grant and contract activity.

The Panel strongly endorses recommendation 6 in the SER, noting the low level of overall overhead recovery from research grants and contracts, and that in the existing model it had resulted in a severe under-funding of central support functions for research and innovation, including the OVPRI. The planned growth of the OVPRI is strongly supported by the Panel.

Physical Infrastructures

6. **The Panel recommends the V-P and the OVPRI's Directors address the issue of its space in a phased manner, in consideration of the financial constraints currently in place and securing, as a matter of urgency, the acquisition of appropriate office space to meet the needs of the Research Teams, who are currently based across various locations, many of which of sub-standard quality and unsuitable for the team.**

The Panel strongly agrees with the Vice-President and the OVPRI's Directors on the unsuitability and congestion of the current physical infrastructures hosting the Research Support & Policy and Research Strategy & Projects Teams. Although the Panel acknowledges the rationale underpinning the SER's preference for co-located headquarters for both the Research and Innovation teams (SER's recommendation 4) and recognises that there are many interfaces between the two teams and that colocation would have some benefits, it placed a lower priority on this option. It is the Panel's view that the location of the Innovation team adjacent to the incubator and accelerator spaces, currently in the Western Gateway Building, is highly beneficial, as it is of good quality and appropriate for its purpose. In light of this, the Panel prioritises the co-location of the research team and finding additional contiguous quality space to allow this.

Doctoral Research Students

7. **The Panel recommends that the V-P engages with the Deputy-President and Registrar to lead together on the development of comprehensive support services for PhD students through the empowerment of the role of the Dean of Doctoral Studies, with appropriate support, so that it is enabled to operate as a University leadership role, in line with the recommendation in the Panel Report for the Deputy-President and Registrar's Office.**

- The V-P, together with the DPR, and an empowered and supported Dean of Doctoral Studies, should lead on the development of comprehensive support services for PhD students following interconnected activities:
  - ❖ Establishment of a University Cross-functional Committee, with representation from key central offices responsible for PhD students, as well as student representatives from all the PhD student groups mentioned above, to:
    - ➢ Map out the research student experiences landscape, identifying the respective responsibilities and areas of overlaps, duplication and synergies;
    - ➢ Collect systematic feedback on experiences and priority needs for each sub-group and measures to meet them. These should be communicated to PhD students through accessible PhD communication channels (e.g. mailing list) to ensure transparency on actions being taken based on feedback.

- Establish clear norms and guidance to ensure equitable treatment and experience of PhD students across the University- that includes College/School/Department levels- aiming for consistency and fairness throughout the doctoral journey.
- Ensure that the services provided by the OVPRI to the research and innovation community, which are of potential benefit also to students, are widely known and availed of by the appropriate student cohorts, regardless of their college/s and unit/s of affiliation.
- Enhance and guarantee safeguarding measures are put in place for PhD students tailored to proposed rigorous research approaches and methodologies, as outlined in the Strategic Plan, under strategic action 1.4.

Having extensively discussed this topic during the site visit with multiple stakeholders, the Panel acknowledges that postgraduate research students, especially PhDs, fall under the partial remit of a range of central institutional functions (some of which are of very recent establishment such as the two Deans below). These include, directly, the Deputy-President and Registrar, with the Dean of Graduate and Postgraduate Studies (1 FTE) and, especially, the Dean of Doctoral Studies (0.5 FTE for three years, equally divided under the DPR and OVPRI), the OVPRI and the HR Business Manager for Research; indirectly, the Vice-President for Learning and Teaching (under whose remit are the Library Department, the Skills Centre and the Centre for the Integration of Research in Teaching and Learning), other HR functions and, operationally, the Graduate Studies Office, to name just some of the key ones. Moreover, the combination of an R&I centralised operational approach at core level with a devolved approach at middle and local level – colleges, schools, departments, RICUs and Tyndall, while allowing for agility and flexibility to adapt to different disciplinary areas and local arrangements, contributes to create a very complex and diversified support landscape in the University. This is not unique to UCC, but it is an area that requires attention.

UCC has set out the ambition to grow PhD enrolment significantly (with a target of an additional 100 PhDs students enrolled annually by 2028), aligning with the UCC Futures Framework and supporting the prioritisation of research-based learning and teaching and innovation, as well as its implementation in the curriculum of all programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate level, driving an increase in spinouts and startup companies.

Specifically, the identification and status of the diverse group of PhD students, as well as their experiences, needs and support services were discussed at length during the site visit with multiple stakeholders, with the Panel trying to join the pieces about priority needs for PhD support and respective responsibilities.

The identification, and fulfilment, of PhD students' priority needs is further complicated by the existing fragmentation and inconsistency of identities and experiences among them, which depend on a range of factors. These include the existence of different types of PhD student groups (national/international/ EU/Non-EU; Full-Time/Part-Time; funded/non-funded; employment-based and so on); with different college/s of affiliation and research area/s; the inconsistency of their identification (as students, staff, personnel, researchers, candidates, scholars, etc.), which is, in turn, also connected to the specificity of funding streams (including self-funded) and attached privileges (or lack of them).

As a result, there is a lack of equity among PhD students' research support and living circumstances, not only across colleges but often also within the same College, School or Department. The need for establishing consistency and equity in the provision of a various range of support services to PhD students should be addressed as a matter of priority, especially considering the strategic pursuit of considerable PhD enrolment growth targets by 2028. These forms of support should include not only financial aspects, physical facilities to conduct research, specialised research support at different stages, but also training and other professional development opportunities that will equip PhD students and graduates with additional skills to secure appropriate employment outside academia.

The newly created part-time role of Dean of Doctoral Studies, reporting to both the Deputy-President and Registrar and the Vice-President for Research and Innovation, is, in the Panel's view, a welcome addition. Yet, the part-time nature of the post, as well as its set three-year contractual duration, seems to create some limitations in the scope and potential impact of this role.

Instead, in line with the recommendation recently made in the Panel Report for the Deputy-President and Registrar's Office, the Dean should be enabled to act as a catalyst for all the functions that are responsible for the quality of experiences, including the health and welfare of postgraduate research students.

Observations

Additional to the recommendations, the Panel identified certain observations for consideration, which the Panel believes fall outside of the OVPRI's remit. The Panel suggests that these observations be shared with the appropriate units to agree on a plan for addressing these observations accordingly.

Observations to the University Leadership Team
The Panel believes that the University's strategic commitment to the prioritisation of research & Innovation informing the Strategic Plan 2023-2028 'Securing our Future' is an important step-change development for UCC. Nevertheless, it believes that the achievement of this project needs the unwavering support by the University Leadership Team in the current circumstances.

Accordingly, the Panel encourages the University Leadership Team to continue enabling the development of the OVPRI by continuing the institutional investment in people, services and systems required to support the University's Research and Innovation ecosystem. The Panel considers that this is essential to lay the appropriate foundation for UCC to scale its research ambition, as envisaged in the current Strategic Plan. Without such an investment UCC runs the risk of eroding its strong position and missing the opportunity to fulfil its forward-looking strategic plan.

The consideration that the attainment of UCC's ambitious goal for research and innovation, as set out in the strategic plan, is a University-wide endeavour, needs to underpin future strategic decision-making by the ULT.

Financial and other support to the OVPRI

The Panel encourages the ULT to:

- Review its Overhead Policy in a thoughtful and holistic way before its introduction, reflecting upon potential unintended consequences at local level, by considering what research activities are currently being supported, what research services need to be scaled to accommodate growth in externally funded research, and concern for achieving an appropriate balance.

- Move at pace with the revised Overheads Policy to secure funding streams to support the strategically important operational functions carried out by the OVPRI. In doing so, the Panel recommends the ULT ensure potential consequences at local level are identified.

- Establish an institutional mechanism to ensure that the size of some of the functions performed by the OVPRI -e.g. pre- and post-award, ethics and so on - scale with the volume of relevant research growth.

- Ensure that the activities of the OVPRI receive optimal operational support from other key functional areas of the University, in particular from the Finance Office, Human Resources, IT Services, Office of Corporate and Legal Affairs and Deputy-President and Registrar. As indicated extensively in Recommendation 3 of this document, particular attention should be paid to the shared responsibilities for Doctoral Education and Support, Post-Award, Data Management, Clinical Research and the championing, implementation and maintenance of Research Systems.

Institutional culture change

The Panel encourages institutional leadership to:
- o Both embrace and promote significant cultural change, including an explicit articulation of the risk appetite associated with particular activities, as well as adopting future-proofing approaches and measures that support a radical change in attitudes towards Research and Innovation activities, in order to maintain agility in a rapidly changing world and effectively fulfil the University's ambition to become the leading Research and Innovation University in Ireland and one of the best in the world.

During the site visit to UCC, the Panel was told by a broad range of stakeholders that the Institution, similar to many HEIs, has a risk-averse culture, which has significant impact in the area of clinical research in particular.

Strategic Recruitment and Promotions

The University Leadership Teams should:
- o Ensure that the Vice-President for Research and Innovation (or their nominee) is explicitly and systematically included in strategic processes of academic recruitment and promotion to ensure that research and innovation are strongly valued in these important decisions.

- o Reconsider current HR hiring practices and evaluate the possibility of reintroducing targeted recruitment in addition to local, national and international advertising campaigns.

- o Consider simplifying and shortening the recruitment process to fulfil vacancies at the required pace and optimise the efficiency of the institution.

Overall Analysis of Self-Evaluation Process

Self-Evaluation Report (SER)

The Panel considered the SER to be a clear, accessible and comprehensive document, reflecting a genuine desire to engage constructively with the self-evaluation process and elaborating relevant high-order recommendations, corelated with a range of implementation actions.

The Panel found that it would have been beneficial for the SER to explore in greater detail the interfaces of the OVPRI with other University's services and functions contributing to the provision of support services to the research and innovation community. Despite this, they found the SER to be well written, providing a good introduction to the team and the services provided, along with an outline of the changes that had occurred since the previous review and an indication of the adopted way forward.

SWOT

The OVPRI's SWOT was undertaken in January 2022, as one of the first self-evaluation activities. Due to circumstances outside the control of the OVPRI, the self-evaluation process was resumed and completed two years after. Nonetheless, additional feedback from the OVPRI staff was obtained through the staff survey in 2023. This validated many of the key themes emerged from the initial SWOT.

The SWOT exercise was led by Dr Anne Gannon, a highly experienced facilitator from UCC's Human Resources Department, who delivered a structured online session. All OVPRI staff were invited to attend the session, held online on January 31st 2022, with a total of almost two thirds in attendance. Following initial discussion, breakout rooms were created for exploration of each of the SWOT areas by multiple groups. A designated rapporteur delivered the main discussion topics and comments, which were captured and later collated under each area before being returned to the Self Evaluation Committee for review. There was clarity as to the purpose and process of the SWOT, open discussion, full engagement and an honesty of approach that provided for meaningful exploration of some of the challenges the OVPRI faces.

From the analysis, staff's expertise and commitment emerged as the top key strength, including the management and leadership roles. Other positives include the new flexible working patterns. As for the perceived weaknesses, the top ones focused on the limited understanding of the Office's remit across the University, together with unmanageable workloads and siloing of expertise, scarce opportunities for staff progression and inadequate IT systems. Opportunities included the possibility of building an integrated OVPRI with public visibility and reputation; the embedding of sustainability within all the practices of the Unit; the development of a research-led institutional culture and the research reputation growth of the Institution internationally. Finally, the perceived threats were the risk of de-prioritisation of research at institutional level; the instability of the funding landscape; the difficulties in attracting and retaining top-level talents; competition from the newly formed technological universities and the poor processes and systems that exposed the unit to greater risks of cyber-attack and lack of agility.

Benchmarking

The benchmarking was conducted when the self-evaluation process was resumed in 2023. The universities benchmarked against included Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin and University of Galway, nationally; the University of Bergen (Norway) and the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium), internationally. The focus of this preliminary benchmarking exercise with other comparable renowned research-intensive universities was to ascertain UCC's national and international positioning, particularly with respect of the key targets within the current strategic plan. While benchmarking was carried out as a desk-based exercise only, the SER's recommendations include a commitment by the OVPRI to continue and deepen this activity in a targeted manner with follow-up visits of some of the institutions benchmarked against in order to provide the OVPRI with the understanding and tools to more effectively support the R&I community.

The Panel also concurs that additional benchmarking would be beneficial to the OVPRI, as evident from its recommendation to seek further examples of effective operational structuring of the functional area, nationally and internationally.

Developments since previous Quality Review

A total of 31 recommendations arose from the last Panel Report (2013), under the consolidated themes of governance, services, staffing, accommodation, finances and communication. Although there has been significant progress, with most recommendations having now been fully or partially addressed, the SER stated that there remains work to do, as evidenced by the remarkably similar major themes arising from this current process which indicate areas for further improvement.

The Panel agreed with the SER's statement above and perceived that some of the key recommendations in the above areas are still somewhat relevant, despite the various improvements carried out and the significant investment made to restructure the whole functional area and its operations. This is addressed in the current recommendations. On the other hand, certain recommendations from the previous report were less prominent themes in the Panel's engagement with the Unit during this review.

Good Practice Case Study

The OVPRI presented '*From Bench to Market: The Establishment of Neurobell from Research undertaken in UCC's INFANT Centre*' as its case study of good practice. The rationale for this choice, among many other valuable initiatives, was that it exemplifies the remarkable outputs of an integrated research and innovation ecosystem supported by the OVPRI at all stages of the journey across the Research and Innovation arms of the Unit.

UCC Research and Innovation, through its professional services, provided the support to establish the Centre; undertake the research; manage our clinical and ethical obligations; protect the innovations created by this research through intellectual property management; establish a new company underpinned by:

➤ UCC patents;
➤ UCC staff trained and mentored through UCC Innovation programmes;
➤ funding from venture capital sources including the Atlantic Bridge University Fund (which includes investment from UCC).

The Neurobell's establishment pathway is shown below.

Pathway to NeuroBell Establishment
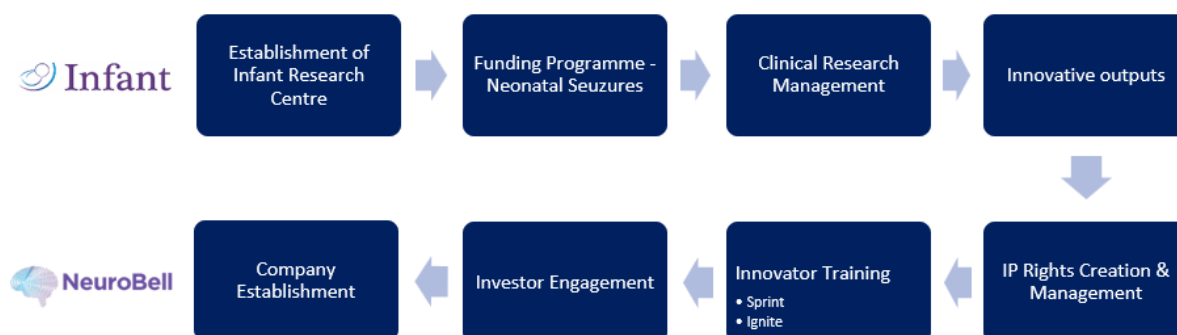
The Panel was impressed by this excellent example of a successful spinout, which demonstrated the team's focus on quality and support through the long lead-in time required for these companies to launch. It also encouraged the OVPRI to explore the extent to which such a venture would be duplicable in other areas.

Facilities

The Panel visited a selected number of OVPRI's facilities within campus and beyond, since the Unit's staff is currently based in different buildings. The tour included the headquarters of the Research arm within the Food Science Building (with a minority of staff also based in the attic of Bloomfield Terrace, Western Road), and the headquarters of the Innovation arm in the Western Gateway Building. The Panel noted a great discrepancy in terms of size and quality between the facilities of the two OVPRI's arms, which are explicitly addressed by recommendation number 6. Specifically, the substandard and overcrowded conditions of the Research facilities were acknowledged, with the Panel recommending prioritising this as an urgent issue.

Overall appraisal

The Peer Review Panel for the quality review of the OVPRI welcomed the quality enhancement process and the open and honest conversations it had with all the stakeholders met with during the site visit. The Self-Evaluation Report was comprehensive, well written and helpful. Indeed, the Panel acknowledged most of the Self-Evaluation Report's findings and endorsed most recommendations identified by the Unit. It was pleased to discover, during the sessions with internal and external stakeholders, that the OVPRI is held in great esteem within the University and among the greater stakeholder groups. The Panel concluded that the staff across all categories are the biggest asset of this Unit and acknowledged the professionalism and deep sense of dedication to the research and innovation community of the University.

The Panel noted some existing limitations within the process: the fact that, while the Vice-President for Research and Innovation is responsible for the Research and Innovation components of the UCC's Strategic Plan, the OVPRI as an organisational unit is only responsible for the direct delivery of a minority of its elements. This means that, within the remit of the review, the Panel was only able to make recommendations within the responsibility of the Unit. That is why it also made a number of

observations to the University Leadership Team, which are relevant to the overall delivery of the strategic plan and the continuing success of the OVPRI.

It is also important to note that at the time of the review UCC had encountered unanticipated financial constraints and was enacting short- and longer-term measures ('Project Alpha') to address these issues. This coloured many of the discussions. The Panel, based on similar experiences at its members' home institutions, understood the realities of the situation and the need for research and innovation functions to share responsibility for addressing the challenges. Nevertheless, the Panel had a strong view that it was important not to implement overly harsh short-term financial measures that might derail the long-term ambition to achieve a step change in research and innovation at UCC.

The Panel's overall view regarding the OVPRI is very positive against the primary criteria of "excellence" and "effectiveness". This is evident from the top commendations contained in this report. The recent transformative growth of both the Research and Innovation arms of OVPRI in a relatively short period of time has been welcomed by the Panel, including the introduction of Academic Consultancy. The latter is recognised as an important component of innovation activity in a research-intensive university through creating new partnerships, evidenced impact of research and important insights from clients that enrich research. Even the expansion into Business Engagement is an important new activity for the University that will require strong support from Centres and academic units to be successful.

Among its core recommendations, the Panel identified areas in which progress needs to be maintained, as well as areas in which the OVPRI should consider modifying its approach. Specifically, the organisational resilience and sustainability of the OVPRI going forward is a concern for the Panel, particularly in key areas such as people, services, systems and finances, and, especially, in light of the University's current implementation of short- to medium-term cost-reduction measures throughout ('Project Alpha').

The Panel found that, while it is imperative to complete the planned staff complement, the recently reorganised operational structure of the Unit may benefit from further review and benchmarking with other national and international comparable functions.

The Panel welcomed the appointment of the Dean of Doctoral Studies, as a catalyst for many interfacing stakeholders and services dealing with PhD students. Nonetheless, the quality of experiences and inconsistency of service provision and equity for the internally-diversified doctoral student cohort is an important issue. The Panel believes that it needs to be comprehensively addressed and further invested on, to ensure equity and consistency across the board, especially in light of the sought growth of PhD enrolment numbers by 2028.

Overall, given its significant development and levels of investment over recent years, the OVPRI is in a very different, much more positive position from the last quality review, to support the University's strategic ambition to be a leading University for research and innovation.

The Panel is confident that the OVPRI is on the right track in supporting the University's strategic ambition, provided that the University keeps investing on the OVPRI. This will ensure it is equipped with the right means to operate in the 21st century and continue to effectively assist the research and

innovation community of the University in an increasingly competitive and complex national and international environment.

Conclusion

The collaborative engagement of the OVPRI with the quality review process was greatly appreciated by the Panel. The Panel wishes to thank the OVPRI's Self-Evaluation Committee for their work on the self-evaluation process.

The Panel members were particularly grateful for the support provided by the members of the Quality Enhancement Unit in the planning of the review, the practical supports during the site visit and in writing this report.

The Panel enjoyed meeting the staff of the OVPRI area, internal and external stakeholders of the Unit, as well as the PhD student representatives from the four colleges and the Tyndall National Institute. The meeting with students was incredibly engaging and beneficial to the Panel's understanding of the very diverse doctoral student experiences and needs and of the progress that needs to be achieved in providing greater and more consistent support services to PhD students in order to meet their needs and improving the quality of their experiences, welfare and health.

Next Steps

The Panel Report will next be presented to the Quality Enhancement Committee (QEC), chaired by the President, and subject to QEC approval, will be subsequently published on the Quality Enhancement Unit (QEU) website.

The OVPRI will implement the recommendations within the timeframes outlined and provide a detailed report on their progress via a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). The QEP will be considered and approved by the QEC and published on the QEU website.

Appendix A – Panel Profiles

Ms Christine Brennan	Christine Brennan, Research Strategy and Policy Manager, Office of the Vice President Research, University of Limerick. In her role as Research Strategy and Policy Manager, Christine has responsibility for research strategic planning, policy development, ethics and integrity, research impact and engagement, research systems and communications. With over 14 years experience in the HEI sector, Christine works collaboratively with senior leadership and stakeholders to develop evidence-based strategies while also driving implementation and organisational change. She is a member of a number of committees and national fora including YERUN Policy Platform, Research Impact National Working Group, RESIN and at an organisational level sits on the institutional quality committee and University Research Committee. A co-chair of the self-evaluation report team for UL's first thematic quality review of professional supports for research.
Dr Michael Byrne	Dr Michael Byrne (MB BCh BAO BSc DCH FRCGP MICGP DAIR) has been the Head of the Student Health Department in University College Cork since 2006. He was previously a Lead Consultant in Primary Care in the NHS in Edinburgh (Scotland) and a partner in a General Practice in Leith, Edinburgh. Dr Byrne has played a leadership role in shaping UCC's response to a wide range of threats to the health and wellbeing of students and staff in the University setting, ranging from issues as diverse as the recent global pandemic, to concerns around the harms caused by drugs and alcohol in the student population. At a national level he has pioneered initiatives and conducted research in the area of pandemic responses, and alcohol and drug use in students, including developing the **REACT** – (Responding to Excessive Alcohol in Third Level) **programme** and publishing the landmark www.DUHEI.ie (Drug Use in Higher Education In Ireland study). He has been successful as Principal Investigator in securing a number of local and national research grants in the area of student and staff health and has re-shaped his role as a clinical primary care practitioner to now include a strong research base to inform best practice in this area. Finally, he has also supervised UCC researchers at Undergraduate, Master's and PhD level and has served as a member of a number of quality review panels in UCC and other HEIs in Ireland.
Ms Paula Leocadio **(Student Reviewer)**	Miss Paula Leocadio is a third-year PhD scholar at University College Cork, where she conducts interdisciplinary research that spans across Cork University Business School, the School of Applied Social Studies and the College of Medicine and Health. Embracing the role of a participatory researcher, she collaborates with young people experiencing vulnerabilities, exploring their experiences in various settings. This work has sharpened her skills in facilitating

	discussions, leading collaborative projects, and shared decision-making, deepening her understanding of the perspectives and needs of young individuals. Additionally, Miss Leocadio brings two years of valuable experience as a Student Reviewer for Quality and Qualifications Ireland. Her unique blend of research expertise, grounded in community involvement, and her background as a Student Reviewer equips her with the insights and capabilities needed to effectively serve as a Student Reviewer for the Quality Review Office of the VP for Research & Innovation.
Dr David McBeth	Dr David McBeth is Vice Principal for Enterprise & Economic Transformation at Dundee University. He joined Dundee in 2021 as Director of Research & Innovation Services before taking up his current appointment. Prior to this, he was Director of Research & Enterprise at the University of York for two years, leading a large directorate which provided all central services to Research, Knowledge Exchange (KE) and Enterprise in this Russell Group (REF Top 10 University), having been Director of Research & Knowledge Exchange Services (RKES) at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow for over fifteen years. There he contributed to the unprecedented growth in industry research income via creation of Industry-led R&KE Centres and led the development of Strathclyde's commercial investment approach to new company formation and growth across the spectrum of staff, student and alumni enterprises. Strathclyde remains prominent in the UK for company creation and continues to be cited as an exemplar for UK best practice for industry engagement in Research. Throughout his career in HE, his professional interests have included: Intellectual Property Rights ("IPR") Management; Licensing; New Company Formation & Investment; European Funding for Research & Knowledge Exchange (including Structural Funds and State Aids); the role of the Public Sector in supporting innovation; and the economic impact of universities on regional economies. Prior to becoming Director at Strathclyde, David was Deputy Director/ IPR Manager there, having previously led Edinburgh Napier University's Research Office and had a successful early career in the UK Chemicals Industry in R&D and Production Management roles. He originally trained as a chemist with first degree and PhD qualifications from the University of Glasgow.
Professor Mark Spearing (Chair)	Professor Mark Spearing is Vice-President (Research and Enterprise) and a Professor of Engineering Materials at the University of Southampton. As Vice-President (Research and Enterprise), he has University-wide oversight of all research and enterprise activities. This includes institutional research and enterprise strategy, the Concordat for Early Career Researchers, engagement with external parties, intellectual property and 'spin-out' companies. His research and educational interests focus on materials, solid mechanics, composite materials and micro-electromechanical systems. He is a Fellow of the Royal Aeronautical Society.

Dr Declan Weldon	Dr Declan Weldon is an Innovation Executive with a proven track record leading global teams serving a range of industries and universities. Dr Weldon has developed and led innovation teams in Europe, North America and China. He is experienced at defining organizational purpose, setting strategy, winning resources and managing implementation of innovation and economic development programmes. He is a strategic advisor on innovation practice and eco-system development serving on several government and institute boards across Europe and the UK.

Appendix B – Timetable

Online Briefing to the Panel

Tuesday 16th April 2024	
11.00 - 12.30	Briefing to the Panel by Quality Enhancement Manager and Review Coordinator *Panel discussion – initial thoughts on SER.*

Site Visit to UCC – first week

Tuesday 23 April 2024	
During the day	Panel members arrive in Cork
19.00	Dinner for members of the Panel hosted by the Director of Quality Enhancement

Wednesday 24 April 2024	
09.00 – 09.30	Convening of the Panel – private meeting
09.30 - 10.45	Meeting with Heads of Directorates
10.45 – 11.15	Meeting with the HR Business Manager for Research (via Teams)
11.15 – 11.45	Private meeting of the Panel (coffee break)
11.45 – 12.30	Meeting with OVPRI's Staff Representatives
12.30 – 13.15	Meeting with College Research and Innovation Managers and Vice-Deans for Research and Innovation
13.15 – 14.00	Lunch
14:00 – 14.15	Panel move to venue for Meeting with OVPRI staff
14.15 – 15.15	Meeting with OVPRI Staff
15.15 – 15.30	Panel to be met by Director of Research Strategy and Projects to conduct the tour of facilities
15.30 – 16.30	Tour of OVPRI facilities
16.30 – 16.45	Panel returns to site visit's main venue
16.45 – 17.15	Meeting with HR Business Manager

19.00	Dinner for members of the Panel

Thursday 25 April 2024	
09.00 – 10.00	Meeting with the Vice President for Research & Innovation
10.00 – 10.30	Private meeting of the Panel (Coffee Break)
10.30 – 11.15	Meeting with representatives of Senior Researchers of the University
11.15 – 11.45	Private meeting of the Panel (coffee break)
11.45 – 12.30	Meeting with Representatives of Early and Mid-career Researchers
12.30 – 13.15	Meeting with the University Leadership Team (ULT operational)
13.15 – 14.00	Lunch
14.00 – 14.30	Meeting with UCC President
14.30 – 15.15	Meeting with the University Leadership Team (ULT - strategy)
15.15 – 15.45	Meeting with UCC's Academic Council Research Innovation Committee (ACRIC)
15.45 – 16.05	Private Meeting of the Panel
16.05 – 16.20	Good Practice Case-Study *'Bench To Market: The Establishment of Neurobell, from Research Undertaken in UCC's Infant Centre'*
16.20 – 17.00	Meeting with UCC Postgraduate Research Student representatives
17.00 – 17.45	Private Meeting of the Panel

Online Meetings – second week

Tuesday 30 April 2024	
09.00 – 09.30	Convening of the Panel – preparation for the day ahead
09.30 – 10.00	Meeting with SFI representative
10.00 – 11.00	Meeting with External Stakeholders
11.00 – 11.15	Coffee Break
11.15 – 12.45	Panel Meeting to draft the recommendations and commendations

Thursday 2 May 2024	
09.00 – 10.30	Panel's Meeting to finalise recommendations, commendations and drafting the closing presentation
10.30 – 11.15	Meeting with the Vice President for Research & Innovation
11.15 – 11.45	Break for Panel
11.45 – 12.30	Panel meeting to discuss feedback from Vice-President and reconsider the closing presentation
12.30 – 13.00	Closing presentation
13.00 – 13.30	Panel – wrap up meeting