University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

# QUALITY IMPROVEMENT/QUALITY ASSURANCE

# PEER REVIEW GROUP REPORT

# PRESIDENT'S OFFICE

# ACADEMIC YEAR 2015/16

**Confidential**

**Date: November 2016**

| Name | Position/Discipline | Institution |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Professor Sir Ian Diamond (Chair & Rapporteur) | Principal and Vice-Chancellor | University of Aberdeen |
| Dr John Hegarty | Former Provost & President | Trinity College Dublin |
| Professor Áine Hyland | Former Vice President | University College Cork |
| Ms Caitríona O'Driscoll | National Student Engagement Coordinator | Union of Students in Ireland |

## PEER REVIEW

### Preamble

This Review is part of a series of quality reviews that University College Cork takes across all areas of its activities with the aim of ensuring that the University's processes are of the highest standard; and in the spirit of continuous improvement. The outgoing President had enthusiastically embraced the opportunity for a Review of the operations of his Office so as to inform the decisions of his successor.   The scope of the review is outlined at Appendix 2.

### Site Visit and Methodology

The visit of the Peer Review Group took place on **28-30th September 2016**, at University College Cork.  We were invited and met staff and stakeholders from within and outwith the University. A full list of those with whom we met and our programme is provided at Appendix 1. We were provided with an extensive set of informative papers and throughout the visit were welcomed warmly.

Professor Sir Ian Diamond acted as chair and rapporteur for the peer review group and led discussions. Ms Caitríona O'Driscoll took meeting notes.

## OVERALL ANALYSIS

### Self-Assessment Report

We were provided with a self-assessment report. All the evidence we found from our observations and from the extensive interviews we conducted with a wide range of stakeholders gave us confidence that the self-assessment was accurate and comprehensive.

### SWOC(T) Analysis

The SWOC exercise was undertaken enthusiastically by the members of the President's Office (PO); rather than "Threats" per se, the term "Challenges" was used during deliberations. The SWOC process was undertaken in two phases:

*Phase I October 2015*: each member of the PO team elaborated their individual perspectives into a SWOT; a collective SWOC highlighting the common and key matters was circulated.

This was the discussed at Office Meetings, and some matters were immediately addressed, e.g. office security and access.

*Phase II August 2016:* Facilitated by Director QPU, the PO team convened to consider a more macroscopic SWOC. The results of this SWOC were provided as an Appendix in the SER.

***Panel's Assessment of the SWOC(T)***

The Panel has reflected on the SWOC in the light of the site visit and the following provides an integration of the Panel's reflections with those of the President's Office.

***Strengths****:* We agree strongly that the role of the team in the President's Office is to support the President in his professional activities; and it is clear that there is a strong sense of purpose under clear leadership from the President.

Reflecting the broad range of backgrounds within the team, the President's Office team considers itself and is demonstrably, flexible, professional and well-integrated. This is in part, but very much not wholly, the benefit of a small team working with an assured and empathic leader. The President himself is very involved in the production of the material that he uses throughout his work, and is very self-sufficient as a speech writer. Each member of the team has access to view the President's diary, heightening awareness of matters arising. Work is saved on shared folders, so that it can be accessed by others when necessary.

***Weaknesses****:* The office is highly dependent on key individuals and there is little room for contingency. We were informed that during the Academic Year 2015/2016 there was a marked turnover of personnel at the President's Office and this has presented a key risk as much of the output is very person-dependent. The team is aware that they work well together as a small group, and that this is very dependent on personal commitment, dedication and focus, a strength which can also be a weakness, as, if one person (for example the Personal Assistant) were to be indisposed, this could have a major impact on the delivery of output from the President's Office.

The President does not have a dedicated resource within the office for speech-writing, PR and communications, hospitality and events, and professional production of material as might happen in other similar organisations (although not, it is noted, in those of the Panel members). As in many institutions there is a lack of awareness amongst the University community of the external focus of the role of the President and the associated functions of the President's Office team.

***Opportunities****:* Insights from the Review Panel are eagerly anticipated; and in particular we have considered the desire for enhanced flexibility with regard to resource allocation. We note that an SEA I post (contract since 08/2008) has recently been approved to become a permanent position. As there is to be a transition to a new President this is an ideal time to reflect on comparisons with other institutions across the world.

***Challenges (Threats)****:* Increasingly, external (often financial) factors both at a national and international level will impact on office infrastructure: human and other resources and recruitment. The small sized team is vulnerable, with limited scope for contingency in allocation of human resources which arise from varied workload. We note with concern that there is limited scope for CPD, despite being supported in principle.

There are further short term challenges in supporting the incoming President in this period of transition; and in finalising activities specific to the outgoing President.

**Benchmarking**

Benchmarking provides an opportunity for measuring and comparing systems and structures between universities. While the benchmarking process usually involves staff travelling to other universities for comparison, in this instance, the President's Office opted for a more preliminary scoping desk-based benchmarking. Comparison was carried out via telephone contact in some instances and also via web sourced information. The PRG has reviewed the benchmarking thus far and offers the following comments on the basis of the documentation received and on our personal experiences.

The following universities were selected for a preliminary benchmarking overview to compare the structure of their Presidents' Offices and the various duties carried out by staff. Most of the information was sourced via their respective websites; some via phone calls, and some from personal experience:

- University of Bristol
- Cardiff University
- University College Dublin
- University of Edinburgh
- Queen's University Belfast
- Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

The benchmarking confirmed that documented organisational features tend to be very specific to each university; structures within universities often evolve to support matters arising, pressures and demands of a given era. The nature – both purpose and configuration - of Presidents' Offices or their equivalent varies greatly throughout Europe.
For example, while comparing Vice-Chancellor Offices in some of the UK Russell Group of universities, it became evident that, in several instances, Pro-Vice-Chancellors also operate directly within the Vice-Chancellor's office, thus sharing administration resources. In summary the benchmarking suggests that there is no clear model, rather it is important to ensure that the processes critical to the effective leadership of the institution are fully able to be operationalised.

FINDINGS OF THE PEER REVIEW GROUP

**Introduction**
We start by stating unequivocally that our work was enabled and facilitated most effectively by all colleagues at University College Cork; and in particular by the Quality Promotion Unit. These reviews depend totally on the quality of the papers and the willingness of colleagues to engage with the process and on all counts we have felt fully informed, supported and welcomed.

Our commendations also extend to the President's Office. Let us say at the outset that, whether from inside or outside the University there is unanimity of view that the office is effective, efficient and friendly. In what follows we will develop some suggestions about how this can be sustained and, indeed, improved at a time of transition for the University. As

noted above, the President has been in post for 10 years and having successfully led the University he is now standing down. We concur fully with the President's view that this is an optimal time to review the activities and structures of the Office of the President.

**Change in a Changing World**

The new President will not arrive in a benign and unchanging environment. External global issues such as the UK vote to leave the European Union, changing global political ecologies, the UK Higher Education and Research Bill – leading to the measurement of teaching excellence will all likely impact on Irish Higher Education. And these events will also impact on the funding regime that the Irish Government is able to deliver on Irish Higher Education. While the economic environment is possibly on the upturn, finances are not where they need to be for Cork to be fully effective and so all serious commentators would agree that there will be a need to diversify funding, to build partnerships and relationships; and hence there is a need to increase time and effort on external relations be they influencing government, developing strategic partnerships with other universities or with industry, or working with alumni.

This means that we concur with the view from UCC that the President's role will, in the future, be likely to have an increased focus externally. Our reflections will be made always through such a lens.

**Overview of Leadership Structure**

The President's increasing external role will, necessarily, mean that the President's internal leadership should be rather more strategic and hence the President should have fewer direct reports. We have taken a view that it would be beneficial to change the structure so that there are no more than four reporting lines to the President. While it will be for the incoming President to identify the final structure we would recommend that there should be a Chief Academic Officer (who would be designated as the President's Deputy), a Chief Operations Officer and up to two others.

It will be critical that the line management from, for example the Chief Academic Officer to the appropriate Vice-Presidents is clear and there is a clear line of responsibility for each of the key elements of the university's strategic plan and for any key risks.

As already noted, the role of the President will increasingly include all aspects of fund raising, much of which will be led by the Office for Development. Successful fundraising requires a close and effective relationship between the Director of Development and the President and we recommend that the Director should also have a clear line to the President.

**Services and Staffing in the President's Office**

In this section we address the staffing of the President's Office. Let us say at the outset that we believe that the size of the Office is not greatly out of step with those elsewhere in Europe. Having said that we make, below, a number of comments and recommendations with regards to the future staffing of the Office. We first consider those staff in the general office and then turn to the resource for Special Projects.

We were very impressed with the staff in the Office. There is clearly an excellent culture of enabling work to be done in a flexible and attentive way that exuded top class team work. We heard from our interviews both inside and outside the University that there was a good

degree of follow up as well, where appropriate, of proactivity. We would also note that outstanding teams tend to have outstanding leaders and this was clearly evident here.

On the less positive side, we heard that, as a result of the fiscal crisis, across the University there had been a lack of permanent posts available, and that had been true of the President's Office. Hence, when a post did come up, colleagues on temporary posts inside the President's Office had applied for and been successful in such applications and this, of course, led to high turnover in the President's Office.

As there is now we understand, increasingly, the opportunity to make permanent appointments we urge the University to consider making posts in the Office permanent. In so doing we urge, additionally, a review of the grades of staff in the Office; and at the same time it would be helpful to ensure that there were clear role definitions for each of the staff. In addition, for career development and motivation we believe it would also be helpful for the staff, individually, to have special projects that they led on.

We were also disappointed to learn that career development was sometimes impacted by the demands of work. We urge the University to ensure that here is a strong culture of career development and that time is clearly allocated for career development in individual workloads. A particular skill that we heard would be required in the future was for sophisticated IT skills and we believe that this could be achieved by upskilling staff in the current roles.

We recognise the comments in the SWOC(T) analysis regarding single point of failure risks. However, we believe that in an Office such as this there is no justification for having too complex a structure of emergency cover, but would note that there should be a clear policy for holidays and also, where appropriate, succession planning should be undertaken so as to minimise disruption.

In acknowledging that staff were undertaking important and effective roles, in general, we were less clear that the Student Exam appeals should remain within the President's Office. We understand that this was a pragmatic solution to a problem and we acknowledge further the excellence with which the process has been developed and prosecuted. However, we are unconvinced that, in a world where the President will be spending more time on external affairs, with a commensurate increase in the need for the Office to be on top of a range of issues, that this is the optimal location.


**Special Projects Office**

In the fast changing higher education landscape it is essential that the President is able to draw on high class policy advice and to do so quickly and with agility. We recommend, therefore, the creation of the role of Special Projects Officer. It would be difficult to write down precisely what would be required as this would vary from year to year but we would see the following areas of activity as being key to the role: horizon scanning of areas that will likely impact on the University, reacting to initiatives and changes in the policy landscape, and proactively developing policy in areas that the University will likely have to take a view. It is also highly likely that the role will, on occasion, require pan University coordination of policy.

As a result of the above we believe that this should be a senior role filled by someone who can easily work across the University and who has a clear understanding of and facility with local and national government with respect to higher education directly and to the wider policy arena where it might indirectly impact on higher education.

We note that much of the role described above is currently filled by the 'Policy Analyst' and that the work undertaken is highly valued and top class. We see this role as being permanent and having, perhaps, a slightly broader remit.

**Communications**

Everyone we spoke to would agree that communication internally and externally is critical to the effective function of the University in general and, in the current environment, ensuring the President's message is heard is ever more important. We discussed whether it would be appropriate to have a dedicated communications person within the President's Office but concluded against this, arguing that it was essential that communications from the President needed to be owned across the Communications team and that interactions between the Communications team were critical.

**Accommodation**

Turning to the physical location, we recognise that the Office space is used fully and conveys an impressive degree of gravitas commensurate with a university such as Cork; and we recognise also the issues around security. However, we urge the University to review the current space and assess whether it is entirely optimal, welcoming and open for the next few years.

**Bureaucracy and Governance**

Throughout our conversations across the University we heard about a fairly complex bureaucracy. This is true of many institutions and should not be seen as a criticism of University College Cork. However, as with all institutions it is good practice periodically to review the bureaucracy around governance and we believe that a change of President represents an excellent opportunity for such a review and we recommend that one takes place.

A review of bureaucracy represents an important opportunity to consider the role of the student body in the governance of the University. We met with the student leadership and were impressed by their positive approach. In recommending a review of governance we believe the University should consider how best to ensure the student voice properly inputs into decisions across the university.

**Recommendations**

The report text highlights the main findings of the Peer Review Group, and the following are provided as overarching recommendations:

1. The President will need to spend significantly more time engaging with the external environment – government, alumni and fundraising, international and so on.

2. To free up time for the President to achieve this, a reorganisation of the top structure is necessary to reduce the currently large number of direct reports. We propose a maximum of four direct reports including a Chief Academic Officer, a Chief Operating Officer and two more at the discretion of the incoming President.

3. Reduce the staffing risk in the President's Office by converting some currently short term contracts into permanent ones, providing opportunities for staff to acquire

important new skills, and encourage staff to seek to lead some projects of their own making.

4. Convert the current temporary position of Policy Analyst into a longer contract position of Special Projects Advisor to help the President drive new initiatives.

5. Ensure that the only functions staying with the President's Office are those requiring the direct involvement of the President. All others should be delegated downwards.

**APPENDIX 1**

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**PRESIDENT'S OFFICE**
**PEER REVIEW GROUP SITE VISIT TIMETABLE**

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| Wednesday 28 September 2016 | |
|---|---|
| 18.30 – 19.45 | Meeting of members of the Peer Review Group. <br><br> Briefing by Director of the Quality Promotion Unit. <br><br> Group agrees final work schedule and assignment of tasks for the following day. Views are exchanged and areas to be clarified or explored are identified. |
| 20.00 | Meeting with President |
| 20.30 | Dinner for members of the Peer Review Group, Director of Quality & members of the President's Office |

| Thursday 29 September 2016 | |
|---|---|
| 08.30 – 08.45 | Convening of the Peer Review Group |
| 08.45 – 09.30 | Meeting with President |
| 09.30 – 10.15 | Meeting with Representatives from President's Office staff |
| 10.15 – 10.45 | Tea/coffee break <br><br> <u>Members of the University Management Team - Operations (UMTO) to attend</u>: <br><br> Head, College of Business and Law <br> Vice President for Research and Innovation <br> Director, Human Resources <br> Vice President for Teaching and Learning |
| 11.00 – 11.45 | <u>Governing Body - Chairs of Committees</u> <br><br> Chair, Committee on Strategy and Innovation <br> Chair, Audit Committee <br> Chair, Finance Committee |
| 12.00 – 12.45 | <u>Local stakeholders</u> <br><br> Chief Executive of Cork City Council <br> President, CIT <br> President, Cork Chamber of Commerce |
| 12.45 – 13.40 | Lunch |
| 13.40 – 14.00 | Meeting with Director of Cultural Projects |

| 14.00 – 14.30 | Representatives of Students' Union<br><br>SU President 2016/17<br>Vice President for Education 2016/17<br>Deputy President 2016/17 |
|---|---|
| 14.30 – 15.30 | National stakeholders<br><br>Registrar, National University of Ireland |
| 15.30 – 16.00 | Private meeting of the PRG (tea/coffee) |
| 16.00 – 16.30 | UCC staff stakeholders<br><br>Exam Appeals Officer<br>Representative from Human Resources<br>Representative from Finance Office<br>Representative from Registrar's Office<br>Representative from Office of the Vice President for Research and Innovation<br>Representative from Media and Communications |
| 16.45 – 17.45 | UMTO members<br><br>Bursar and Chief Financial Officer<br>Vice President for Research and Innovation<br>Director, Human Resources<br>Vice President for External Affairs<br>Vice President for Teaching and Learning<br>Head, College of Science, Engineering and Food Science |
| 18.00 – 18.30 | Teleconference with incoming President |
| 19.30 | Working private dinner for members of the Peer Review Group to commence drafting of report. |

| Friday 30 September 2016 | |
|---|---|
| 08.30 – 09.00 | Meeting with Representatives from President's Office staff |
| 09.00 – 09.15 | Meeting with President |
| 09.25 – 10.00 | Exit presentation to all staff, to be made by the Chair of the Peer Review Group or other member of Peer Review Group as agreed, summarising the principal findings of the Peer Review Group. |