

University College Cork
National University of Ireland, Cork
Quality Improvement/Quality Assurance

Peer Review Group Report

Careers Service

Academic Year 2000/2001

Members of the Peer Review Group

1. Ms. Rose Mortenson Training Manager, AGCAS (UK)
2. Mr. Dermot Killen Smurfit Group
3. Dr. John O'Halloran Dept of Zoology & Animal Ecology, UCC
4. Dr. Patrick Murphy Dept of Electrical & Electronic Engineering Engineering, UCC

Dr Patrick Murphy chaired the Peer Review Group.

Timetable of the site visit

Wednesday 28 February

- 18.00 — 19.30 Meeting of members of the Peer Review Group ,Kingsley Hotel
Briefing by Director of Quality Promotion Unit, Dr. N. Ryan
- 20.00 Dinner for members of the Peer Review Group and the Department/Unit
co-ordinating committee, including the Head of Unit

Thursday 1 March

- 08.30 — 09.00 Convening of Peer Review Group in S. McEvoy's office, Student Careers
Services Department, 3 Brighton Villas, Western Road, Cork
- 09.00 — 13.00 Consideration of Self-Assessment Report and other inputs along with all
unit staff.
Schedule for the session:
09.00 — 09.30 Meeting with Professor A. Moran, Registrar & Vice-President of
Academic Affairs;
09.30 — 10.00 Meeting with S. McEvoy, Head of Unit;
10.00 — 12.00 meetings with individual groups of staff
12.00 — 13.00 meetings with individual members of staff.
- 13.00 — 15.00 Working lunch, including informal discussions with students including
representatives of work placement students
- 15.00 — 15.30 Meeting with Professor A. Hyland, Vice-President and member of Executive
Management Group
- 15.30 — 16.00 Visit to core facilities of Unit
- 16.00 — 17.00 Meetings with students, randomly selected
- 17.30 — 18.30 Meeting of Peer Review Group to identify remaining aspects to be clarified and to
finalise tasks for Day 2
- 19.30 Working private dinner, Kingsley Hotel

Friday 2 March

- 08.45 — 10.00 Meeting in Staff Diningroom, UCC with representative employers.
Breakfast provided
- 10.00 — 11.00 Meeting with representative selections of staff and users of the services provided
by the Department/Unit.
- 10.00 — 10.30 Academic staff
Ms. Teresa Dowling, Dept. of Sociology
Mr. Frank Martin, Dept. of Law

- Dr. Grace Neville, Dept. of French.
 Dr. David Sheehan, Dept. of Biochemistry
- 10.30 — 11.00 Academic Staff who manage work placements
 Mr. Pat Enright, Faculty of Food Science & Technology
 Dr. John Hayes, Dept. of Electrical & Electronic Engineering
 Dr. Alan Kelly, Dept. of Food Science, Food Technology & Nutrition.
 Mr. Humphrey Sorensen, Dept of Computer Science.
- 11.00 — 11.30 Coffee/Tea
- 11.30 — 12.15 Meeting with Dean of Science, Professor P. Giller (accompanied by Ms M. Loughman, Administrative Officer) and Dean of Engineering, Professor R. Yacamini
- 12.15 — 13.00 Meeting with Mr Denis Staunton, Adult & Continuing Education.
- 13.00 — 14.00 Lunch. Meeting with Mr Noel Keely, Director of Human Resources.
- 14.00 — 17.00 Supplemental meetings with individual staff members of Careers Service.
 Preparation of first draft of final report
- 17.00 — 17.30 Exit presentation, made by the Chair summarising the principal findings of the Peer Review Group
- 19.00 — 22.30 Working private dinner in Kingsley Hotel to complete drafting of report and finalisation of arrangements for completion and submission of final report

Suitability and adequacy of the timetable

In general, the timetable was suitable and adequate. Whilst the members of the PRG initially felt the process was too lengthy, in practice, the times allotted proved barely adequate to discuss issues in depth.

With hindsight, the PRG would have preferred to meet the senior officers of the University on the second day of the visit rather than the first. Whilst we recognise the rationale behind the timetable as arranged, we now believe that a number of issues which were identified during our discussions with members and clients of the careers service, could have been more usefully debated with the management of the University in the latter stages of the process. In this regard, in addition to all our scheduled interviewees, we wish to record our appreciation to Mr Denis Staunton and Mr Noel Keely who made themselves available to the PRG at very short notice.

Methodology

The PRG operated throughout the process as a composite unit. All members were present for all interviews and deliberations. Particular responsibility for specific topics or tasks was not assigned to any individual member. However, the external members did, of course, bring their specialist knowledge to bear on many issues, whilst internal members endeavoured to represent the views and concerns of the wider University community.

This report was compiled in the following manner;

- (i) On the evening of the first day of the review, the Group agreed the broad outline of headings and initial findings. Topics requiring further enquiry were also noted.
- (ii) On the afternoon of the second day, the initial list was expanded and modified to reflect the additional information gathered on that day. The general structure of our findings and recommendations were then communicated to the staff of the careers service.

(iii) The final detailed structure of the report and specific recommendations were agreed and noted by all the members on the evening of the second day.

(iv) The chairman of the PRG communicated a draft version of the final report to the members by e-mail. Following corrections and amendments agreed by all the members, the report was finalised.

Self Assessment Report

The PRG were impressed with the detail, accuracy and volume of material contained in the self assessment documentation. The information provided in the appendices was well organised and presented and greatly facilitated our understanding of the structure and operation of the careers service. However, we felt the level of critical and strategic analysis contained in the report did not fully meet the guidelines set by the Quality Promotion Unit. We would have welcomed a brief reflective discussion on the position and future of the service within the University structure. The Strategic Plan, which was included with the documentation, was originally prepared for incorporation into the University Strategic Plan in 1999 and may now need updating.

The recommendations contained in the self assessment report were, in general, considered and realistic. The importance of staffing issues was apparent and this matter is considered in further detail below. A number of specific recommendations were referred to the PRG for comment. Each of these was individually considered by the PRG and, where appropriate, our conclusions are reflected in our findings and recommendations presented below. Those matters that are not included, such as minor operational or structural issues, were felt by the PRG to be outside our remit and should, more appropriately, be addressed within the service.

Findings and Recommendations of the Peer Review Group

At the outset, the Peer Review Group wishes especially to acknowledge the professionalism and dedication of the staff members of the Careers Service. In our view, the quality of service which is realisable in such a unit is ultimately dependent on the quality of individuals available to deliver that service. For this reason we believe the University is particularly fortunate in having assembled such an impressive team.

Our analysis, comments and criticisms, then, are based on a belief that any shortcomings are due to strategic, structural, and operational constraints. Our recommendations are presented in the conviction that an excellent service can be made even better.

Strategic Issues

- (i) In recent years the careers service has undergone a transition from a small unit focussed on careers information to a multi-functional unit dealing with students at all stages of their university careers. In addition, the careers service has become the primary interface between the University and the business community. Therefore, the designation of the unit as a “student service” fails to recognise the range of activities of the unit and, more importantly, loses sight of its strategic importance in our interaction with business and industry. In this latter function, its obvious relationship with the UCC Foundation and the Alumni Office has been completely overlooked.

Accordingly, the PRG now recommends that the reporting line of the Careers Service be changed from the Registrar's Office to that of the Vice President for Planning and Development. In this way an enhanced and co-ordinated institutional interaction with business and employers can be developed.

In making this recommendation the PRG is mindful of the academic function of the placement programme but considers the retention of the academic assessment function in the relevant academic department ensures that there is no loss of academic control by the Registrars Office.

- (ii) As stated in (i) above, the careers service is now a multi-functional unit dealing with a wide range of clients. Functions such as work placement activities, careers advice, and information services may appear as distinct and separate activities. However, our findings are that these functions are interdependent, mutually supportive and necessarily inter-linked.

Accordingly, we recommend that the integrity of the service is preserved and all the current activities are retained within the unit.

- (iii) There is clearly a problem in establishing and maintaining the necessary links between the careers service and academic departments. This problem was acknowledged and confirmed by many of our interviewees. Factors which give rise to this difficulty range from lack of incentive, through apathy, to obvious personal antipathy. Whatever the reason, the net result is that there is a large number of academic departments where the career progression of students is considered to be either irrelevant, or not an issue in which the department has any function.

The PRG believes that the Careers Service cannot deliver an optimum quality of service in this present situation. We also believe that students of those departments which do not interact with the service are, thereby, seriously disadvantaged.

Accordingly, we recommend that the degree, nature and frequency of interaction of an academic department with the careers service be included in the quality assurance requirement for all academic departments. In addition, where appropriate or possible, the issue of career progression of graduates be used as a metric in assessing the quality of an academic department.

Institutional Issues

- (i) The evolving budgetary practice of the University may have serious negative implications for the future role and involvement of the careers service. The obligation on academic departments to pay for input from the service can only act as a disincentive. In view of the difficulties currently experienced (as identified above) it is difficult to see anything but a deterioration under the proposed funding model.

The PRG recommends that the careers service continues to be centrally funded and that academic departments are permitted to avail of its normal services without charge.

- (ii) The quality of service provided by the careers service is often dependent on the quality of service provided by other College units. In particular, the careers service is frequently

dependent on the buildings office, the audio visual unit, the security service, etc in organising a presentation for employers. An error in any of these units can have a serious negative impact on the image of the careers service in the eyes of students or employers.

The PRG requests the Quality Promotion Committee to address this issue.

- (iii) The physical environment of the Careers Service is unacceptable. As stated above, the Careers Service is the primary interface between the University and the business community. The annual report of the service for 1999/2000 notes that sixty-five companies visited in a five-month period. Whilst the present premises are, apparently, an improvement on those occupied previously, they do not present an acceptable image of the University nor do they meet the functional needs of the unit. This view is not based solely on our own observations but was also forcefully conveyed to us by the group of employers we met.

In particular the following shortcomings need to be addressed immediately;

- (a) interview rooms are too small, inconveniently located, badly appointed, and often used for storage space
- (b) the exterior of the building needs redecorating and the surroundings need cleaning
- (c) signage, particularly on the Western Road frontage, needs to be improved.
- (d) some staff rooms are less than the minimum approved area
- (e) special arrangements need to be made for visitor parking, particularly for employers. In view of the special nature of this unit the existing university arrangements are unworkable
- (f) the accommodation used for the “drop-in” service does not meet the requirements of the professional standards for client privacy,
- (g) facilities available for employers visiting the campus are generally unsatisfactory and need urgent attention
- (h) the present layout of the building does not facilitate access or mobility of disabled users.

The PRG requests the Buildings Committee to visit and inspect the unit and give urgent consideration to these recommendations.

- (iv) Academic departments which operate placement programmes typically require students to make presentations and present reports on their return. At present, there appears to be no formalised procedure to ensure that the careers service has access to this valuable feedback process. In view of the fact that the service is in a pivotal position during the placement process itself, we believe that it would be extremely valuable if it were also included in the feedback loop at the other end.

The PRG recommends that a procedure be put in place whereby the careers service is informed of the details of the presentations by students recently returned from placement, and relevant placement staff are given the option to attend. This is not to suggest that the service is given a formal role in academic assessment.

Issues within the Service.

- (i) *Staffing*

It is apparent from the documentation provided by the careers service, and from our own investigations, that the issue of staffing is currently a crucial factor affecting the quality of service from the unit. The proportion of staff which is retained on short term contracts seems inordinately high and has obvious implications for continuity of service, retention of expertise, and staff morale. Whilst we appreciate the circumstances which have given rise to this situation, we believe that the unit cannot maintain the requisite level of service which is required by the University unless the issue is resolved in the short term.

Factors which need to be considered, include

- (a) the professional development of staff and their membership of professional associations,
- (b) flexibility of working hours,
- (c) requirements for continuity in contacts with employers,
- (d) retention of specialist skills,
- (e) conditions of employment of contract staff,
- (f) individual performance reviews.

As the PRG considered this issue to be of such central importance in our deliberations we sought and received a special meeting with Mr Noel Keely, Director of Human Resources. We are grateful for his input and advice in formulating the following recommendation.

The PRG recommends that the issue of contract staffing levels be given immediate attention. We request the Director of Service to meet with the Director of Human Resources to initiate procedures to transfer contract staff members to Tenure B positions. In the longer term we recommend that the University gives priority to ensuring that funding is available to establish permanent posts in the Service.

(ii) *Structure and Communication*

The PRG noted that many of the recommendations contained in the self-assessment report could be implemented autonomously within the service. We offer the following additional observations and suggestions to augment or replace those in the self-assessment report. Our reasoning in suggesting these changes is that we feel, at the present, opportunities for team building and staff empowerment are not being completely realised.

The organisational chart for the service did not, in our view, fully represent the reality of reporting structures within the unit. Whilst there is an obvious and gratifying *esprit de corps*, we believe that roles and reporting procedures need to be clarified and reviewed. Hierarchical structures which may have been appropriate in a small unit are obviously under strain in a service expanding the range and complexity of its activities.

As referred to previously, the members of the service need to be given an opportunity to work on their vision of the future as well as attempting to cope with the daily level of activity in the workplace. At the most basic level, a room capable of seating all the members of the Service should be available for staff meetings as a priority. Also, additional agenda items for such meetings which are proposed and seconded by any two staff members, should be included, in so far as time allows.

The recent and likely growth in the level of placement activities suggests that a need exists for a coordinator to ensure the efficient operation of the service across different academic departments and to ensure that there is institutional consistency in dealing with employers. The employers, with whom we spoke, forcefully communicated their view that they would welcome an enhanced degree of institutional coordination in operating placement programs.

The PRG recommends that the Head of Service, begin a consultation process with the staff of the service, and the College authorities, with the aim of defining and establishing a post of coordinator of placement services.

(iii) *Operation*

(a) Despite the production of substantial quantities of high quality publicity and informational material it appears that much of the student body is still ignorant of the range of services and information available from the unit. In particular, those students who are uncertain of their career paths appear to be unaware of the assistance that might be on offer. Also, the specific availability of information and assistance in connection with post-graduate options is not generally appreciated.

The PRG recommends that procedures are put in place whereby the careers service makes contact with undergraduate students at an earlier stage of their careers than is currently the case.

(b) The PRG considered proposals to extend the activities of the service to include post-graduate students and even alumni at later stages of their careers.

We believe that services should be offered to post-graduate students but should be charged for at a reasonable rate.

We do not believe the unit is equipped at this time, nor is it appropriate, to extend its services to deal with alumni.

(c) On reviewing the budget for the unit we were struck by the fact that printing costs account for more than fifty per cent. Whilst we have acknowledged the quality of the material produced by the service **we believe there are opportunities to reduce the costs associated with printing**, and thus free up funding for urgent requirements such as staff training and the physical resources of the unit.

Among the options which might be investigated are;

(1) Expansion of in-house graphics capabilities. The level of achievement already demonstrated in web design suggests that the Service may be able to develop extra capability in graphic layout and desktop publishing, and, hence, save on design costs. A “house style” may well suffice for many applications.

(2) Literature which is updated may not need to be redesigned from scratch. Given that the student readership is constantly changing, the need for a fresh start is not so pronounced.

(3) The overall cost of printing is such that each job should not be priced in isolation. Rather the College Procurement Officer should be requested to bring his expertise to bear on minimising the annual cost.

(d) In conjunction with the Centre for Adult and Continuing Education, **the Careers Service should investigate the possibility of providing a free-phone service and appointing specialist advisors for mature students**, particularly dealing with the range of programmes on offer and application procedures and requirements.