

**University College Cork  
National University of Ireland, Cork**

**Quality Improvement/Quality Assurance**

**Peer Review Group Report**

**Student Counselling & Development**

**Academic Year 2005/06**

**6<sup>th</sup> December 2005**

## **PEER REVIEW**

### **Members of the Peer Review Group (PRG):**

Professor Alastair Christie, Department of Applied Social Studies, UCC (Chair)

Professor Colm O'Sullivan, Department of Physics, UCC

Dr. Susan Lindsay, Head, DIT Counselling Service, DIT

Ms. Elsa Bell, Head, University Counselling Service, University of Oxford, UK

### **Timetable of the site visit**

The detailed timetable is attached as Appendix A.

The PRG considered that the timetable was well thought through, and that the arrangements were adequate and appropriate. The PRG recognised the issues around confidentiality and access to users of the service. Nevertheless, the PRG was facilitated in meeting a number of users of the counselling service.

The PRG requested meetings with some additional staff of the University. These meetings were arranged, with the exception of that requested with the Head of the Student Health Department.

## **PEER REVIEW**

### **Methodology**

The PRG operated throughout as a composite Unit. All members of the PRG were present for all interviews and discussions. Particular responsibility for specific topics 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 represented the views and concerns of the wider University community.

The final detailed structure of the report and specific recommendations were agreed and noted by all members on the second day of the review visit. The reviewers' report was completed following the visit by email communications. All amendments and corrections were agreed to by the PRG prior to finalisation of the report.

## **OVERALL ANALYSIS**

### **Self-Assessment Report (SAR)**

The PRG found the SAR to be a comprehensive and well-organised document, which provided clear and detailed information on a wide range of issues pertinent to Student Counselling and Development (SCD). The information helped to provide insight and understanding into the operation of SCD. Some additional information was requested and this was provided promptly and accurately during the review visit. The PRG noted that SCD's Policy and Procedures Booklet was particularly useful in explaining the work of the SCD within the university context.

The PRG commended the extensive surveying of stakeholder views that was conducted prior to the preparation of the SAR. Unfortunately, an analysis of the student questionnaires was not included in the documentation provided to the review team. The SAR could have been strengthened by the inclusion of more detailed information on current and potential future service users. The PRG would have also welcomed information on the financial situation of SCD within the SAR. The PRG would have welcomed a brief reflective discussion in the SAR on the future of SCD within the broader University strategy.

The PRG were impressed by the overall standards and the quality of service provided by the staff of the Unit. It is to be noted that all those interviewed were unanimous in their praise of the dynamic and sensitive leadership by the Head of SCD. The PRG were impressed by the openness of the staff of the Unit and their readiness to engage with the review. The PRG commended the professionalism of the staff of the Unit and their ability to respond to demands made on the Unit. The various stakeholders were unanimous in their praise of the speed and quality of response of the staff of the Unit.

The PRG noted the history of SCD and its development as an independent entity. SCD was originally formed as a section of the Student Health Department and was only established as an independent unit in 2002.

### **SWOT Analysis**

The PRG agreed that the SWOT provided an accurate analysis of SCD's work and that members of SCD had engaged with the exercise in an open and honest way. The PRG suggested that it would have enhanced the exercise if opportunities linked to the broader aims and objectives of the University had been identified.

### **Benchmarking**

The PRG noted that SCD had successfully completed a benchmarking exercise with the University of Westminster, Trinity College Dublin and King's College London. The PRG noted that the Unit had benefited from the exercise. The PRG also noted that the Head of the SCD is an active member of the Irish Association of University & College Counsellors and the Irish Association of Counsellors and Psychotherapists. Other core team members are also active members of the Irish Association of Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy, The Psychological Society of Ireland and the Confederation of Student Services in Ireland.

## **FINDINGS OF THE PEER REVIEW GROUP**

At the outset the PRG wishes especially to acknowledge the professionalism and dedication of the staff members of SCD. The quality of service which such a unit is capable of delivering is ultimately dependent on the quality of the individuals available to deliver that service. The PRG believes that the university is fortunate to have such individuals in the Unit.

The analysis of the services offered by the Unit takes into consideration the rapid expansion of counselling and development services in recent years. SCD was initially linked to the Student Health Department, but has now been restructured and is undergoing a period of rapid change and development.

### **Human Resource Issues**

The PRG found that the staff of the Unit are overstretched and working beyond the normal capacity of a team of this size. Despite the obvious current effectiveness of the Unit, the PRG have serious concerns about the sustainability of the present arrangement.

In examining the relative pay scales of the professional staff of the Unit, the PRG found a serious discrepancy between the pay scales in UCC and other third level educational institutions in Ireland.

The PRG found an anomaly in the rates of pay for part-time counselling staff in comparison to the rates of pay of permanent staff. While the reasons for this may be historical and related to market forces, there is a need to integrate part-time hours into the overall service provision. The PRG were of the opinion that the amount spent on part-time temporary contracts is disproportionate in relation to the total pay budget and the PRG have serious concerns about the ability of SCD to plan for the development of future services while this situation continues.

*The PRG recommends that a review be undertaken of the staffing arrangements and salary structures required to meet current and future needs of the service.*

*The PRG recommends that the University examine the possibility of basing salaries on equivalent professional posts (e.g. psychologists) within the Health Service Executive, comparable national education institutions and the wider public sector.*

The PRG considered that there is an inadequate career development and progression structure for counsellors within the Unit. The reviewers also noted that there is no formal arrangement in place for another member of staff to deputise for the Head of the Unit in his/her absence.

*The PRG recommends that consideration be given to putting in place clear formal arrangements for deputising for the Head of SCD in his/her absence.*

The PRG found that the Executive Assistants working within SCD have a unique role and responsibilities that are quite distinct to the normal duties of other Executive Assistants in the University (e.g. communicating with students in distress, negotiating with health and social care professionals, and ensuring client confidentiality). The PRG found that some of the essential work of the Unit for forward planning, such as data processing, has not been completed because of the pressure of work. In the view

of the PRG, the present administrative arrangements are not sustainable in the long-term and will place SCD and its staff under considerable strain.

*The PRG recommends that a review be undertaken of the role and responsibilities of the Executive Assistants, with a view to realistically assessing the needs of the service and putting in place the necessary resources.*

*The PRG recommends that the remuneration of administrative staff should be in line with the particular responsibilities of the post.*

### **Physical Facilities**

The PRG found that the space currently allocated to the Unit is inadequate for the effective delivery of the current service. Specifically there are insufficient rooms for individual counselling. A room previously used for therapeutic group work and training has had to be sacrificed in order to provide two additional counselling rooms. There is no work room/common space for staff to continue administrative work when their room is being used by other counsellors.

The current arrangements whereby the waiting room is shared by other services are proving problematic. The PRG noted that students have restricted access to SCD when the reception area for the Student Health Department is closed. The sharing of space with the Student Health Department hinders delivery of a quality counselling service. Users of SCD argued strongly that they found the current arrangement unsatisfactory. The public nature of the reception area and waiting room, given the number of the students who use the Student Health Department, can be inappropriate for students who are waiting to meet a counsellor.

*The PRD recommends that urgent consideration be given to finding suitable alternative accommodation for the SCD.*

The PRG found that the toilet facilities to be completely inadequate, with one toilet available for use by physically disabled students and staff, and one for the use of all staff and patients/clients of the Student Health and SCD. The PRG were informed that urine specimens are regularly left on a shelf in the toilets.

*The PRG recommends that the provision of adequate and appropriate toilet facilities is reviewed urgently and with a view to health and safety of both staff and students.*

A planned security protocol has not yet been implemented to ensure the safety of staff and students working in the building. This is particularly important as the SCD provides services outside normal working hours.

*The PRG recommends that a security protocol be implemented as a matter of urgency in the immediate future.*

The PRG found the SCD's reception/administrative office is too small. There is no area for students to wait and/or to discuss their requirements in privacy. In addition, there is no space in reception to display the range of material one would expect to see in a modern counselling service.

*The PRG recommends that appropriate reception and waiting areas be provided as a matter of urgency.*

### **Professional Issues**

As a condition of professional accreditation counsellors require 'external supervision'. This involves counsellors regularly meeting a senior external professional who can monitor their therapeutic work. Providing appropriate external supervision is an essential safeguard for the students and staff.

The PRG found that the sessional counsellors employed by SCD are required to independently contract external supervisors. The consequence of this is that the external supervisor has no formal relationship with the University. To ensure safety and quality of counselling services it is recommended that formal contracts are established between the University and external supervisors and that a budgetary allowance is made for this.

*The PRG recommends that the Head of SCD approves the appointment of the external supervisors, that formal contracts are established with the external supervisors and*

*that twice-yearly meetings are held between the external supervisors and the Head of SCD.*

The PRG found that a new system is in place for more regular contact between the permanent staff and the part-time sessional counsellors. Regular meetings of the full team are now being held. However, there is some indication that this arrangement will still not be adequate to meet the needs of SCD as the workload increases in relation to the expansion of the student numbers (in particular the increase in mature and international students).

*The PRG recommends that resources be allocated to enable the development of team consultation, decision-making, sharing of skills, experience and knowledge among the team members and regular meetings of the Head of SCD with individual members of staff (full-time and part-time) to review and monitor work in progress.*

The PRG noted that sessional counsellors are only paid for face-to-face contact time with service users and not for clinical administration or other activities of the Service.

*The PRG recommends that payment of sessional counsellors for clinical administration and other activities be taken into consideration in the context of the review of the staffing structure.*

The PRG were informed by the Registrar & Vice-President for Academic Affairs that there is likely to be an appointment of a senior officer who will be responsible for student services and student affairs in UCC. The PRG strongly supported the proposal and recommends that the holder of the office be a member of the University Management Group.

*The PRG recommends that the holder of the proposed office with responsibility for student affairs and student services be a member of the University Management Group.*

The HSE psychiatrist who provides regular services in the Student Health Department commented on the high quality of the training and practice of the counsellors in



relation to students at risk. There is shared treatment of students with enduring mental health problems and the psychiatrist commented on her confidence in the ability of the counsellors to work with students with such problems.

*The PRG recommends that the expertise on mental health issues developed by the counsellors and psychiatrist be made available in an appropriate way to academic staff with a view to enhancing the understanding of mental health issues and to assist students to maximise the benefits of their education at university level and to achieve their academic goals.*

*The PRG recommends that the numbers of students being treated be monitored with a view to the long-term impact on resources.*

## **Research**

The PRG were unclear whether the University expected staff of SCD to undertake research. Such research could be used to evaluate and guide the future developments of the service. Research-led and evidence-based practice is viewed as the cornerstone of any modern counselling service.

## **Data Collection, Analysis and Monitoring**

The PRG noted that SCD has started to use the software programme INFORM, a specifically designed record keeping system for counselling records. However, the staff find it difficult to find the time to enter data on an on-going basis and, as a result, SCD is not able to use this system as an efficient management tool. There is insufficient administrative support available to enable regular reports to be generated in an on-going manner and thus make use of the software package to its full potential.

The PRG noted that data from this system should be regularly disseminated to relevant bodies and staff. There is little information currently available about the use of SCD services by particular groups of students and students with particular departments/faculties/colleges.

*The PRG recommends that data analysis be completed on a regular basis and that specific results be communicated to various University bodies, as appropriate and relevant.*

*The PRG recommends that Colleges/Faculties provide opportunities for the SCD staff to make presentations to academic and administrative staff. Such discussions could enable SCD staff to be informed of relevant changes and developments across the University.*

### **Development**

The PRG noted that ‘development’ had been included in the restructured SCD service. Such development work is an important part of any good student counselling service. Development work reaches a wider range of students and helps to promote mental well-being and academic success. Currently, in UCC, development work consists of a number of approaches, including workshops, skills training, peer-assisted learning in conjunction with faculties, and peer-assisted mentoring, e.g. for mature students and for international students. While these activities are still at a pilot stage, comments from those interviewed by the PRG were highly supportive of this preventative/developmental work of the service. The PRG noted that there was some confusion about whether preventative/developmental work is a core activity of SCD, which should be funded centrally, or whether it is an activity that is dependent on funding from individual departments.

The PRG noted that other student support services in UCC provide some of the same type of developmental support as that provided by SCD. The PRG noted that there is a high degree of both formal and informal collaboration in delivery of these programmes.

In the opinion of the PRG, UCC needs to develop an overall strategic plan in relation to these services and to engage with the expertise of the staff responsible for the services.

*The PRG recommends that some strategic thinking be carried out around development issues and on how this type of developmental work is delivered in the future.*

### **Integration**

The PRG found that the service is making great efforts to contact and liaise with faculties and departments. It is unclear if the service is viewed as an integral part of the student life and the university community, in assisting students to achieve their academic and personal developmental goals, or a peripheral service for the few specifically vulnerable students.

The PRG recommends that the service should be viewed as one for all students and should be integrated into the general life of the University. This integration model has the advantage of engaging the expertise of SCD staff to inform policy and practice in the University. SCD could be involved in policy-making and generating data that would inform strategic planning. Formal provision needs to be developed to facilitate the exchange of information between the SCD and other areas of the University.

*The PRG recommends that the service be viewed as one for all students and should be more closely integrated with other student services and the academic sector.*

### **Strategy and Forward Planning**

The PRG noted that the current University strategic plan makes no reference to SCD. The PRG was informed of the University's plans to increase the number of international, postgraduate, mature and non-traditional students. As all these groups are already over-represented as SCD service users, it is perhaps surprising that the development of SCD has not been identified in the University's strategic plan.

The PRG noted that the University is developing a Resource Allocation Model (RAM) for implementation in 2006/07 and recommends that the needs of specific groups of students for counselling and development are accommodated within the model. SCD plays an important role in enabling the University to fulfil its obligations in relation to Targeted/Strategic Initiatives. This needs to be recognised through adequate funding of the service.

*The PRG recommends that SCD carry out detailed analysis of the impact strategic plan in relation to the future need for counselling and development services.*

*The PRG recommends that the University's strategic planning process takes note of the impact of its specific plans on student services and on the counselling and development service in particular.*

*The PRG recommends that the University recognise the role played by SCD in assisting the University to fulfil its obligations and provide adequate resources accordingly.*

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

### **Recommendations for improvement made by the Unit in the SAR.**

The PRG endorses the proposed actions for improvement made by the Unit in the SAR as follows:

1. To support and empower students to enhance their experience in UCC and to work towards reaching their potential by
  - Increasing student Awareness of the Department and its Services;
  - Engaging in Joint Initiatives with Student Groupings;
  - Enhancing Peer Support systems.
  - Exploring a Student Advisory/Welfare Service; Mental Health Mentoring.
  
2. To lead the way in understanding and embracing the opportunities and challenges of an increasingly diverse student population by
  - Developing specific, credible responses to the four highest presenting student issues:
    - o Academic Anxiety;
    - o Depression;
    - o Bereavement;
    - o Family Matters.
  - Focussed Research Projects and Partnerships.

- Extending Programmes and Workshops aimed at Understanding and Embracing Diversity;
  - Engaging in ongoing dialogue with students, staff and the wider community.
3. To support and train UCC staff to be more effective in their dealings with students, particularly vulnerable students by
- Staff Training & Support Programmes – e.g. Identifying and Responding to Students in Distress
  - A student desire to have staff trained to deal with the vulnerable student
  - Exploring the counselling and interpersonal training needs of staff and how they might be met
4. To provide an open, happy, professional working environment for all staff of the Department where each can find expression and opportunities for development by
- Ongoing appreciation for and commitment to the Team Spirit
  - Affirming the Team's capacity for research activity
  - Confidence building, around good and effective structures and processes
  - Evolution of staff structures, and staff grades
  - Resolving Issues around Location, Space, Facilities and Budget
  - More appropriate rates of pay
  - Developing further internal communication systems
  - Receiving recognition and affirmation from College authorities
  - Communicating with clear vision
  - Making time available for team building initiatives.
5. To be a reliable and valued resource to UCC and the larger community in understanding and enhancing human performance and happiness by
- Working with UCC to develop a Critical Incident Response Protocol
  - Providing valued insights into the changing student population based on quality research
  - Continuing and expanding opportunities for Partnership across the campus and the wider community

**Recommendations for improvement made by PRG, in addition to those made by the Unit and endorsed by the PRG**

The PRG recommends that:

1. A review be undertaken of the staffing arrangements and salary structures required to meet current and future needs of the service.
2. The University examine the possibility of basing salaries on equivalent professional posts (e.g. psychologists) within the Health Service Executive, comparable national education institutions and the wider public sector.
3. Consideration be given to putting in place clear formal arrangements for deputising for the Head of SCD in his/her absence.
4. A review be undertaken of the role and responsibilities of the Executive Assistants, with a view to realistically assessing the needs of the service and putting in place the necessary resources.
5. The remuneration of administrative staff should be in line with the particular responsibilities of the post.
6. Urgent consideration be given to finding suitable alternative accommodation for the SCD.
7. The provision of adequate and appropriate toilet facilities is reviewed urgently and with a view to health and safety of both staff and students.
8. A security protocol be implemented as a matter of urgency in the immediate future.
9. Appropriate reception and waiting areas be provided as a matter of urgency.
10. The Head of SCD approves the appointment of the external supervisors, that formal contracts are established with the external supervisors and that twice-

yearly meetings are held between the external supervisors and the Head of SCD.

11. Resources be allocated to enable the development of team consultation, decision-making, sharing of skills, experience and knowledge among the team members and regular meetings of the Head of SCD with individual members of staff (full-time and part-time) to review and monitor work in progress.
12. Payment of sessional counsellors for clinical administration and other activities be taken into consideration in the context of the review of the staffing structure.
13. The holder of the proposed office with responsibility for student affairs and student services be a member of the University Management Group.
14. The expertise on mental health issues developed by the counsellors and psychiatrist be made available in an appropriate way to academic staff with a view to enhancing the understanding of mental health issues and to assist students to maximise the benefits of their education at university level and to achieve their academic goals.
15. The numbers of students being treated be monitored with a view to the long-term impact on resources.
16. Data analysis be completed on a regular basis and that specific results be communicated to various University bodies, as appropriate and relevant.
17. Colleges/Faculties provide opportunities for the SCD staff to make presentations to academic and administrative staff. Such discussions could enable SCD staff to be informed of relevant changes and developments across the University.
18. That some strategic thinking be carried out around development issues and on how this type of developmental work is delivered in the future.

19. The service be viewed as one for all students and should be more closely integrated with other student services and the academic sector.
20. SCD carry out detailed analysis of the impact strategic plan in relation to the future need for counselling and development services.
21. The University's strategic planning process takes note of the impact of its specific plans on student services and on the counselling and development service in particular.
22. The University recognise the role played by SCD in assisting the University to fulfil its obligations and provide adequate resources accordingly.

### **Conclusion**

The PRG thanked the staff of the QPU for the quality of the arrangements and the care taken during the review. The PRG commended the staff of the Student Counselling & Development Service for their active engagement with the quality review process and for the quality of the service provided to the students and the University.



## **Timetable for conduct of Peer Review Visit**

### **Student Counselling Service**

#### ***Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2005***

- 17.30 Meeting of members of the Peer Review Group  
Briefing by Director of Quality Promotion Unit, Dr. N. Ryan.  
Group agrees final work schedule and assignment of tasks for the following 2 days.  
Views are exchanged and areas to be clarified or explored are identified.
- 19.30 Dinner for members of the Peer Review Group, Head of Department and members of the co-ordinating committee responsible for preparation of the Self-Assessment Report.

#### ***Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2005***

- 08.30 Convening of Peer Review Group in Dúthalla, Student Centre

##### Consideration of Self-Assessment Report

- 09.00 Mr. Paul Moriarty, Head of Unit
- 09.30 Meeting with all members of the Unit
- 10.30 Tea/Coffee

Time allowed for private meetings of members of the Peer Review Group with members of staff.

- 10.45 Joe Heffernan  
11.00 Angela McKeown  
11.15 George Nagle  
11.30 Catherine Sheahan  
11.45 Eileen Brady  
12.00 Marian Browne  
12.15 Moya Geraghty  
12.30 Helen Prendergast

- 12.45 Working private lunch for members of the Peer Review Group
- 14.00 Visit to core facilities of Unit escorted by Mr. P. Moriarty
- 14.45 Sarah Simpkin, Welfare Officer of SU
- 15.00 Representatives of students of UCC.

- John Cuffe, *Science*  
Alan Egan, *Arts*  
Fergal Harrington, *Science*  
Philomena Heffernan Byrne, *Arts*  
Helena Khan, *Soc Science*  
Val Rice Nathaniel, *Science*

Stephen O Shea, *2<sup>nd</sup> Science*  
Mark O'Sullivan, *Social Science*  
Helena O' Driscoll, *Social Science*  
Eddie Ryan, *Youth and Community Studies*

15.40 Time for consideration of issues by PRG

16.00 Representatives of academic staff of UCC.

Francis Douglas, *Early Childhood Studies*  
Bettie Higgs, *Department of Geology*  
Mary Horgan, *Early Childhood Studies*  
Seamus O'Reilly, *Food Science Faculty*  
Colman Quain, *Faculty of Commerce*  
John Vaughan, *Computer Science*

16.20 Representatives of support staff of UCC

Suzanne Buckley, *Welfare Officer for International Students*  
Teresa Dwan, *Faculty of Science*  
Mary McNulty, *Careers Service*  
Mary O'Grady, *Disability Support*  
Carmel Quinlan, *Mature Student Officer*

16.50 Consideration of issues by PRG

***Friday 4<sup>th</sup> November 2005***

08.30 Convening of Peer Review Group in Dúthalla, Student Centre

09.00 Professor Paul Giller, Registrar & Vice-President for Academic Affairs

09.30 Ms. Carmel Cotter, Finance Office

09.45 Mr. Con O'Brien, Academic Secretary

10.00 Time for consideration of issues by PRG

10.30 Conference Call Dr. Patricia Coakley

10.45 Time for consideration of issues by PRG

12.30 Mr. Paul Moriarty, Head of Unit

13.00 Working private lunch for members of the Peer Review Group

14.00 Preparation of first draft of final report

16.30 Exit presentation made to all staff of the Unit by the Chair and members of the Peer Review Group, summarising the principal findings of the Peer Review Group.

The presentation was not for discussion at this time.

17.00 Consideration of issues by PRG and confirmation of arrangements for completion of drafting of report and finalisation of arrangements for speedy completion and submission of final

report.

18.00 Externs depart