

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

Quality Improvement / Quality Assurance

Peer Review Group Report

Secretary's Office

Academic Year 2000/2001

MEMBERS OF THE PEER REVIEW GROUP

Chair: Mr. Noel Keeley
Director of Human Resources
UCC

Int. PRG Member Professor Peter Woodman
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Ext. PRG Member Dr. Peter West
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Timetable for conduct of Peer Review Group Site Visit to review the Secretary's Office

Wednesday 9 May

Meeting of members of the Peer Review Group in Suite 1, Business Centre, Kingsley Hotel, Victoria Cross, Cork

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.

Dinner for members of the Peer Review Group and Head of Department and Departmental Co-ordinating Committee in Jacob's Restaurant

Thursday 10 May

Convening of Peer Review Group in M Farrell's office

Consideration of Self-Assessment Report and other inputs along with all department staff, including administrative and technical staff, as appropriate. Time will be allowed for private meetings of members of the Peer Review Group with members of staff.

Venue: Mr. M. Kelleher's office

Approximate Schedule:

09.00 – 09.30 meeting with all Staff

10.00 – 10.30 Meeting with Mr. Michael Kelleher, Secretary & Bursar

10.30 Coffee/tea

10.50 – 11.20 Meeting with Mr. Michael Farrell, Administrative Secretary

11.20 – 13.00 Meetings with individual members of staff:

11.20 Meeting with Mary Collins

11.40 Meeting with Aileen Finn

12.00 Meeting with Ruth Horgan

12.20 Meeting with Mary Killeen

Working lunch

Meeting with Registrar/Vice-President for Academic Affairs, Professor Aidan Moran

Meeting with B. Hartnett, member of staff

Visit to core facilities of Department

Meetings scheduled with institutional 'users' of the service,

Approximate schedule:

15.20 Jim Kelleghan, Pensions Manager

15.40 Kieran Dowd, Director of PE and Sport

16.00 Tony Perrott, Administrative Officer, Audio Visual Services

16.20 Maura O'Neill, Accommodation Officer

16.40 Denis MacDonald, Assistant Accommodation Officer

coffee/tea will be provided during session

Meeting of Peer Review Group to identify remaining aspects to be clarified and to finalise tasks for the following day

Working private dinner for members for the Peer Review Group in Suite 1, Business Centre, Kingsley Hotel, Victoria Cross, Cork

Friday 11 May

Convening of Peer Review Group in M. Farrell's office

Breakfast meeting with representatives of external users of the services provided by the Secretary's office.

Venue: President's Dining room, East Wing, UCC

1. Representative of Solrs: Mr. Frank Daly of Ronan, Daly, Jermyn
2. Representative of Insurance brokers: Mr. Patrick Cotter of Coyle Hamilton Ltd.
3. External Governor & Businessman: Mr. John O'Callaghan
4. Representative of estate agents: Mr. Frank Ryan of Collier, Jackson, Stops
5. External Governor & Businessman: Mr. Eddie Lucey

Meeting with Virginia Teehan, College Archivist

Meeting with Michael Farrell, Administrative Secretary

Preparation of first draft of final report

Coffee/tea will be provided during the session.

Working Lunch

Exit presentation, 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

Venue: Conference Room, Top Floor, Áras na MacLéinn

Completion of drafting of Report and finalisation of arrangements for speedy completion and submission of final report

Externs depart

INTRODUCTION

At the outset the Peer Review Group would like to compliment the Secretary's Office on the obvious hard work and effort that went into compiling the self assessment report. Clearly, the team of people concerned had a very firm grasp of how the self assessment process might benefit the office and there is significant evidence that some of the possible improvements identified have been implemented already.

METHODOLOGY

Given the overall number of people working in the Secretary's Office, the Peer Review Group functioned as a team throughout the review process and did not delegate specific responsibilities to specific members of the group. Initially, the group met with all of the staff from the Secretary's Office to discuss the process itself and the recommendations contained in the self assessment report. This meeting was most informative and served to guide the work of the Peer Review Group throughout the review process. Following this meeting, the Peer Review Group met with the Secretary / Bursar, the Administrative Secretary, the staff of the office (individually) and a number of other internal and external people who report to, or have contact with, the Secretary's Office. The Peer Review Group also toured the facilities and offices of the Secretary's Office.

The report was developed by discussing the findings of the review in the context of the established guidelines provided by the Quality Promotion Unit.

SELF ASSESSMENT REPORT

As mentioned above, the Peer Review Group was most impressed with the quality and content of the self assessment report, particularly given the fact that the Secretary's Office is one of the first administrative units in the University to go through the quality assurance process. The Peer Review Group did identify a number of possible considerations for the development of future reports that may be of benefit, specifically:

1. Swot Analysis - while the report provided the actual information required to complete a swot analysis, it was noted that this actual exercise was not engaged by the project team.
2. Focus Groups - the Peer Review Group noted the low response rate to the questionnaire (which we understand is the norm for all such reviews) and felt that it may be beneficial in the future to consider the use of focus groups as another way to collect data or information.
3. Organisational Structures – it was felt that the self assessment report could have contained more information with respect to how the Secretary's Office fits into the structure of the Secretary / Bursar's office and the University as a whole. On this point, it was noted that some areas which were identified as “institutional users” were in fact an integral part of the Secretary's Office itself (e.g. Physical Education, Audio Visual, Accommodations Office, Heritage Office, etc) and may have benefited from being included in the assessment and review process.

4. Similar to point 3 above, the Peer Review Group felt that the full rigours of the assessment and review process may have been a little elaborate for such a small group / unit.

FINDINGS

We have set out our comments on the self assessment report under the headings suggested by the Quality Promotion Unit.

DEPARTMENT DETAILS

The Peer Review Group felt that it was provided with a comprehensive overview of the role of the Secretary's Office. While it is recognised that the self assessment report recommends the development of a mission statement, the Peer Review Group felt that the Secretary's Office (and the other administrative departments who are scheduled to go through this process) would benefit from having to develop a mission statement and customer charter as part of the self assessment process itself.

DEPARTMENT PLANNING AND ORGANISATION

There was clear evidence to suggest that the Secretary's Office is planning and organising its work in a most effective manner. While the issue of communication was raised by some staff as an area requiring improvement, the Peer Review Group noted with satisfaction that efforts to address this particular issue, i.e. regular staff meetings, are already well underway. It was noted by staff that they found these meetings most beneficial and, without exception, all staff agreed they should continue and be given priority status as a means of communication in the office.

The Peer Review Group noted that the Secretary's Office has only existed in its current form for a relatively short period of time (2½ years). In that regard, the Peer Review Group was most impressed with how the office has established its role within the University in such a short period of time. It was felt that this success was due mainly to the strong management and leadership evident in the area.

LIST OF CLIENT GROUPS FOR THE DEPARTMENT

The Peer Review Group felt that the Secretary's Office had provided a most comprehensive list of client groups or customers and that all of these groups had been surveyed vis-à-vis the services provided. As stated previously, it was noted that some people listed as 'institutional users' were in fact part of the organisational structure of the Secretary's Office and that future reviews should probably consider them in this role rather than 'users'.

SERVICE STANDARDS

The Peer Review Group felt that it was obvious from the questionnaires returned that the services provided by the Secretary's Office are of a very high standard. Indeed, the Peer

Review Group noted that some of the qualitative comments provided on the questionnaires were most complimentary of the office and the people who work within it. Notwithstanding the above, the Peer Review Group felt that the Secretary's Office would benefit from defining specific service standards and in that regard, the recommendation in the self assessment report regarding the development of a customer charter was noted with satisfaction.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

The Peer Review Group noted the findings of the self assessment report in relation to staff development as very positive. It did however also recognise that scope in this area can be limited by lack of adequate resources and the absence of established policy and practice in relation to staff appraisal or personal development systems. It was noted however that such systems are scheduled to come into place as a result of the implementation of the most recent national pay agreement, the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness.

DEPARTMENTAL BUDGET

The Peer Review Group noted the concerns raised with regard to the overall budget and, in particular, to the issue of the legal budget where the responsibility for the budget rests with the Secretary's Office, while the full control for same does not. The Peer Review Group supported the concept of a central legal budget to be maintained within the Secretary's Office and agreed with the recommendation that the legal costs incurred by the University should be reported on an activity by activity basis. It was felt that this budget could not be cash limited.

CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE

As stated previously, the quality of the self assessment report provided clear evidence of the considerable time and effort invested in this process by the co-ordinating committee. The Peer Review Group also noted that members of the co-ordinating committee found the process to be most beneficial and that they felt it contributed to the overall development of the office.

OVERALL ANALYSIS

In developing the overall analysis of the self assessment report, the Peer Review Group decided to consider the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats influencing the Secretary's Office and comment further on a few specific issues raised during the one on one meeting with staff, clients and customers.

Strengths

In terms of strengths, the Peer Review Group identified the following:

- The office has the benefit of strong leadership and management.

- The staff of the office appear enthusiastic and well motivated and while a few issues were raised in respect to the working environment, all were very minor in nature.
- The Peer Review Group noted that the Secretary's Office has developed a most impressive and comprehensive website and in that regard the Peer Review Group felt that UCC is far ahead of its peers in both Ireland and the UK.

Weaknesses

- The lack of general knowledge within the University community in relation to the functions and services provided by the Secretary's Office was seen as a potential weakness, in that it was felt many would not be aware of, or appreciate, the many functions and services the office is responsible for delivering.
- The issue of being responsible for a budget for which the office does not have complete control was seen as a potential weakness.
- The Peer Review Group felt that there was some evidence of understaffing in terms of meeting the demands of specialist areas and, in particular, in relation to the implementation of the Freedom of Information Act. The Peer Review Group noted that UCC has not made a budget allocation for additional human and financial resources to support the implementation of the Freedom of Information Act and that prompt consideration might be given to this matter.

Opportunities

- The Peer Review Group felt that the Secretary's Office is well positioned to develop its role in relation to supporting the Governing Body in its function of governing the University, as this role evolves and develops in the coming years.
- The Peer Review Group also saw the implementation of the Freedom of Information Act as a solid opportunity for the Secretary's Office to continue to establish itself as the unit responsible for the legal affairs of the University.
- The Peer Review Group saw a significant opportunity in harnessing the potential synergy of all groups and units reporting into the Secretary's Office in terms of further developing its corporate identity within the University and contributing towards the development of the student experience.

Threats

- The budgetary situation of the office and the University as a whole was seen as a potential threat in that it could stifle initiative and innovation if not addressed.
- There was some evidence that units reporting to the Secretary's Office had a perception of increasing bureaucracy within the University system as a whole. Recent changes in the University may lend some credibility to this perception and it was felt that the decision making process would need to be clearly identified for all concerned so as to avoid frustration or confusion.
- The Peer Review Group noted that the Secretary's Office may be held accountable by its clients for matters that are outside of its control, e.g. circulating documentation to the Governing Body prior to meetings.
- Given the role of the Secretary's Office is not widely known and the given skills of the personnel in the office, the Peer Review Group felt that it may run the risk of becoming "a willing horse" in the management of projects that may not necessarily fit into its overall remit.
- The increasing litigious nature of the University community and society in general was seen as a significant threat for the future.

OTHER OBSERVATIONS

Servicing the Governing Body

- The Peer Review Group noted the huge amount of materials which need to be circulated to the Governing Body and various committees prior to meetings of same. While the Peer Review Group recognised that providing such information is critical, it was felt that a review of the information provided and the agenda structure for such meetings may be beneficial to ensure that current practices are not interfering with the overall effectiveness of such bodies.

Physical Space

- The Peer Review Group noted the challenges faced in regard to physical space in the Secretary's Office and in particular the inappropriate space for sorting and retrieving files.

Pension Administration

- The Peer Review Group noted that the Pensions function reports to the Secretary / Bursar. A number of issues in this area came up during the review. While these issues are not within the remit of this particular group, it was felt that these matters could be considered during a quality review of the Bursar's area.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Peer Review Group is of the view that the recommendations set out in the self assessment report are both appropriate and comprehensive in terms of addressing the areas identified for potential improvement in the Secretary's Office and would add the following recommendations in that regard:

1. That consideration be given to developing an initiative involving all areas reporting to the Secretary's Office aimed at enhancing the corporate identity of the office as one unit.
2. That consideration be given to developing the existing filing room in terms of adding rolling shelving or some other form of more efficient document storage and retrieval system.
3. That the use of the cellar area for storing and retrieving documents be discontinued as soon as possible.
4. That the decision not to dedicate additional human and financial resources towards the implementation of the Freedom of Information Act be reviewed.
5. That the planned staff meetings in the Secretary's Office aimed at enhancing communication continue on a regular basis and, where possible, are prioritised over other office business.
6. That the volume of information being provided to the Governing Body be reviewed with a view to possibly reducing same and that consideration be given to the introduction of an A and B type agenda format for Governing Body meetings, (i.e. A – items to be discussed, B – items for information only which will not be discussed)
7. That the Secretary's Office set specific deadlines for receiving materials going to the Governing Body and that these deadlines be adhered to by other departments and units of the University at all times.
8. That all departments and units who go through the quality assurance process might be encouraged, as part of the self assessment report, to develop a mission statement and customer charter.

CONCLUSION

In concluding, the Peer Review Group would like to congratulate the staff of the Secretary's Office for a job well done. The vision expressed for the office is most impressive in that it demonstrates the intention to move towards a team system whereby staff will be empowered to make decisions and encouraged to take on more responsibility. The Peer Review Group was left in no doubt that this vision will be achieved in time. We are hopeful that this report will assist in that regard.

The Peer Review Group would also like to thank all internal and external people who participated in this review. In particular, it would like to acknowledge the staff of the Secretary's Office for their hard work and dedication to this process and who were also most accommodating, friendly and participated fully in the exercise. The Peer Review Group would also like to thank and acknowledge Dr. Norma Ryan, Director of the Quality Promotion Unit, who provided excellent support and guidance throughout the process.

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Mr. Noel Keeley
Chair, PRG

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Professor Peter Woodman
Int. PRG Member

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