



EUA (European University Association)  
Institutional Evaluation Programme

INSTITUTIONAL QUALITY REVIEW OF THE UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE CORK

*EUA REVIEWERS' REPORT*

*February 2005*

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## **1. Introduction**

Irish universities are required under the 1997 Universities Act to establish and implement procedures for quality assurance, and arrange for a review of the effectiveness of these procedures “from time to time and in any case at least every 15 years”. For this purpose, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and all seven Irish universities represented by the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) engaged the European University Association (EUA) to undertake a review of quality assurance in Irish universities, with the participation of experts from Europe, the USA and Canada.

The review of all seven Irish universities therefore took place in a coordinated manner during the calendar year 2004 using the EUA institutional review methodology and guidelines. These guidelines were specially fine-tuned to meet the specific requirements of the Irish quality review. The process was designed to ensure that each individual university, the university system as a whole, and its stakeholders gained maximum benefit from comprehensive reviews by teams of experienced international quality assurance experts. This methodology also ensured that the procedures and processes in place in Irish universities were reviewed against best practice internationally.

The EUA has a strong international reputation in quality assurance having conducted institutional reviews of some 135 universities in some 33 countries during the past ten years. The tenth anniversary of the EUA programme was celebrated during 2004.

Under the joint IUQB/HEA commission, the EUA was requested to report on the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures in each university and the implementation of findings arising out of the application of those procedures, in the context of the university’s overall institutional decision making and strategic planning processes.

It was further requested that these key elements be placed within an institutional analysis, allowing the review teams to comment on institutional obstacles and success factors for an effective internal quality management and the university’s ongoing development.

## **2. Process**

Following a formal request from the President of University College Cork (UCC), the Steering Committee of the EUA institutional review programme appointed a team for the review of quality at UCC. This team was composed of:

- Hélène Lamicq, former President, University of Paris XII, France, as chair;
- Lee Fritschler, former President of Dickinson College, former Assistant Secretary for Post Secondary Education, Department of Education, USA;
- Bent Schmidt-Nielsen, former Rector, Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University, Copenhagen, Denmark;
- Lewis Purser, programme manager, European University Association, as secretary.

The EUA quality review methodology is guided by four central strategic questions. These questions, which have also been taken adopted by the IUQB in its Framework for Quality in Irish Universities, are:

- What is the university trying to do?
- How is the university trying to do it?
- How does the university know that it works?
- How does the university change in order to improve?

The EUA team used these questions as its framework when reviewing the quality assurance process at UCC. These questions ensure that quality is examined as part of the wider institutional strategic setting and put into its relevant context and perspective. The four questions were familiar to UCC, since they are at the core of the IUQB quality framework to which UCC also subscribes.

The process for the review of quality assurance at UCC began after the preparatory seminar for all Irish universities on 20 January 2004. During this seminar, the EUA review team members met the UCC Registrar and Director of Quality Promotion and set the timetable for the work. UCC then appointed a steering committee according to the EUA guidelines, which was chaired by a Vice-President. All members of the steering committee were also members of the UCC governing body. The steering committee met frequently and, while the self-evaluation report was being drafted, conducted a wide ranging and open consultation process across the university. As part of this preparatory phase, the Council of Deans and the Executive Management Group undertook a SWOT analysis of the UCC quality improvement and quality assurance procedures.

As an output of this process, UCC sent a 30 page Self-Evaluation Report (SER) to the EUA team in advance of the team's preliminary visit. This first visit took place from 9 to 11 May 2004. The SER was accompanied by annexes with detailed information on the Quality Review (QR) process. The EUA team appreciated the work done in the SER and considered it to be a good report. The team also received further relevant documents during its visits to UCC, including the University's Strategic Development Plan 2000 - 2005, more detailed student data and updates on important recent initiatives. Generally speaking, the team was impressed with the overall quality of the documentation, being both extensive and analytical in nature. Following the preliminary visit, the team did not request any additional information, a rather unusual occurrence which shows how comprehensive the SER report had been. The team then came to UCC for a main visit from 10 to 13 October 2004.

During its two visits to UCC, the team had meetings and discussions with:

- President, Registrar and Vice-Presidents
- Deans and the Executive Management Group
- Director of Quality Promotion
- Self-assessment steering committee
- Governing Authority
- Student Union

- Staff and students of the Faculties of Arts, Commerce, Medicine and Health, and Science
- Staff and graduate students from research institutes in Biosciences and Humanities
- Staff and students from five units (English, Government, Microbiology, Office of Buildings & Estates, Physical Education & Sport) which had been reviewed as part of UCC's quality review process
- Central office and support unit staff members
- External and internal members of the peer review groups which reviewed the five units listed above
- Representatives of external stakeholders from business and industry as well as from the local community.

The EUA methodology required that that the team maintain a broad institutional approach to quality, including issues not directly linked to the formal quality review process but which can affect the quality of the university's work in various fields. As part of this approach, the EUA team insisted on meeting the various UCC Faculties and Institutes in their own daily places of work across the university.

The EUA review team would like to thank the UCC President Prof. Gerard Wrixon, the Academic Vice President Prof. Áine Hyland, the former Registrar & Vice-President for Academic Affairs Prof. Aidan Moran (who retired from UCC during the summer of 2004), and all the staff, students and external stakeholders for their warm welcome and for many interesting and useful discussions during its preliminary and main review visits. The team especially wishes to thank Dr. Norma Ryan, Director of Quality Promotion, and her staff for their constant support and attentions.

### **3. Institutional context for quality assurance**

UCC is a medium sized university which has grown substantially over the last ten years, from 10,225 students in 1994 to over 14,800 students in 2003/04. The university is situated in the second largest city in the Republic of Ireland. Cork is also the country's main industrial and commercial centre outside Dublin. Founded in 1845, UCC has developed a strong regional identity and ownership, drawing the majority of its students from the south of Ireland and playing a crucial role in the life of the city and region. At a time when the overall numbers of new students entering universities in Ireland are stagnating, the percentage of students expressing first preferences to study at UCC increased in 2004 by 10%. The university is now seeking to position itself more visibly in the wider competitive national and international contexts.

These regional, national and international dimensions are enshrined in the UCC mission statement, which states that UCC will "create, preserve and communicate knowledge and, thereby, contribute to the cultural, social and economic well-being of the people of Munster, Ireland and the world."

UCC is currently strengthening its cooperation with other educational providers in the city and region, notably the Cork Institute of Technology, in order to develop a seamless spectrum of educational opportunity for all learners in Cork and the Munster area. This vision is shared and supported by a number of important social and economic stakeholders who are encouraging UCC to play the leading role in developing such opportunities.

UCC has a strategic development plan for the period 2000-2005, entitled "Agenda for Excellence", which emphasises the importance of rounded undergraduate programmes to develop essential skills and cultivated minds. At the same time, the strategic plan promotes strong postgraduate programmes with enhanced facilities to attract and support outstanding students. The "Agenda for Excellence" also emphasises quality improvement strategies in human resource management, recognising that success is largely dependant on the individual and collective performances of staff.

As a university, UCC is built around a traditional disciplinary structure, with a very broad spectrum of academic fields and disciplines on offer. The basic structural unit is the academic Department, of which there are 61. These Departments are of widely differing sizes, and grouped variously in Schools, Faculties and other units. Each Department is currently a cost centre and as such is competing directly for resources with other Departments in the same Faculty and across the university. For example, the EUA team was informed that each Department negotiates directly with the Executive Management Group regarding the recruitment and filling of positions, and deals directly with the Library regarding new acquisitions. All Heads of Department appointed prior to 1996 can stay in that position until their retirement, and currently over half of the Heads fall into this category. Some of these Heads may still be in place for many years to come. As far as the EUA team could ascertain, students and staff identify most strongly with their Department.

As can be seen, the current structure of the university creates a number of challenges for the longer-term strategic and daily operational management of the institution. These challenges have increased since the implementation of the 1997 Universities Act, which obliges universities to develop strategic plans and gives increased responsibilities to the President as Chief Officer and Accounting Officer. Various methods have been tried to meet some of these challenges, such as strengthening the intermediary structures of Faculties and the roles of the Deans. The EUA team was informed that the Deans now play an increasingly important role in the budgetary process, and have become the most important decision making group regarding academic resources. However, the team perceived that the importance of this position did not yet appear to be fully understood across all units at UCC.

Faculty structures across UCC would appear to have developed heterogeneously, both in size and function. Some of these Faculties have not yet become the necessary intermediary level of reference in terms of passing coherent messages from the ground up to the leadership, or for the strategic allocation of resources across a related group of disciplines. The EUA team felt it was necessary to strengthen the capacity for intermediary action between the basic teaching and research units of the university, and the central levels of university governance. Too many responsibilities seemed to be Department-based, while not enough capacity existed at the Faculty level. The specific attributes and powers at intermediary level are however only partially defined, although a number of Faculties are certainly on the right path. This has consequences for effective decision making, as well as for the allocation of financial and human resources.

The recent rapid growth of UCC has made these structural challenges more evident and pressing. These structures, which have grown up incrementally over many years in response to earlier demands for teaching and research, have been further destabilised by unequal rates of growth in student numbers across the disciplines. Combined with the effects of the current resource allocation model, these structures also make it difficult for Departments to work together at undergraduate and post-graduate levels, for example to provide joint modules or to coordinate library purchases. There are increasing demands today for innovative inter-disciplinary teaching programmes and research teams. The current departmental structure of UCC no longer appears to offer a suitable framework for responding to these new demands in teaching and research. The university must change in order to guarantee its continued success and relevance in the years to come, and these current structures do not encourage such change or allow sufficient flexibility in responding to new patterns of higher education. The President has therefore asked a steering group to lead a consultation process across UCC regarding a proposed reorganisation of university structures, and to present proposals and recommendations for this in February 2005.

Notwithstanding these challenges now facing the university, the EUA team formed the clear impression that a large majority of UCC students are very happy with their university and indeed would recommend it to their peers. These students likewise clearly seem to appreciate the close relations they have with the UCC staff and leadership, and

are full of praise for the campus, despite the need for further capital development and the current intense occupation rates of buildings.

The university has started a very ambitious capital development and buildings programme over the last five years, with many improvements to the campus. At the time of the EUA visits, a new building for medicine was in an advanced stage of development, and the construction of a new graduate library was at an advanced stage of planning. These, as well as a number of other recent developments, including a new Student Centre, mean that, despite the ongoing lack of space, the campus is a busy, exciting, as well as attractive place to study and work. The magnificent new Lewis Glucksman Gallery, which was opened during the week of the team's main visit, shows that there is a clear vision of the role of the university in the cultural and artistic life of the city and region.

UCC has also taken a number of steps to modernise the teaching and learning process, including the introduction of a modular structure for all undergraduate courses. This has been useful from several perspectives, not least that of transparency, in providing better information for students, academics and administrators. However, it appears to have been implemented in a variety of ways across the university; the EUA team was informed that, in some cases, modules consist of 15 or 20 ECTS credits, representing one quarter or even one third of a year's work. It would also appear that, in other cases, groups of modules of various sizes have been "locked" together. In some few cases, previously existing curricula have been re-labelled along ECTS lines, without taking the modular structure into account. Such cases effectively reduce or remove completely any possible flexibility for staff or students and defeat one of the main purposes of modularisation itself.

The research and technology transfer work of UCC has also been upgraded in recent years, with the creation of the position of Vice-President for Research Policy & Support. A major element of UCC's strategy has been the development of research institutes and centres in selected subject areas, matching the university's main strengths and linked to national developmental priorities. UCC has consistently been successful in winning important research contracts through the national research funding channels. An important role of the Vice-President for Research Policy & Support is to support staff applying for research funding, in the preparation of proposals and the financial management of these.

While this strategy has been successful in terms of winning research contracts in specific targeted areas, the EUA team also looked to see how research is encouraged and fostered in other areas at UCC. Most research teams at UCC are relatively small, and the need to ensure critical mass and sustainability should perhaps be addressed more explicitly, also concerning the new institutes and centres. The team was informed that there were few organised opportunities for researchers from different disciplines to meet each other across the university, and there was a clear need for greater structure in the organisation of doctoral and post-graduate research programmes, bringing young researchers together to stimulate and encourage each other in their various fields of work. As the numbers of these young researchers and scientists at UCC continue to increase, greater attention will



need to be paid to the conditions and structures in which they are working, starting with PhD students at which level young talent can be encouraged to stay at the university or otherwise.

The strategy for the development of UCC is ambitious. There is undoubtedly much excellent education and research taking place across the university. However, the team observed that the management structures and methods across UCC, in particular at intermediary level, did not yet appear sufficiently well embedded to ensure a clear link between the top-level strategies and the grass roots activities, mutually feeding one into the other. As in any university undergoing important change processes, it is a clear challenge to combine strong growth with evolving structures over a short period of time. However, at UCC the different roles of the various offices and committees did not always seem fully defined, and there seemed to be many university-wide bodies who felt it was their brief to cover everything and who operated on the margins of their core competences. For the EUA team, the role of the quality review process therefore becomes even more important, since it must provide the framework within which the teaching, research and other activities of each unit are evaluated against the university's mission, vision and strategy. The QR process must also ensure the data and feedback which can inform ongoing strategic management and lead to clearer and stronger decision making processes.

The quality review process is also important in that it provides a framework within which the word and concept of quality is being built into discussions at many places and levels across the university. No major changes can occur in open public systems such as universities without the benefit of these discussions. As policy moves from decision to implementation, previously hidden constraints will emerge, resulting in further policy changes, more or less radical. The discussions at UCC provoked by the quality review process will help resolve other wider issues through debate and experience. This process is now underway at UCC and can be expected to yield positive results over time.

The President has a clear vision, but the EUA team did not encounter many other visions of the future of the university and its different components for the next five to ten years. The team did not expect to find one shared global vision of the future, but a number of converging ideas which together would help create a common set of explicit institutional objectives for the mid to long term. This did not appear to be the case, making it difficult for the team to situate the quality review process. Without this shared vision, it is also likely to be difficult for the various components of the university to situate themselves. In the opinion of the EUA team, any shared vision of the future should be built on the wide range of competences which already exist at UCC and lead to an overall strategy for implementing the internal changes required.

The team therefore wonders what choices UCC can make in reinforcing its profile over the coming years, a profile which the team feels should be expressed more clearly than in the 2000-2005 Strategic Plan. In particular, the team feels that UCC will need to position itself more clearly in the new environment of modern Ireland, in the European higher education area, and further afield.

#### **4. Quality assurance procedures**

##### *Background*

The 1997 Universities Act requires all Irish universities to create an internal quality assurance system. This law also gives the overall framework for this system:

- evaluations should be conducted at regular interval and not less than once in ten years
- all Departments and, where appropriate Faculties, and any service provided by the university should be evaluated
- teaching, research and the provision of other services should be the subjects of evaluation.

Led by UCC, the Irish universities have collectively been working since 1995 to develop a common quality assurance framework. This framework was formalised in 2003 through the creation of IUQB, and ensures that the universities' legislative obligations are met and that the evaluations are undertaken in a useful and systematic way, working towards an internal quality culture at all universities across the country.

As part of this framework, UCC has developed a strong quality assurance process at the Department level and has initiated this process with energy and determination. Work began in 1998 when the Governing Body set up a sub-committee to lead this process, called the Quality Promotion Committee. This Committee is chaired by the President and includes members from all relevant groups at the university.

A six-year schedule of quality reviews was established, commencing in 2000/01. The process is therefore several years old now, and by the start of the 2004/05 academic year had reviewed approximately 40 of the 56 academic Departments, 17 out of 27 support units, as well as a number of schools, centres and interdisciplinary academic programmes. The pace of work has been intensive and large numbers of people across the university have been directly involved. The QR process has therefore become both visible and well known in a short space of time.

##### *Process*

The quality review (QR) process at UCC follows the IUQB framework in that units undertake a self-assessment, then submit themselves for review by a group of relevant peers, who then present a report on the work of that unit with recommendations for improvement. This report goes to the Dean, who can comment on it and can also influence the implementation of its recommendations. Following the review, the unit should ensure that the recommendations for improvement are acted upon on an on-going basis. The process is actively coordinated by the Quality Promotion Office at UCC, under the control of the Quality Promotion Committee.

The QR process is seen by the units as a demanding process, requiring a lot of investment in terms of time and effort, but which works well in a large number of places across the university. The EUA team heard many positive comments regarding the benefits of the self-assessment phase, gathering data about what the unit does, evidence about how it does it, and whether it works. The process of undergoing review by external peers was also reported as being important and useful. It should be remembered that for most units at UCC, this was their first experience of both self-assessment and external evaluation. The process has therefore been taken on board by very many different units of the university and used in a variety of ways. Many of these units have adopted the process internally as a catalyst for change and development, while only a small number tend to regard it as an obligation which they must reluctantly meet.

One clear benefit of the QR process is that, through its participatory methodology and relevance to all aspects of work, it has brought together different categories of staff which previously might not have cooperated in such a structured and systematic way. The QR process has systematically included the work and role of the non-academic staff in examining units across the university, giving them a clearer sense of their place in the structures and providing better information about the work of the unit. This is apparently the first time that these categories of staff have been involved in such an exercise and as such is also most important; the EUA team was informed that this had been both appreciated and found useful by the staff in question.

Furthermore, the QR process has obliged units to look more objectively at their relationship with students. Traditionally these are thought to have been very good at UCC, but with little evidence to support this supposition. The QR process has allowed this issue to be approached in a more objective way. However, there has not been widespread success in getting students involved directly in the QR process itself; indeed most students at UCC would not appear to be aware of the process at all, despite the best efforts of the Quality Promotion Unit, the Student Union and other bodies. This may be partly due to the absence of a student evaluation or feedback culture at UCC – the team was surprised to find that there are no university-wide procedures for evaluation by students of teaching, courses or modules. There would also appear to be a generally low level of engagement by “ordinary” students in university issues: participation rates in the Student Union’s own elections are very low and it can take many months to complete the nominations process for class representatives across the university.

The EUA team expressed some concern at the composition of the peer review teams. These usually include two experts from other Departments at UCC, including the review team chair, as well as at least two external experts, one of whom is often from another Irish university, and one of whom must be from an international institution/body. The Department under review nominates a panel of peer reviewers, from which the members are appointed by the Quality Promotion Committee. Only the chair of the peer review group is not nominated by the Department. The EUA team suggests that more external members be included on the teams, especially from universities outside Ireland. The team would also like to stress the need to remove any link between the Department under review and the choice of peer reviewers. This is necessary in order to maintain the

independence and objectivity of the review process. The small size of many Departments likewise requires that peers be nominated by others, since such a Department's own pool of potential reviewers may in some cases be limited. The Deans could play a useful role here, or an expert external to UCC agreed by both Department and Dean.

The EUA team received mixed reports about the usefulness and success of the follow up activity after the peer review. Although this phase of quality improvement should be the primary goal of the process, not all units found this satisfactory or useful. The distinction may lie in the levels of expectations generated prior to the peer review, and to the types of recommendations and suggestions made in the peer review report. Little regard seems to have been paid by most peer review teams to the resource implications of the recommendations they made, nor of the relative priorities, when these were expressed, of the various recommendations. Thus in a number of cases the implementation phase has been difficult, if not impossible, and some staff have been disappointed. Clear expectations were also held regarding possible responses from the university leadership, and in a number of cases these were reportedly not met.

These expectations need to be more clearly managed in the future, and the terms of reference of the peer review teams improved to ensure that their recommendations fit realistically into the context of the university, also in a long-term perspective. It may also be useful for these recommendations to be divided into those which require additional resources and those which do not. Whether resources are available or not, the university needs to respond to the reports and to show that the work undertaken has been noticed and appreciated, and will also feed into wider strategic considerations, even if the desired resources may not currently be available.

#### *Other mechanisms*

As in all quality-conscious universities, a variety of other mechanisms exist at UCC by which the university can monitor and improve the quality of its various activities. Apart from the formal QR process, these also include:

- The use of external examiners to monitor the contents of programmes and courses, as well as standards and procedures for student assessment
- Formal course evaluations for new academic programmes
- External professional accreditation for certain programmes
- Teaching quality promotion, including a series of university awards and incentives, and a recent high-profile initiative creating a post-graduate diploma in teaching and learning, for the voluntary upgrading of staff skills
- Research reviews and evaluations, including the development of initiatives to strengthen support to researchers in a wide range of fields.

This list is not exhaustive, and these mechanisms are well explained in the UCC SER. As already noted, one mechanism notably missing from this list is the systematic evaluation of teaching by the students, although this has been developed in some units over the last few years.

## **5. General observations regarding quality assurance at UCC**

Since the QR process can be considered a learning process for both the university and each unit undergoing review, it is important for exchange and feedback to take place after each peer review report has been received. In particular, the university needs to show that the efforts made by the unit have been appreciated and found useful, and for the unit to place the outcomes in the wider institutional context. The university should also respond explicitly to issues which may have been raised in the report which cannot be met by the unit alone, even in cases where additional resources are not forthcoming.

A vital mechanism for quality assurance has until recently not been available at UCC or any other Irish university. Since the most important element in ensuring the quality of teaching, learning and research is the work of the individual member of staff, the use of a well developed individual performance management and monitoring system would appear necessary. The EUA team understands that the introduction of such a system is now possible in Irish universities, thanks to a breakthrough in collective industrial relations negotiations. This is good news in that it may help improve not just collective but also individual performance and activities. It may also bring in the necessary possibilities to offer increased incentives and rewards to top performers, or at the other end of the scale, the necessary sanctions for poor achievers. The only such incentive at the moment is the hope for promotion, and this can only happen when positions become available, which in some cases may mean waiting a long time. This situation was repeatedly mentioned to the EUA team during its visits to UCC, and has obviously been the subject of much internal discussion.

Interdisciplinary studies are an important element of a quality education. The team was pleased to note that inter-disciplinary work is underway throughout the university, indeed much more so than the team had been led to believe. However, these endeavours are not always recognised as such, and since they do not correspond to current structures, are often being developed without coherent support, and on the basis of individual contacts and cooperation. Current structures constitute an obstacle to the more systematic development of such initiatives, and also to student participation; e.g. some departments do not allow students to choose small and relevant study modules or courses from other departments. This is also evidenced by the impression that most inter-disciplinary programmes do not seem to fit into the QR process and therefore have not been evaluated in the same way, although some reviews of interdisciplinary programmes have been conducted separately to reviews of departments and others are planned in the near future. The proposed merger of several groups of small Departments should be one way to help overcome some of these challenges. In any case, the team would encourage UCC to develop clear strategies for pursuing inter-disciplinary activities in both teaching and research.

Active international cooperation and exchanges are likewise an important element of ensuring quality across the range of university activities, allowing for formal and informal benchmarking, the sharing of best practice, the active exchange of ideas and methods across cultural and other boundaries, and the general exposure of the institution

to alternative ways of thinking. These can add significantly to the quality of the work of both students and staff at a university. However, internationalisation is not mentioned as a policy in the UCC “Agenda for Excellence”. The team considers that an important aspect of quality is to have and implement a clear and explicit internationalisation policy, including the internationalisation of curricula and the mobility of staff and students.

Discussions regarding student mobility at UCC left the EUA team with the impression that this was seen first and foremost as a tool for generating income from incoming non-EU students, at least in some Departments. Such an impression can also be obtained for the entire Irish higher education system from the recent OECD report. Despite obvious signs of increasing internationalisation at UCC, the EUA team detected an unequal drive to encourage Irish students to become more international in their approach and to include a study abroad period during their time at the university. Given some exceptions, e.g. Law and Commerce, the team also found little widespread evidence of incentives for internationalising study programmes or developing foreign language skills for students and staff.

There appeared to be substantial obstacles to increasing such international mobility, including the necessary funding. In most Departments visited, the team perceived a lack of knowledge of HE systems and developments in other countries, potentially leading to unnecessary complications for the recognition of study credits or qualifications of students coming or returning from universities abroad. The development of foreign language skills and competences does not appear to be stimulated sufficiently across wide sections of the university, despite being an explicit objective of the Strategic Plan. This may result in UCC graduates being disadvantaged on the European and international labour markets. Students themselves were only minimally aware of European-wide developments in higher education. The strong influence of the Bologna Process and the European Research Area in most European countries seemed to be a marginal issue in discussions about quality at UCC. This lack of engagement may likewise result in the relative isolation of Irish students and universities, and in continued under-exposure to multicultural experiences.

The current operations of the QR process have some limitations. One of these is due to the focus on individual Departments and units, as required by the 1997 Universities Act. While this focus is certainly useful for the unit in question, it may not necessarily cover in an adequate way some of the broader issues which might be identified by focusing on a School, Faculty or other set of units. Examples of this wider QR focus do exist, e.g. at the Faculty of Medicine and Health, and the experience has been positive. However, the reviews of Faculties, which had been scheduled for 2004/05 and 2005/06 have apparently now been removed from the agenda until after the restructuring process is completed. If the restructuring process is to help bring together groups of Departments, then, as one input to the restructuring process, it may be useful to address such groups already through the QR process, even if their exact composition changes later. Although there is a legal obligation to evaluate individual Departments, the continued focus of the entire QR process on individual units only serves to encourage the assumption that these units will

continue to exist as they are. Since there are currently 61 of these, the current process could also be seen as an obstacle to structural change.

Given the intensive inputs into the QR process, the EUA team had expected to find a more systematic use of the outputs of the self-evaluations and peer reviews. However, the team only found a few people at university level with a clear overview of the results coming out of the many reviews of departments and other units. There did not appear to be any formal synthesis or central analysis of these results either, nor rapid feedback to the different units. Given the abundance and quality of the documentation which has been generated, the team had also expected to find greater evidence of the use of these outcomes in the ongoing strategy of the university, especially for use by the Governing Body and the Executive Management Group. Although all reports are circulated on receipt to top university management and annually to the Governing Body, neither the EMG nor the Governing Body appears to be provided regularly with a usable overview of the results of the QR process, the outcomes of which should be seen as one vital ingredient contributing to strategic reflection.

The links between the formal QR process and other elements which contribute to quality across the university, as mentioned above, did not always seem clear to the EUA team. Many such initiatives take place in a variety of ways across UCC but resulting synergies did not appear to be as important as might be expected. All these mechanisms should, in their different ways, contribute to an institution-wide ethos of quality culture, in which staff and students are aware of the role each mechanism can play in improving the work of the university.

The team observed a certain disconnect between the QR process, the development and implementation of strategic management tools, and the incipient restructuring process. This disconnect is certainly linked to the planned timing of the QR process over a six year period, which does not allow for easy adaptation to rapidly changing external and internal factors. This disconnect also exists in other universities in Ireland and elsewhere. Whatever the reasons, this appears to be a challenge if the university is to be successful in making the fundamental changes which it is now setting itself. These three processes must be reconciled. At the time of the EUA team visits, they appeared to be running in parallel without necessarily engaging with each other.

For example, the team would encourage greater long term planning of human resources. Which positions will become available over the next five years? And how should these be used to achieve what UCC wants to do? Given that the current resource allocation system does not allow for much prioritisation or collaboration between cost centres, the distribution of positions is one crucial area where the university can have a long-term strategic effect.

Even with the current difficult financial situation, a connection must also be made between the QR process, strategic management and the resource allocation process. These three key processes are all currently operating on different timeframes. The majority of recommendations arising from the QR process and which do not require extra

resources have been followed up. The balance between these elements is not easy to find but has to be faced. There is a growing risk of disillusionment by UCC staff and departments with the QR process itself, especially in times of budgetary constraint where resources for quality improvement are not easily available. The EUA team was made aware of very real and shared feelings of frustration across some parts of the university regarding the inability to ensure follow-up on some of the quality improvement measures identified through the review process, even in units where this process is recognised as useful and pertinent.

As acknowledged in the SER, the main weakness in the QR procedures at UCC today would appear to be an underlying lack of confidence in the process, owing in part to a lack of transparency in the handling of the outcomes and the recommendations of the reviews.

Many of the above issues can be addressed, at least partially, by improved internal communication across UCC. There would appear to be an urgent need to ensure better understanding of the precise roles and functions of different parts of the university. As already stated in this report, it may also be useful for UCC to develop a vision of its ongoing development and goals which can be shared not only by the entire leadership team but also by a broad section of staff and students.

## **6. Recommendations**

On the basis of these different observations, the EUA team would like to make a series of general recommendations aimed at different parts of the QR process and institutional development, and at a variety of levels.

- Link the three central processes underway at UCC – strategic planning, restructuring and Quality Review – in order to ensure greater coherence and better understanding of these across the university;
- Focus the main thrust of the QR process at cognate groups of Departments e.g. Faculties or Schools, in order to obtain more structured outputs;
- Include more external reviewers on the peer review groups and remove all links between the Department under review and the choice of peer reviewers: involve Faculties and Schools more actively in this;
- Formulate an overview from results of the QR process and use this as a strategic tool for the development of priorities and the allocation of both human and financial resources;
- Ensure discussion in the Governing Body of the strategic vision of the future of the university, and for this vision to be expressed in terms of priorities;



- Develop interdisciplinarity to strengthen research competences and to attract students to interesting new areas of study;
- Develop internationalisation and use it as a lever for change;
- Seek out and develop more strategic alliances with other Irish institutions and networks;
- Put in place a fully integrated management information system, and use it as a basis for strategic management and change;
- Examine further potential and more coherent uses of IT across UCC for the benefit of staff and students, especially for access to documentation;
- Make special efforts to ensure post-graduate students, especially doctoral students, have opportunities to join collective and transversal structures and teams across the university, and thus to become the researchers and faculty members of the future which UCC and Ireland will need.

## **Envoi**

The EUA team would like to thank the University once again for the excellent arrangements made for its visits and work. The EUA team was delighted to have been asked to undertake the review of quality assurance at a university in such a process of change as UCC, and to discuss with staff, students, and external stakeholders the strategic challenges now facing the university.

The team recognizes the real competences which exist at UCC but considers that these are currently too fragmented across the institution for the expected overall benefits to emerge. UCC as an institution likewise needs to be more aware of the rapidity of the change processes taking place in European and international higher education. Facing these challenges successfully presupposes that the university community across UCC engages itself in the necessary organizational, structural and cultural changes needed in order to maintain and develop the university's own position.

The two visits have left the team with the impression that an enormous task has begun at the university. The challenge is great and the stakes are high. The EUA team is convinced that the university has the qualities and potential to reach these goals, and that the QR process can help. The team trusts that its inputs can be useful in assisting the university, and wishes the university well for the next stage of its development.