

UCC Student Reviewer Handbook

A complete how-to for student reviewers



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

**Fheabhsú Cáilíochta
Quality Enhancement**

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Student Reviewer in 2018/2019

Updated in 2022

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1. INTRODUCTION

What is quality? Why are we trying to enhance it? And what does it mean for us, UCC students, in practical terms? 'Quality' translates into the standards of teaching, research, training, service provision and facilities at University College Cork, which overall impact on our student experience, as well as adding value to our qualifications, future employability and overall personal and professional development. To put it simply, the higher the quality of professional practices at UCC, the better our student experience will be; the more valuable our obtained qualifications become; the more rounded we will be as individuals, citizens and professionals; and, finally, the more employable we will be. Thus, by proactively sharing our insights, commendations and recommendations on the current standards of teaching, research, training, service provision and facilities in our university, we are contributing to Quality Enhancement at UCC, a better student experience for us all and better opportunities for our future and for more sustainable societies.

The Quality Enhancement Unit (QEU) develops and manages the University's quality processes to support the achievement of the University's strategic objectives for excellence and to enable a culture of quality based on a commitment to enhancement, as outlined in UCC's Strategic Plan 2017-2022 and still underpinning current recent strategic planning (UCC 2022):

"By embedding a strong quality-enhancement ethos, we will use our quality processes to ensure a culture and experience of best practice in the delivery of our academic mission, demonstrating our commitment to continuous evolution and improvement (p.23)"

Contributing to the Quality Review process as a student reviewer, on behalf of other students, **does** have a positive impact for the student body for years to come. As a student reviewer you are an active member of the review panel and, in turn, give voice to the over twenty thousand students enrolled at UCC - make sure to include your voice in the process.

2. WHAT IS A QUALITY REVIEW?

A quality review is a long cyclical process, which starts with a self-evaluation phase by each unit under review (e.g. a School, a Department, an administrative service and so on); it continues with the assessment of the Peer Review Panel and it concludes with the creation of a Quality Enhancement Plan by the unit under review to implement the Panel's recommendations and share with the university community, so pursuing the ongoing enhancement of the unit's professional practices and services.

2.1 SELF-EVALUATION REPORT (SER)

The Self-Evaluation process and its output, the Self-Evaluation Report, help enable the unit to reflect upon and develop a collective knowledge and understanding of its professional practices and their impact upon students' learning and experience. It is about genuine reflection and analysis of the Unit's thinking, values, structures and professional practices and actions. This involves the evaluation of several important items of evidence:

- What does the Unit/School do?
- Why does the Unit/School do it (values, belief, assumptions, aspirations)?
- How does the Unit/School know this is important/worthwhile?
- What evidence does the Unit/School have to support this opinion?

Information contained in the SER includes a history of the unit/school for context, followed by the unit/school's vision or mission which should align and support the objectives of UCC's Strategic Plan 2017 – 2022. This is followed by information on key developments, issues and opportunities. Statistical data on the unit/school structure, teaching, learning and assessment is also included along with a programme portfolio assessment. The unit/school needs to also include a Good Practice Case-Study (e.g. something the unit/school does really well). Importantly, the Unit must clearly outline in the report its own recommendations for quality enhancement arising from the whole self-evaluation process, as well as the identification of its points of strength.

2.2 PANEL'S SITE VISIT

The site visit by the Peer Review Panel members lasts for a number of days depending on the chosen format of the site visit. This was greatly conditioned by the governmental regulations to limit the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, shifting from an on-campus mode (until 2019/2020), through a remote mode (in 2020/21), to then settle for a hybrid mode (since 2021/22).

On this occasion, the Peer Review Panel meets with various representatives of the unit under review, as well as with external and internal stakeholders and senior officers of the University. The Panel's function is to assess the unit's performance in light of both the Unit's Self Evaluation Report and the insights shared by all the participants to the Site Visit (*including the student reviewer/s*), considered against the backdrop of inter/national good practices and advancements in the field. This reflection will result in a report formulated by the Peer Review Panel, which contains a critical assessment of the unit, commendations (positive appraisal of the unit's strengths) and recommendations (suggestions for change and/or improvement). The latter focuses on enhancement-based outcomes that are responsive, creative,

enabling and student-centered.

The Peer Review Panel is made up of senior internal academic/professional services peers (university staff members), external academic/professional services peers, who are expert in the area under review and, last but not least, students themselves, as student reviewers. The student body also contributes to review processes even at earlier stages of the review process, such as the self-evaluation process. For example, student feedback is collected in a range of ways: surveys, questionnaires, focus groups collaboratively organised by the units under review and the Quality Enhancement Unit prior to preparing the Self-Evaluation Report. Registered UG and PG students also meet peer review panels during a site visit to ensure their perspectives are directly listened to by Panels. Staff members of the Quality Enhancement Unit also coordinate each unit's review process, provide support throughout and participate for the whole duration of the Site Visit to assist the panel up to the drafting of the report. Overall, the QEU is available to help with any queries you may have throughout this process.

3. STUDENT REVIEWERS

3.1 What is a Student Reviewer?

A Student Reviewer is a member of the Peer Review Panel, who represents one of the main stakeholders in the University: the student body.

While that may seem like a daunting task, remember, as a student, you are already qualified to represent the student voice with your contribution that draws on your experience of being a student and your relevant prior experience as a student representative and/or roles in student societies, university committees, student union and other comparable positions.

Usually, there is a student reviewer on each review panel, so make sure that you contribute to represent your fellow students. The Quality Enhancement Unit greatly values your voice and encourages you to express your views through the quality review process.

If you wish to candidate yourself for the role of Student Reviewer for any of the forthcoming quality reviews, contact the Quality Enhancement Unit to express your interest in this role. There is an application process for each academic year to form a Student Reviewer Panel, to choose the most suitable candidate as a Student Reviewer each time.

3.2 What is expected of you as a Student Reviewer

The University and, more specifically, its Quality Enhancement Unit, takes a student-centered approach and, hence, places great importance on engaging students as active partners in the quality enhancement

process. The quality review process, thus, offers a great opportunity for students to contribute to enhancing and improving the student experience at this university. This can happen simply by informing yourself and speaking up on behalf of your fellow students. Therefore, make sure you engage in the documentation sent to you before the committee meets; ensure you have a rounded knowledge of the area you are reviewing and do ask questions, if you are unsure.

By including the student voice in these reviews, we are actively engaging in the process of improving the student experience within UCC's academic units (schools/departments/research centres, ...) and services, as well as indirectly increasing the overall value of our qualifications obtained from UCC, our personal and professional development opportunities and our chances of future employability.

Remember that you are not being graded in these reviews, the student voice is welcome, encouraged and greatly appreciated.

4. A WALK THROUGH THE QUALITY REVIEW PROCESS

4.1 Beforehand

- You make an application for the Student Reviewer Panel to the Quality Enhancement Unit and receive appropriate compulsory training for being included into the Student Reviewer Panel;
- As a member of the Student Reviewer Panel, you may be contacted to serve in a peer review panel for a quality review during the given academic year;
- As a Student Reviewer, you will be informed on review's details and, specifically, on the site visit's schedule. Make sure to read these documents thoroughly. This will give you an idea of what to expect over the course of the review, whom you will be working with and what area you are reviewing. At this stage you can jot down questions you may have for some of the meetings with stakeholders/Quality Enhancement Unit for the review.
 - **IMPORTANT: If you are/have engaged/studied/worked with the area that is under review, make sure to flag this with the Quality Enhancement Unit. There may be a conflict of interest.**
- A helpful reading prior to the Site Visit is the UCC's current Strategic Plan; this document will help you familiarise with the broader institutional context at UCC (e.g. aims, objectives and planned actions of the university) before the review takes place.
- If you have any questions surrounding the process, you can email staff at the Quality Enhancement Unit for clarification.

4.2 The Panel

- The panel, as previously mentioned, is made up of both internal UCC staff members, external members and, of course, you, the student reviewer.
- You will meet all the panel members both remotely and on-campus at different stages of the site visit. Specific logistical details may vary from a review to the other. While the other panel members may be older/more experienced professionals at an academic level, it is important to remember that you are of equal standing to them and expert on student matters, so your voice, as a student, is equally valued in this space. Introduce yourself and be proud that you are representing your fellow students, giving voice to over 21,000 learners.
- There will be a Chair of the panel, who will chair the meetings; this person is usually an internal staff member. On some occasions, external chairs are also appointed.

4.3 The Site Visit

Since 2020 the format of the Panel Site Visit has been greatly altered as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. It has changed from an intense fully on-campus experience to a currently hybrid event, which is spread out over a lengthier time stretch. However, the overall Panel's duty- and hour-commitment has remained mostly stable. Below an indicative hybrid site visit template is included. Please be aware that this may change slightly from a review to the next, depending on the unit. Finally, since this is a newly introduced format, further adjustments may be made in subsequent years.

Hybrid Panel Site Visit

- Hybrid site visit takes place over 3 weeks for a total of 6 days
 - Week 1 = 1.5 days (Panel's get together, evening meal & physical site visit at UCC)
 - Week 2 = 2 days
 - Week 3 = 2 days
- Pre-site visit meeting to virtually brief panel members on QR & site visit
- Review comprises meetings with interludes to discuss arising matters
- Panel meets with Head of unit, staff, students, University's senior officers and external & internal stakeholders
- Before a meeting, panel agrees together **issues** to be explored (these tend to arise from the SER and previous meetings); after a meeting, panel agrees key take-away points, as well as **tasks/questions** to be asked in the following meetings



4.4 Afterwards

- The draft report is rarely fully completed by the end of the Site Visit. The Quality Enhancement Unit staff member will collate together Panel members contributions throughout the site visit to create a first full draft of the Quality Enhancement Report. This will be circulated to all Peer Review Panel members for review and feedback in the weeks following the Site Visit. Once every panel member comes back with individual feedback on the draft, a collectively agreed version of the draft will be circulated for approval by all panel members.
- **You will participate in a brief recorded interview with QEU staff for the awarding of the Quality Peer Reviewer Digital Badge.**
- That is the end of your contribution to this process.

5.GENERAL INFORMATION

Dress Code

- While there is no specific dress code for student reviewers, smart/casual is suggested.

Payment

- Student Reviewers are paid a stipend for their participation in the Peer Review process. After the review is completed, as a serving Student Reviewer, you will be sent an invoice to fill in so that the Quality Enhancement Unit can process your payment. Please note that the stipend is paid only once the panel report is fully complete and approved by all the panel members. This can take up to three-four weeks after the site visit.

Dietary/Mobility/Sensory Requirement

- If you have any mobility, dietary, sensory and/or any other special requirements, please, inform the QEU staff members as so they can accommodate you.

Digital Badging

- To acknowledge the student's contribution to the Quality Review process, appointed Student Reviewers will be awarded the Quality Peer Reviewer Digital Badge. Prerequisites for this award include completion of all the Student Reviewer stages from the initial training to the finalisation of the Quality Enhancement Report and, finally, participation in a short, recorded interview to provide and document their reflexive feedback on their student reviewer experience, role and contribution to the University quality enhancement endeavor. The QEU may wish to publish excerpts of these audio-recordings and/or quotations on its website and/or other informative material. In these cases, prior permission from the respective student reviewer will be sought in

compliance with GDPR policy.

Transport

- On occasion of the Peer Review Panel's dinner/s, Reviews, the QEU can provide taxis for you to travel home at night time. They are affiliated with the Taxi co-op - 021 427 2222. You only need to let QEU staff know about this, please.

6. STUDENT REVIEWER TESTIMONIALS

Beatrice McCarthy, Government Student, Previous UCCSU

Entertainments Officer



There is little to no doubt that the Quality Review process is a learning experience for not only the student reviewer but for all involved. As a student there are very little, if any, opportunities to see how your department works, to give any real feedback and to see any change actually occurring. During the review, the student reviewer is afforded the chance to learn a bit more about the department at hand; they get to see how the department deals with student issues or in some cases fails to deal with the issues; how it functions on a daily basis and in general how well the 'shop' is run. Having taken part in two reviews and from speaking to other student reviewers, the key lesson to be learned is to keep an open mind and to develop your problem solving skills rather than allowing the issue to be perpetuated any further. Having experts in the given field on the panel gives a much greater insight into the type of work that is being done in the department and can show at times how a simple solution can fix a great number of the problems faced. I must also say that part of the learning experience is to engage and become more comfortable interacting with others be it in the confines of the panel room or addressing the whole of the staff in the department.

How to better represent students:

To fully represent students it is necessary to ensure a few key criteria when carrying out a review. Before the review can begin, it is essential that there are adequate numbers of the current students attending the stakeholder engagement/student meetings and an emphasis on the third year and final year degree students who are more likely to be engaged with the department, more likely to have encountered issues and will have greater confidence levels. I would also be of the opinion that the student reviewer on the panel should have the opportunity to meet the students on their own before the other panel members get to meet them. This is to allow the students to feel totally comfortable and to feel that they can speak openly about their problems without a fear that it will at some point get back to their lecturers. Further communication with the Students' Union, and in particular the Education Officer, to increase support and to make sure students are aware that they may have an input into the goings on in their department. Incentivising students to attend in terms of a free lunch in the main rest that day or a certain amount of pages for free printing to encourage students to take part may also help to increase student representation.

Challenges faced by the Student Reviewer:

The thread of immensely long documentation surrounding the department being reviewed can only explain so much and after that it is up to you to interpret.

Art Kelleher, Medicine, Previous UCCSU Med & Health Rep



When the opportunity to take part in the QEU Review Panel presented itself I was very keen to take part. Firstly, I believed it would further my understanding of how Schools and Departments operate within the larger institution of the University. Secondly, I felt it would be a valuable experience working as part of a team of highly capable and accomplished academics and leaders in their respective fields. This was what I hoped to gain from the experience but I also felt I had much to contribute. Not only did I feel I could contribute, but I also thought it was important I contribute. I have found that as students, we are very good at asking for improvement and change but we often fail to play an active role in developing or reforming. Therefore, it was important to me that there be a strong student voice in the panel. The following is a reflection on some of the aspects of this process which were helpful to myself and I hope may be of use to others.

What Were My Learning Points?

Observing experienced and competent people provided an excellent learning opportunity for me. The manner in which the other members conducted themselves when expressing opinions, questioning aspects of the review and providing feedback provided me with a template on how I should go about this myself. As the process continued, I grew in confidence. I was more forthcoming with opinions, questions and feedback. I think this was due to the openness and respect afforded to me by the other members of the panel. It will be important for me to remember how the environment created during this review process nurtured my confidence and I will strive to create similar positive working environments in my future work. I've since noticed how experienced and competent clinicians create such environments. Simply talking with and expressing an interest in each individual in a team, from cleaning staff to consultant, helps to make everyone feel they are working towards a common goal. I'm now attempting this in my clinical placements and will continue the practice into my internship and beyond. I also think I learned about the many competing and, at times, conflicting perspectives within a university. Each Department, student body, administrative group has a different way of doing things and has different goals. It was valuable for me to learn to appreciate many different viewpoints while aiming to work towards a common goal.

How to Better Represent Students?

This is a difficult question to grapple with. Students like to see change however change often occurs slowly within an institution such as a university. Knowing some of the other peer reviewers who were chosen, I am confident that students are well represented on all of the review panels.

However, picking the right students is a difficult task. I think it was beneficial to approach students involved in the Students' Union as well as the Societies Guild and Clubs Executive. To make sure that students are well represented, the students chosen should have an interest in some form of leadership as well as an understanding of current student opinion. As I learned myself, being part of a review panel is also a learning opportunity, so picking students who stand to learn and develop from the process is also a factor in student selection. It may be worth expanding the pool of students invited to participate in peer review panels. If time and resources facilitated, providing a questionnaire to prospective student reviewers might shed light on what they hoped to gain from the experience as well as what they wanted to contribute. Supplementary or alternatively to a questionnaire, individual interviews could be conducted following review of written personal statements.

What Challenges Face a Student Reviewer?

Probably the biggest challenge is to overcome what might feel like an intimidating situation. The panel members I worked with made this very easy but I would understand if a student found it difficult to voice their concerns or opinions, especially if they were inexperienced at interacting with University staff. Another challenge I found myself confronted with was having to consider problems from perspectives quite different from my own. As a student it is unusual to get an insight into why a problem is taking time to be resolved. At the same time, it is important that student concerns are still raised and noted. There is also the challenge of voicing views expressed by the majority of the student body as well as making sure less well represented groups are not forgotten about. It can also be difficult to occasionally bring up topics, questions or issues that you disagree with but which are important to students nonetheless. This is a difficult challenge faced by those in leadership and at times is extremely pertinent to the QEU review process. I felt I was able to voice student concerns by first addressing the problem in question and then outlining the common goal or resolution to that problem shared by staff and students.

What Additional Support Could the QEU Provide?

To be completely honest I think the QEU were very supportive in preparing me for the process. I had an idea of what was expected of me during the review and what I should prepare beforehand. One aspect I did struggle to keep up with was the back and forth that occurred during the report writing. I rarely felt I had anything to contribute at this stage and some direction at this stage might have been useful. It may also be beneficial to do a group debrief with all the student reviewers to share learning points and give the QEU more info on how to select, prepare and support future student reviewers.

I thoroughly enjoyed being a part of a QEU Review Panel. I'm sure I will look back on the

experience in time and realise that I learned even more than I am aware of at present.



Aaron Frahill, BA, Current UCCSU Education Officer

QEU

Reflection

Report

In October 2016, I acted as a student reviewer for a Quality Enhancement Review. Some of the main issues I took away from the whole process - and in particular the two and half days where we intensively reviewed the School - included a further understanding of how staff view students, the issues that staff have, and the values that Departments place highly across the board; the general theme from observing the School was an undeniable dedication to a high standard of quality for their students. What I found in the review was that students were very much accommodated so I didn't have to be a nagging voice throughout my time on the panel.

Prior to the review, I received the Self-Assessment Reports which was a bit overwhelming at first. Getting a document of approximately 80 pages required being able to scan and analyse the points made in it, but it enabled me to develop better scanning abilities. When the review actually began, I definitely appreciated the fact that I was sitting on a panel with professors and head of departments/colleges – it definitely showed me the standard that was set and how highly the student reviewer was regarded within the process. I found that once the review started it was very rapid in the sessions that we would have, but this allowed us as a panel to get an understanding of multiple different perspectives from those involved with the School, which proved quite useful in our drafting of the report. I found the interaction with students to be one of the most important parts of the review, as the students gave us an insight into a lot of things that we didn't even think of after two days of meeting a lot of staff and stakeholders.

I found the review to cover a lot of areas, which in the end allowed us to produce a comprehensive review of the School including its strengths and weaknesses, which led to a list of recommendations – I strongly feel following European and International standards allowed the Quality Enhancement Unit to produce a timetable which allowed us to access a number of areas which gave us the scope to make the review. One thing that I found particularly useful was the fact that two members of UCC staff sat on the panel, as this allowed them to consider their experiences from a staff perspective in UCC. In general, the make-up of the panel was very mixed but this ensured that each viewpoint that could potentially factor into the process was there. Even after the actual content for the review was found by the end of the Thursday, there still was stuff to do and again my presence was still very much valued, as when the report was forwarded onto all the reviewers I was able to ask about changes and make them if possible.

In conclusion, I found that review was a worthwhile experience as a student which gave me an understanding of how a School operates, and gave myself and the panel a platform to express our views and possible methods non-judgmentally in order to improve the running of the School. The student voice was a valued one on the panel, and I did appreciate this when I was doing it, and it's a credit to the process

that it is so valued. The process felt like an important one to UCC as a body, and the student presence within that was valued, and in my time in UCC that has been a consistent characteristic of any committees or bodies that exist here.