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How does quality assurance make a difference?

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Title: Institutional Integration of Quality Assurance & Enhancement in an Irish University Context

Abstract:

The main aim of this paper is to provide examples of how quality assurance and enhancement activities have provided a clear means of integrating QA into an Irish third level institution, Dublin City University (DCU). The background to quality assurance at a national level in Ireland is first outlined to set the context. This is followed by an examination of the development of a quality assurance and enhancement system at DCU, including an outline of the internal quality review process. A number of innovative quality initiatives which have been introduced in DCU over the last two years are then outlined, and the benefits that these have provided to the University are discussed. The details of these initiatives may be interesting for those working in Quality Offices internationally, as well as other academics and Heads of Departments in higher education institutions.

Text of paper:

1. Introduction & Objectives

This objective of this paper is to examine changes and developments in quality assurance and enhancement (QAE) that support the aims and objectives of Dublin City University (DCU), Ireland. In particular, the issue of 'QA supporting institutional aims and profiles' within the context of DCU will be discussed in detail.

Quality assurance at third level has been a matter of scholarly and practitioner investigation for some time, and many authors have written in this field over the last number of years, from a number of perspectives (Solomon, 1993; Barnett, 1997; Galloway 1998; Pounder 1999; Tam, 2001; Kekäle; 2002; Narang, 2012). In this paper, the background to quality assurance at a national level in Ireland is first outlined, followed by an examination of the development of a related system at DCU. A number of quality initiatives which have been introduced in DCU over the last two years are then



outlined, and the supports and benefits that these have provided to the University are discussed. A summary with concluding remarks ends the paper.

2. Background to University based Quality Assurance in Ireland

The 1997 Irish Universities Act (Universities Act, 1997) outlines a clear procedure including a number of steps aimed at improving the quality of education, research and support services throughout the Irish university sector. Although Sachs (1994, p.23) states that 'Discussions about the quality of higher education start from the premise that no single, workable 'definition' about quality is possible; that quality in higher education is not a definable concept...'), such legislative developments, nationally and internationally, changed the context in which the Irish universities operated. Since 2000 there has been an increasingly co-operative approach in the universities in the development of quality assurance systems, and the document a 'Framework for Quality' (IUA/IUQB, 2007), appropriate to the needs of Irish universities, outlines this approach.

3. Background to Quality Assurance, Enhancement and Promotion in DCU

In 2000, the decision making body in DCU, Executive, set up a Quality Promotion Committee (QPC), chaired by the chief academic officer, the Registrar. This committee is representative of all Faculties and a wide variety of Support / Service Offices within DCU. Its remit includes the promotion of an ethos of self-evaluation and continuous quality improvement within the university, thereby seeking to enhance the student and staff experience. QPC is also tasked with making recommendations to Senior Management, Executive and Academic Council on policies for quality assurance and improvement, arising from DCU's statutory responsibilities,

In 2001, the DCU Executive set up the Quality Promotion Unit (QPU), which was subsequently renamed the Quality Promotion Office (QPO) in 2011. The QPO is responsible for the organisation and facilitation of the internal quality review process, as well as promoting quality assurance and enhancement across the full range of university activities. An important function of the QPO is the presentation of annual reports to the two main Boards of the University, that of Governing Authority and Academic Council. Academic Council is a large group with about 90 members, and all academic issues have to have final approval at this forum. The Director of Quality Promotion representing the QPC and the QPC makes an annual report to both of these bodies, outlining work related to the internal quality review process over the previous year, as well as other quality assurance and enhancement activities.

In total, 28 internal quality reviews were carried out in DCU during the period 2001-2007. In 2007, a new, Faculty based structure was established in DCU, and the 15 Schools, were brought together within four Executive Faculties, each headed by an Executive Dean. It was then an obvious step for the internal review process to mirror this strategic structural development, and over the period 2007 to date the four Faculties have been reviewed as an individual Faculty, including the organisational elements involved in bring a number of schools together under one umbrella.

4.1 Overview of the DCU Internal Quality Review Process

The internal quality review process in DCU, similar to the rest of the University sector in Ireland has four main components:

- 1) The development of a Self Assessment Report (SAR) by the area under review, under the leadership of the area Head, facilitated by a quality review committee
- 2) A 3 day visit to the campus by a 5 member Peer Review Group (PRG) both internal and external to DCU
- 3) The provision of a PRG report with recommendations



4) The development of a Quality Improvement Plan (QuIP) by the area under review.

There are several benefits for an academic or support/service office in undertaking an internal quality review. First, it provides the opportunity to undertake a thorough examination of all sections and operations within the area. The development of the SAR ends up being a quality enhancement process in itself, and ongoing anecdotal and other evidence confirms the value of the process to both the area under review and the University. The second benefit of the review process is that it provides an update and endorsement to Senior Management and the wider university community of the commendable work being undertaken in the area. There are few fora where this kind of self promotion can take place, and this particular aspect of the review process is always commented on favourably by internal quality review committees. The third benefit is the opportunity to avail of national and international expert peer advice via the recommendations for improvement provided in the PRG report.

5. QPO and QPC supporting DCU's Institutional Objectives

In the following sections, a number of recently introduced initiatives aimed at improving quality assurance and enhancement in DCU are outlined.

5.1 Quality Improvement and Development Funding

In 2012, following a suggestion by the Director of Quality Promotion, the QPC set up a new funding initiative in DCU entitled Quality Improvement & Development (QuID). The purpose of the initiative was to offer financial support to projects that will enhance, promote or develop quality in all areas of DCU. Funding is open to all DCU staff, including part-time and contract staff. Proposals submitted were confined to once-off, short term projects, with costs of €4000 or less.

The criteria taken into consideration in allocating the funds was that the project proposal:

- Contributes to quality improvement and development in the applicant's area (50%).
- Contributes to quality improvement in DCU, i.e. has the potential to be beneficial in the wider University context for staff and/or students (30%).
- Has clear timelines and deliverables (20%)

A sub-group of the QPC is responsible for assessing the applications. This group is chaired by the Director of Quality Promotion, and makes recommendations to the QPC regarding potential QuID funding. In 2012, a total of 16 project applications were provided with QuID monies. From the University's perspective, the provision of ongoing QuID funding on a yearly basis has a number of benefits, and clearly supports its ongoing quality and strategic objectives. University staff and the associated community are provided with an annual reminder of the quality enhancement process, and invited to submit proposals for quality improvement projects not related to an internal quality review process. As the quality review schedule for the University covers a seven year time period, having the QuID process in place means that in between formal quality reviews, staff can take a personal or group initiative on suggesting quality improvements and enhancements to benefit their own area of work, as well as potentially have benefits for the wider university community.

5.2 Quality Review Training

In 2011/2012, training seminars were initiated by the QPO for a number of staff groupings in relation to the internal quality review process. The first of these involved two members of each of the quality review committees undertaking quality reviews in the next academic year. These are typically held annually, in the January of the preceding year, and about 10-12 people are in attendance. The outline objectives of the seminar are to provide:



- A better overall understanding of the Quality Review process
- An outline of the steps to be taken for producing the Self Assessment Report (SAR)
- An appreciation of the timeline and associated deadlines
- Key elements of preparing for a successful Peer Review Visit

These seminars last approximately 2.5 hours, and plenty of time is allowed for participants to ask questions, and for those who have been involved in previous quality reviews to provide their experiences in an informal and participative environment. Our experiences are that these seminars 'demystify', and clarify, the activities involved for new stakeholders to the process, and also provide a dedicated forum for the quality review committees to engage with each other and provide encouragement throughout the quality review cycle which can range from 10 – 18 months from beginning to end.

Another set of seminars involves the participation of internal peer review group (PRG) members. The PRG is the review panel that visits the University over a 3 day period having previously read the Self Assessment Report (SAR) developed by the area under review. One of the internal members is a senior academic or senior administrator, and the other is a member of the QPC. As well as providing an outline of the internal quality review process, the main purpose of this particular seminar is to provide an understanding of the PRG's remit and the requirements during the review group visit, as well as discuss in detail the role of the internal PRG members, in particular the co-ordination of the final PRG report.

A third set of training seminars introduced in 2012 focuses on administrative support staff, in particular Personal Assistants (PAs) to members of DCU's senior management group (SMG). Confidential documents such as the area under review's Self Assessment Report (SAR) and the Peer Review Group (PRG) report are provided to SMG members via the PA, and their understanding and support of the process are very important.

A final method of communicating the workings of the quality review process in DCU is undertaken by the Director of Quality Promotion visiting a meeting of the quality review committee, or the entire staff of the area under review, to outline the quality review process and provide an update on the current quality assurance climate in the Irish higher education sector. The statutory, legal nature of the process is explained, but a clear emphasis on the benefits of undertaking the quality review for the area is stressed.

Overall, the institutional benefits obtained from the provision of quality review related training, and presentations by the Director of Quality Promotion impacts positively on the university from a number of perspectives. A major benefit is the wide range and level of staff involved in the seminars, from Heads of School and Middle Management to junior clerical staff in support/service offices. The ethos and mission of the quality review process is therefore promulgated throughout the wider university on an ongoing basis. Typically at least four training seminars will be held in a year, in which up to 25 staff members, including those from the Colleges of DCU participate. There is then further potential for the information provided to be widened out to other colleagues throughout the University and the staff of the DCU Colleges.

5.3 University representation on Linked Providers' Quality Promotion Committees

As a University provider of graduate and post-graduate awards, DCU has institutional linkage agreements and memorandums of understanding with a number of institutions, and provides the awards for these institutions. From a historical and geographical perspective, the three main linkages are with two local teacher training colleges, St Patrick's College Drumcondra (SPD) and the Mater Dei Institute (MDI), as well as All Hallows College (AHC). The Director of Quality Promotion in DCU has always been a member of these three committees, which meet at different periods of regularity. Since



2010, the current Director of Quality Promotion arranged for a member of each of the committees to attend and participate in all meetings of the QPC in DCU. There have been several distinct benefits to this initiative from the University's perspective, but the main advantage is that institutional knowledge from DCU has a clear transfer path in regard to quality assurance and enhancement developments. The Director of Quality Promotion brings details of quality related changes and initiatives from the University to each of the linked Colleges on a regular basis, and outlines and explains the potential implications for the Colleges.

5.4 QPO representation on Education Committee

In 2010, the Director of Quality Promotion was invited to become a member of DCU's Education Committee. This committee is responsible for the shaping of university strategy in relation to academic affairs, and is chaired by the chief academic officer, the Registrar. All of the Executive Deans are members of this Committee along with the Dean of Teaching and Learning and the Dean of Graduate Studies. This committee is a key group within the University, and is highly regarded in terms of its remit, membership, and depth and breadth of its work.

Over the period 2010-2012 the Director of Quality Promotion was heavily involved in two major quality assurance initiatives undertaken by Education Committee. The first of these initiatives was the development of a new University policy relating to the assessment of teaching quality. A working group comprised of Education Committee members and others, representative of all four Faculties, was set up to research and develop a proposed policy and associated procedure. Following the work of this group, a policy entitled Quality Enhancement and Survey of Teaching (QuEST) was approved by Education Committee, and began its implementation with an online survey of student views on every module in DCU for the second semester of 2011/2012.

The second area in which the Director of Quality Promotion had a key, and leadership involvement, was the development of a DCU policy and procedures document for annual and periodic programme review (APR/PPR). Although annual and periodic review had been carried out previously for many programmes on an informal basis, again, as a result of institutional and other reviews, a working group was set up to develop a clear policy, purpose, principles and procedures document, with associated timelines and templates. This policy will begin to be implemented during the academic year 2012/2013.

6. Summary & Conclusion

Harvey and Green (1993, p.28) suggest: 'At best we should define as clearly as possible the criteria that each stakeholder uses when judging quality and for these competing views to be taken into account when assessments of quality are undertaken'. DCU has always had a tendency to judge and perceive quality differently to other third level institutions, partly as it is a relatively young university, just 23 years old. It is also different to traditional universities in that it has a proactive aim of seeking to enhance the efficiency with which it 'translates' its research activities into societal impact and commercial reality by developing strategic alliances with complementary partners (DCU Strategic Plan, 2010).

The quality improvement and enhancement initiatives outlined in this paper reflect strongly the aspirations of past and current strategic plans, and in 2012 continue to have increased relevance to DCU's institutional aims and objectives. One example of this is the strategic decision taken to develop a Faculty structure in 2007, and the internal review process was instrumental in building on the new structure by setting up a Faculty review process which will be completed in 2012.

In summarising the main points of this paper, it is useful to address the overall question posed by EQAF 2012 – 'How does QA make a difference at institutional level?'. As



already outlined, in DCU, the Chair of the Quality Promotion Committee (QPC) is the chief academic officer, the Registrar, which indicates that the University takes the committee and the remit of the Quality Promotion Office very seriously, and views it as integral to the attainment of its aims and objectives, both nationally and internationally. As already outlined, the QPC is central to suggesting and undertaking ongoing improvements in the internal quality review process. The Director of Quality Promotion also has a key remit to advise the decision making body of DCU, University Executive, and the Senior Management Group of relevant changes and developments in quality assurance and enhancement, and recommend via the QPC, new procedures and processes appropriate to the changing environment. She also has a high-level involvement in key committees internal and external to DCU, and is encouraged to provide leadership on quality related projects and developments.

Recently introduced quality assurance and enhancement activities such as the quality review training seminars and the QuID funding process, have certainly improved the relationship of staff with quality related matters. Another benefit has been the further integration of the activities of the Quality Promotion Office into more areas in the University, as well as in the Colleges of DCU, This has led to an overall increased level knowledge and involvement of the quality assurance related work being undertaken.

Although a lot of positive quality related developments have been undertaken in recent years, there is more that can, and should, be done to integrate quality assurance and enhancement throughout DCU. The involvement of students, both under-graduate and post-graduate for example is an area that could be improved. At present, for example, there is just one student representative on the QPC. Another suggestion would be to broaden the scope of the quality review process to include a wider range of peer reviewers, and / or include student representation on the internal quality review committees. This is being carried out successfully for example in Scotland, and may be something that could be considered in the future.

To conclude, it is evident from the details provided in this paper that quality assurance and enhancement activities being undertaken make a strong, and vital, contribution to DCU, and are clearly related to the institutional aims and objectives. The ongoing challenge will be to maintain and increase this relationship, within a context of expanding student numbers, and diminishing financial and other resources.

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Questions for discussion:

1. How can university staff be encouraged and supported to consider and include ongoing quality assurance and enhancement activities as part of their role and daily tasks?
2. How important is the provision of information and training to the internal quality review process?
3. How can university Quality Offices best promote the benefits of their quality assurance and enhancement activities both internally and externally?