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Changing education – QA and the shift from teaching to learning

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Short bio:

Dr Sarah Ingle is the Director of Quality Promotion at Dublin City University (DCU) in Ireland. Previously she was a Senior Lecturer in Enterprise and Entrepreneurship at DCU's Business School, her PhD was in the area of total quality management (TQM) within Irish-based manufacturing organisations. Sarah's research interests at present cover quality assurance themes for HEIs and she leads DCU's involvement as a partner in an EU funded Tempus project (EUREQA) to assist in the development of quality assurance in West Balkan universities. Sarah is also an active member of the Irish Universities Association Quality Officers Group (IUAQOG) and is a member of the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI, Ireland's national quality agency) Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee. She is also President of the Irish Fulbright Alumni Association (IFAA).

Proposal

Title: Quality Assurance for Teaching and Learning: Evolution and Revolution

Abstract:

The main objective of this paper is to address the changing role of university quality assurance structures in particular regard to teaching and learning and the associated developments in online and distance learning. It begins with an outline of recent developments in Irish higher education followed by an examination of major transitions at national level within educational quality assurance in Ireland. The background to quality assurance in an Irish university is provided, followed by an overview of the quality assurance, referencing specific details of how teaching and learning is assured. Also outlined in the paper are developments in the Irish higher education sector in particular regard to online learning, along with the changes that have recently been undertaken in one university to reflect an increased emphasis on module and academic programme review processes. The move towards a blended learning approach, combining traditional and digital methodologies is also discussed. The paper concludes with a summary of successes and challenges.



1. Introduction & Objectives

The main objective of this paper, in line with the 2014 EQAF conference theme of 'Changing education – QA and the shift from teaching to learning', is to examine the changing nature, or 'evolution', of university level quality assurance structures in particular regard to teaching and learning and the associated developments in online and distance learning. Recent developments in the higher education arena and an outline of major legislative and structural transitions at national level in the area of quality assurance in education in Ireland, are included in order to provide an appropriate context. As a relevant case study, the background to quality assurance, enhancement and promotion in Dublin City University (DCU) is summarised. This is followed by an overview of the quality assurance structure in DCU referencing specific details of how teaching and learning is assured.

In the next section of the paper, changes in the Irish higher education sector are examined, in particular regard to online and distance learning and the establishment of the National Institute for Digital Learning (NIDL) in DCU. The developments that have been undertaken in DCU, including the introduction of learning outcomes, to reflect an increased emphasis on module (course) and academic programme (award) review processes are outlined. The international trend towards a blended learning approach, or 'revolution', combining traditional and technological methodologies is a key change in the sector which is also discussed within a QA context. The paper concludes with a summary of successes and challenges.

2. Irish Higher Education Context: Teaching and Learning in Transition

The 1997 Irish Universities Act (Universities Act, 1997) and the 2012 Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act (QQAI Act 2012) outline clear procedures aimed at improving the quality of education, research and support services throughout the Irish university sector. Such legislative developments in recent times, nationally and internationally, have changed the context in which Irish universities operate. Since 2000, in Ireland there has been an increasingly co-operative approach to the development of university quality assurance systems and the document a 'Framework for Quality' (IUA/IUQB, 2007), appropriate to the needs of Irish universities, outlines the relevant methodology and procedures chosen. This quality framework, however, is currently under review to ensure that QA within the sector continues to be appropriate in changing environments.

The Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA) as the provider of most of the public funding directed to Irish higher education institutions (HEIs) also plays a key role in monitoring the 'quality' health of the sector and taking actions to support the effective operation of higher education institutions. Within the last year for example, one important development in this context has been increased reporting requirements to HEA from Irish HEIs in particular relation to institutional strategy and quality.

A further recent initiative at a national level has been the funding call from the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (NFETL, 2014). Under this call, Irish higher education institutions have been invited to make collaborative proposals for funding by the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund 2014 (Building Digital Capacity



in Irish Higher Education). The fund amounts to €6 million and the total investment will be over a 3-year time-frame ending in 2016. Proposals are to be evaluated on a competitive basis.

A more complex picture of the contextual background for this paper emerges as on-going transformations or 'revolutions' in the higher education landscape are being undertaken simultaneously with changes in Irish national structures governing quality assurance. The Qualifications and Quality Assurance Ireland (Education and Training) Act in November 2012 brought about the amalgamation of four 'legacy' quality bodies leading to the establishment of a new authority, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). QQI has now assumed all the functions of the legacy organisations, while also having responsibility for new statutory areas.

The establishment of this new body, QQI, represents a major development for the sector, in that for the first time, an emphasis on teaching and learning in the form of identification with academic programmes is the over-riding focus. This is a clear signal that the student, or learner, will be at the centre of all future quality related initiatives. Another related development is the work that was undertaken during 2013/2014 to review the institutional review process for HEIs in Ireland over the previous fifteen year period. There were multiple aims for this review including building on the work that already been completed, as well as setting out future objectives and models in order to ensure that the future institutional review process would be one that would add value to all Irish HEIs and align with strategic, as well as quality objectives.

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

Almost twenty years ago a DCU senior committee was given the task of researching national and international quality review and assurance models relevant to higher education institutions (HEIs), including frameworks for self-assessment. In 2000, the main decision making body in DCU, Executive, set up a Quality Promotion Committee (QPC), currently chaired by the Deputy President (Vice-Provost). 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.

The QPC now operates as a sub-committee of Executive, which includes the President (Vice-Chancellor) and the Executive Deans of the Academic Faculties. QPC is also tasked with advising, and making recommendations to, Senior Management, Executive and Academic Council on policies for quality assurance and improvement, arising from DCU's statutory responsibilities and also from the requirements of national agencies including the HEA, that as already mentioned, has an oversight remit for quality assurance in higher education in Ireland (HEA, 2012). Other roles for the QPC include advising DCU on developing and establishing relevant frameworks of principles, policies, priorities, procedures and good practice in quality assurance and enhancement in teaching, research and administration across the University; reviewing the range of quality assurance mechanisms used at institutional level, as well as by Faculties, Schools and



Support/Service Offices and disseminating information on best national and international practice on quality related issues.

In 2001, the DCU Executive set up the Quality Promotion Office (QPO). This office has its own dedicated staffing of one full time Director of Quality Promotion and one support staff member. 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 DCU's activities and liaising with, and providing feedback to, QQI on behalf of the university.

4. DCU Quality Assurance Structure

The Quality Assurance (QA) structure for the university, outlined graphically on the next page, is built upon a teaching and learning assurance framework in the form of annual and periodic programme review processes that are owned and managed by the Schools and Faculties. The outcomes of these reviews feed into the internal review process. The QPO is responsible for the organisation and management of all internal reviews as well as any institutional reviews, facilitated by Schools, Faculties, Support Offices and DCU Senior Management.

4.1 Module Review – QuEST

Underpinning programme review is a quality assurance process recently introduced to monitor the on-going quality of the module, or course, within each academic programme. This is known as Quality Enhancement and Survey of Teaching (QuEST). DCU's Academic Council approved QuEST as a procedure whereby the University could assure itself of the continuing quality of teaching as required by European Standards & Guidelines (ESG). The driving goal of the approved process is that it contributes to the continuous improvement of teaching and learning at Dublin City University. This same consideration of on-going improvement applies to the procedure itself. What was originally approved is a pilot programme that will be reviewed and is subject to amendment in the light of DCU's experience regarding its effective operation.

Within QuEST, the 'module' is the unit of review. Three information sources are utilised to assure the quality of the module: the reports of external examiners; the profile of results on the module and the results of a survey of students taking the module. The continuous professional development (CPD) activities, formal and informal, of the module co-ordinator (lecturer/professor) are also reviewed as this is a key aspect of teaching quality enhancement. Along with the module data, QuEST requires that module coordinators report in summary form to their Head of School on CPD activities undertaken on an on-going basis. Any minor or major difficulties with a particular module can then be addressed on an annual basis.

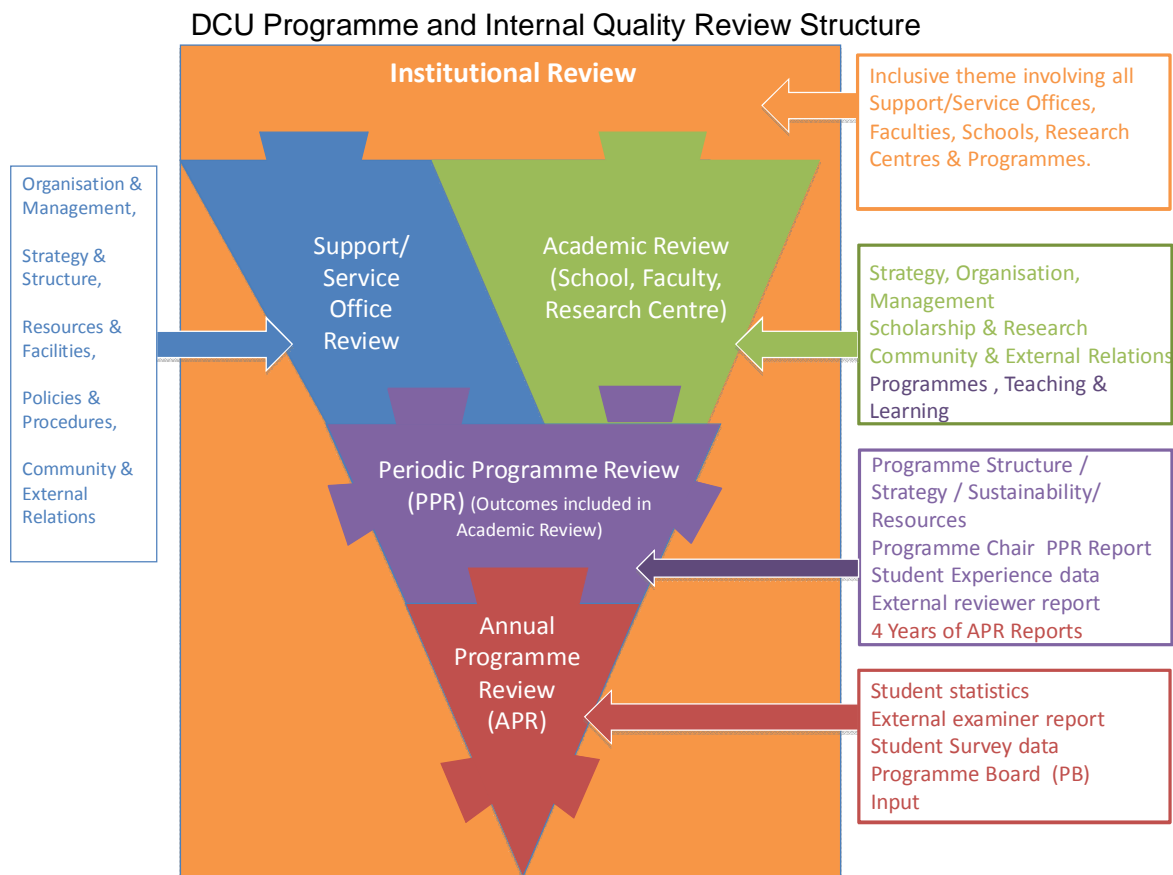


Figure 1: DCU Quality Assurance Structure

4.2 Programme Review – APR and PPR

At DCU, regular monitoring of programmes is undertaken in the form of an *Annual Programme Review* (APR). The APR process¹ provides an opportunity for self-evaluation, self-reflection, review and identification of issues, both positive and negative, at programme level. APR is carried out for all DCU taught programmes.

The purposes of DCU's APR monitoring process include:

- Ensuring that appropriate articulation between the initial validation and accreditation of programmes and their development occurs over time.
- Ensuring that issues highlighted in previous annual and periodic reviews have been/are being appropriately addressed.
- Ensuring that curriculum, programme design, content and assessment are regularly reviewed.
- Ensuring that issues highlighted by external examiners have been/are being addressed appropriately.
- Reporting on student recruitment and numbers registering, and marketing initiatives.

¹ The purposes and objectives of APR and PPR are taken from the relevant DCU policy.



- Reporting on student progression and performance.
- Ensuring that issues highlighted by students have been/are being addressed appropriately and that feedback is provided to students on these issues.
- Reporting on proposed changes to academic structures for the following year, and providing a rationale for proposed changes.

The purpose of DCU's *Periodic Programme Review* (PPR) five-year process is to fulfil DCU's commitment to consistent, transparent quality assurance for teaching and learning, by means of a rigorous and effective quality monitoring process. It provides evidence that DCU's internal quality assurance and enhancement processes are reliable and effective. Finally it enables DCU to meet both internal and external requirements in an embedded and on-going review procedure which is sufficiently robust to withstand external review.

The PPR process achieves its objectives by:

- facilitating programme teams to review and monitor the impact on taught programmes of cumulative, incremental change over a longer review period;
- allowing academic staff to support curriculum and programme development in light of the programme review process;
- identifying further opportunities for enhancement of the student learning experience;
- enabling DCU to undertake a broader review of the continuing validity and relevance of programmes offered, and, where appropriate, evaluate these against the case made at validation for the creation of a new programme.

4.3 Internal Quality Review

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 three day visit to the campus by a five member Peer Review Group (PRG) both external and internal 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 as it provides the opportunity to undertake a thorough examination of all sections and operations within the area including input and feedback from staff, students and other internal and external stakeholders. The development of the SAR ends up being a quality enhancement process in itself, and on-going anecdotal and other evidence confirms the value of the process to both the area and the University, in particular regard to teaching and learning.



5. Quality Assurance structure supporting Teaching and Learning in DCU

The overall focus of the QA structure including its constituent elements as outlined in the previous section, is to support and develop teaching and learning activities in DCU and to provide an opportunity for all staff to engage in quality enhancement in these areas. One area of particular interest in regard to QA developments in teaching and learning is the recent move to a potentially transformational 'learning outcomes' paradigm. Core to the quality of teaching provision is the programme and its constituent modules. Adherence to the stated learning outcomes is crucial and being able to identify how the assessments address the learning outcomes is an important measure of quality. As one set of authors has put it:

'The advent of new educational technologies, especially virtual learning environments, has stimulated the development of a range of innovative online, task-based, constructivist, pedagogical techniques which can facilitate the achievement of a wide range of learning outcomes. (MacKeogh, Fox, Lorenzi and Walsh, 2010, p.14)

It is beyond the scope of this paper to detail the benefits of these and related techniques for teaching and learning within a QA context. It is important to state, however, that in recent times a number of changes have occurred within higher education in Ireland and DCU affecting how teaching provision and the associated learning, is organised, provided and assured:

- Decreased funding for teaching relative to research at third level;
- Increasing numbers of students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels due to reductions in job opportunities following international economic recession;
- Increasing diversification of the student population - age, gender, prior learning, campus accessibility, previous background experience and skills - as more flexible learning pathways are provided;
- Increased emphasis on autonomous learning for all students;
- Employer requests for business / industry-ready graduates leading to an increased focus on graduate attributes and skills.
- As technological advances continue, the increasing importance of design and delivery of a 'blended' teaching provision using online as well as campus-based methods to facilitate traditional and non-traditional students;

Ultimately, to address national and international guidelines, and in order to be effective, all quality assurance and enhancement processes in DCU that support teaching and learning aim to be embedded, integrated and on-going, and involve a combination of regular monitoring and periodic review. This is already a challenging task for traditional, campus-based models, but is even more challenging for primarily open, online and distance education due to first; limited financial, human and other resources, second; decisions regarding retaining a central open education unit as against providing online programmes within existing Faculties and finally; the increasing need to provide a wide range of online programmes to attract and retain potential students.



A programme that is primarily offered via online and distance learning methodologies is inherently different to a campus based programme in a number of ways including:

1. The nature of these programmes requires a more coherent and co-ordinated approach to delivery;
2. The Programme Chair, director or leader has real input from the rest of the programme team, i.e. the module co-ordinators / lecturers delivering the programme, so it is a team effort;
3. Teaching and learning methodologies are more varied and increasingly 'blended'.

Given the multiplicity of regional and national changes occurring at this transitional time, of central relevance for this paper is the establishment of the Irish National Institute for Digital Learning (NIDL) in DCU. The main objective of the NIDL is to become a global leader in the design, implementation and evaluation of new models for teaching and learning in particular relation to online and distance learning (NIDL, 2014). This aspiration links clearly into the DCU overall mission of transforming lives and societies (DCU, 2012). A related aim is to design and deliver flexible learning methodologies as part of the provision of high quality online and blended learning programmes. This will be achieved by means of *DCU Connected* (2014), the university's recently launched suite of distance education courses.

6. Successes and Challenges

The Quality Assurance structure in DCU has developed over the last ten years to reflect and support the changes in teaching and learning in a number of ways including:

1. Revising and improving initial programme validation and accreditation processes;
2. Developing and streamlining the external examiner process including online interfaces;
3. Implementing regular programme review, annual and five year yearly;
4. Adapting and improving the internal review process to support developments in teaching and learning and associated quality assurance;
5. Engaging with the national quality agency, QQI, to develop value-added institutional review procedures that are relevant, cost-effective and timely.

In relation to the online and distance learning environment, a number of initiatives have been introduced in recent years that have helped improve both the quality of the teaching and learning experience and its increased integration within the quality assurance structure.

- Increased wireless broadband access and provision of Google Apps account for every staff member and student;
- Linkage of learning management system (Moodle) to the student record system;
- Administration and results collation of online student surveys via Moodle to determine student feedback on modules and programmes;
- Learning Analytics projects to monitor and analyse student engagement with Moodle;



- Provision of e-Portfolio accounts to students;
- Implementing student support relationship management;
- Introducing learning outcomes to all modules and programmes over two years;
- Single sign-on to facilitate ease of access to all online facilities;
- Improved pedagogical provision including staff development workshops, online programme in online teaching and teaching and learning consultancy;
- Introduction in 2014 of a new online learning platform DCU *Loop* (2014). *Loop* facilitates students and learners to engage and connect easily with their module and programme content, fellow learners, lecturers and tutors.

Challenges however do remain, and many of these are relevant to the entire higher education sector in Ireland and Europe to greater or lesser extents within institutions.

- Obtaining meaningful student feedback, both qualitative and quantitative;
- Creating an environment where a whole programme is regularly reviewed against the attainment of the learning outcomes, in particular regard to the continuous and examination assessments applied;
- The need for the introduction of quality frameworks for online teaching and learning such as *E-xcellence* (2014) or *Quality Matters* (2014);
- Continually engaging academic and other staff in quality assurance for teaching and learning;
- Addressing the increased monitoring and regulation requirements by the national quality agency and statutory legislation;
- The development of an appropriate International Education Mark (IEM) for Ireland to assure teaching and learning for international students.

There is no doubt that currently the European higher education environment is a challenging and evolving area for all those involved in quality assurance. Ultimately it is important to consider, however, that perhaps we should be aiming towards developing embedded quality enhancement and assurance approaches that lead developments in teaching and learning, rather than just follow them.

Acknowledgements:

The author would like to sincerely acknowledge the insights and ideas of two DCU colleagues from the National Institute for Digital Learning (NIDL) and the Chair of the Quality Promotion Committee (QPC) in the preparation of this paper. It should also be noted that some of the background information provided to clarify the Irish and DCU context in the paper, is, of necessity, similar to some details in the author's previous published submission to EQAF 2012.



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Questions for discussion:

How can quality assurance for teaching and learning be continually enhanced in a time of diminishing public funding for higher education institutions?

How can support and administrative staff be encouraged to participate in quality assurance processes for academic programmes and teaching and learning initiatives?

What are the future challenges for QA in particular relation to the rise in digital and online teaching and learning methodologies?

What are the potential challenges to embedding QA processes within teaching and learning by means of driving online and related developments in this field?