

# Quality Implementation Plan for the Research Support Office

## 1. Recommendations which the Unit could implement unaided

### Recommendation 1.1:

NUIM has seen an increasing throughput of research contracts and agreements and the most significant risks from this appear to arise from commercially-funded research contracts, responsibility for which rests with the Commercialisation Office. RSO has identified the need to increase its core skill base in contracts, but given the relatively limited scale of high risk contract work at NUIM it would appear that any resource available to recruit professional contract staff would appear best dedicated within the Commercialisation Office. Training and development of existing RSO staff should enable them to undertake effectively the lower risk contract work, for example research collaboration agreements.

#### Response of Unit:

RSO receives primarily low risk contracts which mainly consist of collaborative research agreements with other institutions and companies, EU consortium agreements, consultancy contracts with funding agencies and infrequently consultancy contracts with industry. In late 2010 we decided to send two of the RSO staff on a contracts course. Praxis regularly holds Research Contracts training courses in the UK which specialise in Research contracts for academic organisations. Two of the office staff attended a Praxis 4-day course in late 2010. The course covered the following topics:

- Common law jurisdiction
- Contract structure and boiler plate clauses
- Putting it into context
- Tenders, Government and Lambert agreements
- Managing risk: Liability in university contracts
- IP in research contracts
- Preparing, negotiating and producing research contracts
- Workshops
- Charity law
- European collaborations
- Interpretation of contracts.

It is envisaged that other RSO staff will complete this course also later in 2011. The RSO also plans to hold an internal workshop for RSO staff to work through sample contracts with a view to transferring the knowledge gained at the workshop.

**Comment by QPSC: One member of the unit is a career break pursuing a Law degree - if / when she returns can her expertise be availed of?**

## **Recommendation 1.2:**

The senior management oversight of submission of research proposals appears relatively weak, although current practice appears to be significantly improved over that seen previously at NUIM. Opportunities exist to clarify and develop policies and procedures, for example on costing and pricing of research, and could be included within the responsibilities of the proposed Head of RSO. A significant burden of academic oversight of research proposals rests with the Vice President for Research and this burden will only increase as NUIM achieves its visions of a significant increase in the number of highly research active staff. It is surprising that Heads of Academic Departments and Deans appear to have little oversight of the submission of applications from their Departments.

### **Response of Unit:**

The Research Support Office acknowledges the requirement for increased academic oversight of funding applications by Heads of Department and Faculty Deans, to relieve the burden on the VP for Research. There are several potential mechanisms by which this could be addressed and we propose that the options should be presented to the Research Committee in order to identify the most appropriate mechanism to adopt:

1. The aims of implementing the Proposal Tracking module of the Research Information System were not only to record and monitor applications for research funding, but also to permit access to this information to Heads of Department and Deans. We believe that incorporating an additional signature to the 'Intent to submit a proposal' form would introduce an unnecessary obstacle to a system that is working effectively at present. Thus we suggest that a report is generated from the RIS which is sent by e-mail to the HoDs/Faculty Deans on a regular basis (monthly, quarterly – to be determined). The report would detail either:
  - a. Funding applications that (i) have been submitted in the time period and (ii) have been successful in the time period for their given department/faculty, or
  - b. If an alert is required at an earlier stage in the process, i.e. prior to submission of the application for funding, the report would detail the registrations of intent to submit proposals by staff of their given department/faculty.
2. All Departmental Administrators have access to a departmental RIS profile and all information therein. In addition, the Research Support Office hosts training workshops for Departmental Administrators in order to demonstrate how to use the departmental RIS profile. Thus, reports on funding applications, publications, etc., can be generated by the Departmental Administrator upon request by the HoD/Faculty Dean. This mechanism would require that all Departmental Administrators receive the necessary training.

**Comment by QPSC:** The RSO's response to recommendation 1.2 that they claim does not require additional resources is incorrect. They are suggesting shifting costs onto the Faculty Deans and the Heads of Department and onto Department administrators. The faculties and the departments do not have the resources in time or personnel or expertise to absorb these tasks. The RSO must be made aware that this is a costly not a no-cost response and they

should reconsider this response in light of this: the response might be moved to section 3, or it might be possible to devise a solution internal to the RSO.

**Response from RSO 04/05/ 2011:**

We believe that the panel has misinterpreted our comments in section 1.2. Our intent is that our offices would generate reports for the Heads so that they are more aware of the research projects in their departments and/or that the admin staff could also do so if they so wished. Most of the admin staff has already received training for the system. We don't see how this could cause an extra burden or work or cost as our office would be the ones generating the reports which the Heads can choose to read or not?

## **2. Recommendations which the Unit could implement only with assistance from other bodies within the University and without cost implications**

(For each recommendation, list under "Response of Unit" the actions required by the Unit or other bodies to implement the recommendation, state if the recommendation has already been implemented, and if not, indicate a timeframe for the actions or the reasons for not implementing the recommendation)

### **Recommendation 2.1:**

Further development of NUIM European Strategy would appear to be timely, for example to develop specific aspirations and targets for agencies such as the European Research Council. NUIM's aspirations for Framework 7 funding are appropriate although it must be appreciated that many leading European Universities will be looking to increase funding from EU sources and hence competition for funding will increase. Existing activities in train at NUIM to develop EU funding opportunities appear to be appropriate.

#### **Response of Unit:**

We are aware that competition for EU funding continues to increase as national funding in a number of EU countries, including Ireland, declines. We are continuing to implement the NUIM EU funding strategy, and the Research Office has seen an increase in the number of proposals submitted to the European Commission, with 49 submitted in 2009 and 64 submitted in 2010, compared to 10 in 2008. To further embed EU funding opportunities in the collective consciousness of our researchers, we will hold annual "EU Encouragement" workshops. These workshops will provide a refresher on the types of funding available review how to become involved, both as applicants and evaluators. Successful funding has doubled to about €2M for 2009, compared to just under €1M in 2008, although we continue to rank in 9th place behind the other Irish universities, RCSI and WIT, as they have also stepped-up their applications to the EC. We will incorporate our response to this Recommendation with Recommendation 2.2 in order to maintain the visibility and pressure in the NUIM research community.

### **Recommendation 2.2:**

Further refinement and targeting of information on funding opportunities will be important as competition for funding increases both nationally and internationally. One-one dissemination of funding opportunities is the ideal, and could be achieved through the expanded use of Departmental surgeries held by RSO staff.

Response of Unit:

We intend to act upon the recommendation to initiate departmental surgeries, beginning in 2011. The expectation is we will initially focus on using the surgeries to promote EU funding, and target departments/institutes with a high potential for accessing these funds, but that might not have been as active or successful in this realm in the past, such as Biology, NIRSA, Geography and the Hamilton Institute. We aim to hold one surgery per month beginning in the second half of the year.

ResearchResearch.com website is rarely used; we currently pay a subscription as a University and plan to encourage greater use of the ResearchResearch.com website and review if not working.

### **Recommendation 2.3:**

NUIM could further refine its definitions of success in achieving its strategic goals in research. Current definitions of success are either not specific (e.g. "recognised strengths in targeted areas of the humanities, social sciences and science and engineering" or are very specific (e.g. "to increase research income to €25 million by 2011". The objectives of the RSO should be set, and its success in achieving its objectives should be judged, as far as is possible, in terms of its support for the University's broad strategy for research not just specific research income targets

Response of Unit:

The following are the overall objectives of the RSO which were set as part of the preparation for the quality review process.

Specific targets for 2011 are:

- Further contract training of RSO staff to increase legal expertise in contract preparation and negotiation
- Improve efficiency of communication with Commercialisation by a clearer definition of Commercialisation's responsibilities and creating a formal and defined approach to interaction (in particular around grand submission)
- Improvement of the RSO website by:
  - Ensuring the information of most importance is easily found – both on the top bar and also in a quick-link, easily seen on the front page
  - Developing a new 'Calls' page, which can be searched by agency, scheme or deadline

- Devising new categories for ease of navigation around the site, with those of most importance most prominent
  - Re-evaluating which pages need to be 'local-access-only', so as to make as much information as possible available off-campus
  - Working with the Computer Centre to try and find a possible solution to make the website accessible off-campus for those with a NUIM login
  - Ensuring the website is clear in describing the role of the office and how researchers should communicate with the RSO/RAO
- Successful proposals by NUIM PIs are presently not available for viewing. We plan to review use of Securedocs.nuim.ie (encrypted database) and access of successful proposals
  - Further proactive approaches need to be developed with regard to proposal preparation. We plan to hold interactive guidance for young researchers on writing proposals. If a researcher's application fails, they should look at other possibilities and RSO will go through proposals to assist this process.
  - Research Information System update. There are no postdoctoral profiles currently on the system. We plan to update system to include postdoctoral profiles when HR links in with current RIS system. Currently it is easier to update CV in discipline-specific way rather than through RIS, which discourages academics to include their publications in RIS. RIS information should be exportable so can interface with departmental systems and should be possible to export data to other formats e.g. Bibtex etc. Currently being set up – e.g. Hamilton, Engineering and Computer Science. 40% of researchers are currently unaware of Researcher Profile Directory (as per survey) Cathy Jones is demonstrating to many departments, to encourage use.
  - The present ethical approval process is being streamlined with new application forms being drafted with a view to alleviating the burden on researchers who have to apply for ethical approval. We also plan to review the ethics policy in 2011 and produce an updated policy to present to academic council

### **3. Recommendations which the Unit could implement only if additional resources are provided by the University**

(For each recommendation, list under "Response of Unit" the actions required to implement the recommendation, state if the recommendation has already been implemented, and if not, what resources might be required, including an indication of the level of capital or recurrent expenditure involved)

#### **Recommendation 3.1:**

It is clear that tensions exist between RSO and the RAO and improvement of working across this interface would appear to be a priority. Recent benchmarking undertaken by the University of Warwick on staffing levels in post-award finance functions at UK Universities would indicate that staffing levels in the RAO are low, and hence pressure of workloads in the RAO are an issue.

There may be opportunities to rebalance workloads through further clarification and redistribution of some elements of the post-award function, for example in-award and post-

hoc reporting. The Vice President for Research and University Bursar must be fully involved in this dialogue to ensure that a full and effective discussion of all options is undertaken.

There is a case for increased support for the management of research support at NUIM, however this need spans the pre/post award interface. Given the apparent pressures within RAO, and the imperative to improve joint working across this interface, the proposed role of Head of the RSO should be considered but as part of a wider review, including the potential integration of the RSO and RAO functions.

#### Response of Unit:

We intend to take a two pronged approach to this recommendation. In the short term we plan to put some measures in place that will attempt to improve on the management of RSO and the overall interaction with RAO.

- We plan to hold monthly meetings with RAO, both offices will also meet (e.g. workshop) every 6 months to plan interaction and ensure correct processes are in place.
- The guidelines around costing non standard budgets are unclear and are clarified on a case by case basis both internally and by RAO. This creates a greater amount of work for RSO staff and also means that researchers need greater assistance in costing certain budgets. We are presently formulating a budget policy regarding % overheads where no specification is given, VAT considerations, costing existing staff etc. to alleviate this problem.
- Planning of Projects – Balance of Workload (and Challenge): Ensuring that the workload is balanced across the office staff. The workload for the office changes regularly to meet requirements related to institutional projects, reviews, or government requests for statistics and reports. The office is often faced with the challenge of a very short turn around time to complete these projects. We intend to hold a planning session within RSO Meeting every two months and also to review Individual portfolio of work with Director/VPR annually. The intention is to develop a more formal process for allocating extra work that arises.

In parallel we support the creation of a role of Director of RSO separate to VPR. The aim is to work towards a 'one stop shop' and it would be essential that the Director would encompass both the functions of RSO and RAO. This would ensure better operational performance and communication flow. The role of director will also ensure continuity of knowledge at end of VPR term. This clearly would have resource implications.

**Comment by QPSC: The proposal concerning Director of RSO will need some thinking through. Will it set a precedent for other offices where the Senior Officer / VP has considerable external and strategic responsibilities – e.g. Bursar, Registrar, ... How might this post be funded - the continuity is important, but then we must have the right person. If a future VPR / Director relationship were to break down what would be the options?**

#### **Appendix: General response to the Peer Review Report (optional)**

The process of composing the self assessment report and quality improvement plan has led to the development of a set of proposed activities taking on board the feedback from the external stakeholders and the assessor's recommendations.

Feedback on all accounts has been positive and for the most part in agreement with our overall assessment and proposed improvements. The significant issues highlighted by the SAR were also of general concern with the external assessor. These primarily encompass:

- The problem which arises from the role of the Vice President for Research as overall manager of the office and the fact that the VPR is frequently and necessarily absent from the office. There is a need for greater clarity and documentation on the specific roles and responsibilities of the RSO and the RAO. The proposed establishment of a post of Director of Research Support on a full-time basis which would encompass both RAO and RSO would result in better management and overall operation of both offices.
- While the Research Support Officers are highly qualified and motivated to provide a quality service, there are gaps in the expertise and skills profile of the office. A particular and pressing example is in relation to expertise in completion of non-standard contracts. Basic training in elements of contract law undertaken by several members of the office in 2010 proved to be very successful and further training in 2011 should address this issue.

Our overall conclusion is that, following an intense period of growth in an organic fashion, there is now a need to ensure that a properly systematised structure for research administration is constructed that will allow for further expansion of the quality and quantity of research activity at NUIM in the coming years.