NUI MAYNOOTH

Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

Peer Review Report

NUI Maynooth Registrar's Office – Quality Review

Review by:

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1. Introduction

1.1 Study Visit

The visit to NUI Maynooth campus took place on March 1-3, 2004 and the outside evaluators were: John McGarry, Director Consulting, Deloitte, Dublin and Dr. Sherry H. Penney, Professor of Leadership, College of Management, U Mass Boston, Boston, Massachusetts. They evaluated the Registrar's Office at Maynooth under the guidelines of the Irish University Quality Board. For the purposes of this evaluation, the following units make up the Registrar's Office at Maynooth: Admissions, Access, Examinations, International Students, Student Records and SRS Project Officer. We will provide comments on each unit in the following report.

In advance of the visit, we reviewed the documents prepared by the above units, each of which had undertaken a thorough self-assessment. During the visit, we met with the following individuals and groups: President Seamus Smyth and Vice President Frank Mulligan, Registrar Dr. David Redmond and his assistant Joan Galvin, Quality Promotion Officer Saranne Magennis, Admissions (John McGinnity and 5 staff), Access (Ann O'Brien and 5 staff), Examinations (Michelle Berigan and 3 staff), International Students (Melanie Kilduff and Lisa Parker), Students Records (Ann O'Shea and 2 staff) and SRS Project Office, Dr. Ann Burns. We also met with John Behan from the computing office. In addition, we had an open meeting of approximately 20 faculty and staff to discuss the overall process and two meetings with approximately 30 students, drawn from across the student population and including access, mature and international students.

1.2 Overview of the Registrar's Office

Brief descriptions of each office follow.

Registrar

The Registrar has two roles: serving as a senior officer of the University and managing the Registrar's Office and its various units and their staff. The Registrar's Office as currently organized dates from 1997 with the current Registrar in place since 2001. Each of the sections assessed its own functions and performance. The overall theme of the Office is to support a student centered University. The Office has established appropriately broad goals that were clearly stated in the self-assessment.

Admissions

The Admissions Office is responsible for informing prospective students about the University, increasing the quality of applicants (maximise applications and 1st preferences in particular) and then successfully bringing them on board.

Access

The mission of the Access Office is to increase the numbers of under-represented students among the student body at Maynooth (access students, mature students, ethnic minorities, travellers and students with disabilities) and to support these students as they progress through their courses.

Examinations

This Office is responsible for organizing the examinations of the University, and producing the end of year result for each student.

It administers the examination process from receipt of entries through to the issuing of results. This work includes organisation of staffing, venues and materials for the examination paper.

International Office

This Office coordinates the SOCRATES and study abroad programmes and manages the recruitment of non-EU degree students.

Student Project Office

This Office was established to acquire and install an integrated student record package that can be effective and timely. This task was completed in early 2000. The Office now supports the system and undertakes development of it, e.g., modularisation, in achieving the overall goals of the University.

Student Records

The aim of this Office is to create and maintain accurate student records for all students, past and present.

2. Response to Self-Assessment

2.1 Introduction/Overview

The Registrar's Office took the quality review process seriously and expended significant effort in the research and report production process.

Many issues have been identified which bring a clear focus to the strategic initiatives which must be delivered. The overall impression is of a committed and functioning office which is achieving but has considerably more to do.

Based on the documentation provided, we noted that staff numbers increased to 20 ½ (5652 students) which is a considerable increase on the 7 staff in 1996 (4107 students). Most of the staff increases have been in "new" areas such as access, international and student records, although admissions has also grown significantly.

2.2 Definition of Users of Services

All the units in the Registrar's area have adequately defined the users of their services and undertaken their self-assessments accordingly. We are highlighting the Access area as an example.

The Access Office is currently staffed by 3 ½ employees. The staff has been expanded as the responsibilities of the Office as well as the numbers of those served have grown and the law governing it has changed to meet additional needs. As stated by the staff, with its expansion: "a lot of hopes and dreams are now being realized."

The Access Office self- assessment was clear in its assessment of the users of its services. It serves primarily socio-economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities and mature students. Its outreach programme is impressive and includes targeted schools and their principals and counsellors. These, too, are users of its services. We met several of them for lunch and heard nothing but praise for the Office and its activities. Other users are the mature students, primarily women, where again the outreach has been impressive. We met several students from the access area, including women, students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with dyslexia and all praised the services which they were receiving. The users are particularly pleased that the new facility will provide more and better coordinated services. The users have expanded as the law has been changed and the Access Office has assumed these additional responsibilities.

2.3 Definition of Services

The units in the area of the Registrar are clear in regard to the definition of services and each unit has appropriately outlined its services and how they relate to the users. We will use the Examination Office as an example here.   Its service includes organisation of the staffing, location and materials for the examinations as well as providing special arrangement for those with special needs, compiling the results, organizing Examination Boards and issuing transcripts. It also is responsible for preparing the statistical reports for the Higher Education Authority. The process is centralized at Maynooth, and examinations are held eight months of the year. The staffing of the Office has changed since the initial report was written and the new staff indicated to us ways to improve the area of examinations as the new technology becomes more widely used and more effective.

2.4 Definition of Measures of Performance

The Registrar's Office has extensive measures of performance for each of its units. For example, returning again to access as an example, this Office looks at numbers of school visits, numbers admitted, and success in completion. It also reviews programmes for post-entry support and revises those programmes and adds additional ones as needed. Careful measures are also taken in regard to the students with disabilities such as numbers receiving funding for equipment and numbers receiving accommodations for examinations. The Office also has measures for looking at the HELP CENTRE. This Office helps students build their skills, and partly as a result of the need for this assistance, new facilities are about to open which will make this important service available to more students in much better surroundings.

The Mature Student section also has appropriate measure of performance and looks at numbers applying, interviewed and registered as well as numbers using the advisory services, seminars and orientations.

As noted above, we met with principals from the schools as well as several students and heard over and again stories of the success of this Access Office. This qualitative assessment was useful when added to the quantitative assessments that were provided to us in the self-assessment documents. It also was helpful to learn that the measures of performance had been fed back into the decision making process to bring about actual improvements in the programme—such as the new Learning Centre which will open shortly and the addition of staff in critical areas.

However, despite the range of performance measures which exists, we found we had to search to identify key performance targets and then many were not specified in the form of key performance target indicators to allow easy comparison with actual performances.

2.5 Information to Users

All units in the Registrar's Office were clear in the need for providing accurate and timely information to their various users. The users varied by Office with some such as the Admissions Office having more external users and the Examinations Office more internal users. Each office was clear in defining those users.

The Admissions Office is an area where this is particularly important and its information involves school visits, phone contact, publications, email, an innovative mini CD and the web site. Extensive efforts are made to assure that the information is timely and accurate and surveys conducted indicate that the Office is working well. The recent dip in applicants is a concern and one that is being addressed immediately.

A related office—the International Office—also showed the importance of information to users since accurate information is crucial to non EU students, particularly those now coming from China. When the Office learned that some of the information on housing needed to be revised and updated, efforts were made to do so.

2.6 Definition of Procedures

All the units in the Registrar's area were clear in regard to the definition of procedures. Each unit articulated its aims and objectives, described the services it provided and was clear about the scope of information provided to it clients. These were adequately spelled out in the self-assessment documents, and the findings were confirmed in our interviews with the units.

For example, in the Examination and Student Records areas, we also were provided with an update to show how the recent technological developments have made additional improvements in several areas:

examination timetable, examination seating lists, personalized examination timetables, departmental entry of examination marks, automatic registration of modules, and electronic transfer of examination marks. All these improvements further define procedures and impact stakeholders in a positive manner.

2.7 Provision for Feedback from Users

It was quite clear from the self-assessment document as well as from interviews during our visit that all the units have developed extensive procedures for obtaining feedback from their users. We received an index of appendices that showed the various instruments used by each unit and also indicated how the results had been compiled for use by the unit. We were very impressed by the extent of these exercises in all the units and were also pleased to see that, in every case, follow-up had been or was in the process of being initiated. In other words, the results and findings were being put to use to bring about needed positive changes—exactly what a good self-assessment process should do.

For example, if one looks at the feedback for the Office of Student Records (appendices, p. 199), one finds that several questions were asked about the registration process in general as well as on specific parts of the process. This extensive questionnaire provided much valuable feedback to the Office as it further refines its procedures and sets priorities for the future.

Another example was found in discussions with the International Office. Their surveys are also included in the appendices and their findings summarized in charts with the report. We found that they had taken seriously what they had learned and were making improvements as a result. They know from day to day experience that the international students are placing more demands on the Office, and the surveys confirm that finding and help the staff members as they undertake future planning.

The self-assessment document lists the many ways in which each of the units has compiled its recommendations and then used the findings. We were impressed by the use of results in the units in the Registrar's Office.

However, there is a need to ensure that the Registrar's Office receives continuous formal feedback and not only when a major quality review is taking place.

2.8 Provision for Review of Objectives

In general, this was completed to a high standard. One or two units did not follow the suggested template but addressed the key questions elsewhere in their response. As an example of the level of effort to assess performance, the Admissions Office undertook a number of questionnaires for the following distinct stakeholders.
- Guidance counsellors (involving external commissioned research)
- General enquiries
- Mature students
- Transfer students
- Internal departments.

All of the units engaged in one or more surveys and some level of consultation. While there were variations by unit in the level of detail and analysis and indeed of the reporting of the findings, we feel that, on balance, units made meaningful efforts to report the principal conclusions. As a general observation, the overall target for each unit need to be more readily identifiable and expressed in very specific performance indicator type language.

The International Office has identified the need for more clarity in its role. This clearly impacts on objective setting.

2.9 Staff Development

While staff development is undoubtedly a key focus for the University and for the Quality Promotion Office which oversees training and development, our overriding impression from the documentation provided and the consultation process is that personal training and developments are not clearly articulated or defined. This is not to say that individuals have not availed of training or development opportunities but a more structured approach would be useful.

Only two of the units – Admissions Office and the International Office made any reference to staff development.

2.10 Communication

Communication within the Registrar's Office appears to be effective although largely informal. While, there is a strong openness and willingness to communicate to provide an efficient and effective service, there are no formal communications or structured meetings on a frequent basis. Within the University, the Office has extensive communication with all stakeholders – students, staff, parents, administrators, officers etc. Again, this takes place during the normal course of business or informally. Other than this review process itself, we are not aware of any structured approach to seeking feedback and to sharing information. As a possible example of the impact of this – some staff seemed very surprised at the level of concern expressed by academic and department staff about the (lack of) user friendliness of the ITS (Integrated Tertiary Software).

Given the small size of the various units, there is a somewhat understandable though not necessarily acceptable lack of formality about holding regular structured meetings within each unit. We noted that the Admissions Office and the Access Office hold more formal meetings by comparison to the others – this view is based on the documentation provided.

2.11 Relationships External to the Office

The Registrar's Office has a key part to play in the development of the University. The Strategic Plan 2000 – 2005 identifies a number of key areas of development. Each focus area has a number of important recommendations. Responsible officers are also assigned. Each focus area requires a number of responsible officers working together from across many University functions. Below, we identify where staff from the Registrar's Office have been specifically named in the Strategic Plan. The Registrar's Office takes the lead role in relation to the student population and course development.
The Registrar's Office would have many external relationships – NUI, HEA, other Universities, international Universities, etc. The Quality Review documentation probably under records the level and nature of these interactions.

Table 2.1: Influence of the Registrar's Office

Focus Area	Number of Recommendations	Responsible Officers specified in Strategic Plan

Student Population
e.g.   - growth
         - recruitment
         - access
         - non-EU Students
         - etc.
	10	Registrar
		Admissions Officer
		International Officer
		Access & Mature Student Officers

Course Development	11	Registrar Admissions Officer
Research	8	Registrar

Most of the areas have external points of contact. For example, the student records area has contact with the Higher Education Authority, the National University of Ireland, the Industrial Development Authority/Forbairt and the Central Statistics Office. The Conference of the Heads of Irish Universities, the Central Applications Office and other higher education institutions are also key contacts for the University.

2.12 Other Factors

The management of the factors identified in this review e.g. communications, staff development, etc. appear to be focused and managed within each unit. All of the factors require both local management (by the unit head) and group management by the unit heads as a collective group, which takes responsibility for the Registrar's Office as a senior management team.

This helps communication, sharing of people, ideas, etc. and breaks down a silo mentality.

3. Conclusions

Our principal conclusions are as follows:

1. The Registrar's Office is an area demonstrating focused goals and is clearly meeting its mission.

2. Staff are highly committed and dedicated.

3. The Office has the respect of its many stakeholders.

4. The Office is providing quality service to its users.

5. The culture in the Office is beginning to respond to changing needs and is adapting to the new technologies in place.

6. The Office has been given some additional staff and space to meet the increased demands put upon it.

7. New student clienteles at Maynooth are being well served.

We have prepared the following strengths and weaknesses table which is very useful in outlining our principal conclusions and defining some action points for the Office going forward (section 4)

Table 3.1: Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths	Weaknesses
- Dynamic institution - Committed Staff - Respect from stakeholders – students and staff - Good quality service - Positive culture - Responding to changing needs - Student centred.	- More collaboration / team work / sharing of ideas - No formal management team - Need to continually develop IT - No formal training plan - Structural historical placement of functions – need review - No overall plan / targets for overall function and review not explicitly linked to overall Registrar plan / University plan - Opportunity to share staff may be missed.

4. Recommendations

The Registrar's Officer is aware of the key immediate **challenges**. These include:

1. Modularization. The work load in this is very significant.

2. Staff and space needs. These exceed the allocations that have been provided.

3. Uncertain funding (funding for one year at a time) particularly for the access areas as well as the Quality Promotion Office make planning difficult.

Recommendations

A review of the principal weaknesses identified suggests that the Office could profit through:

Formal Management Team & Communication

1. The establishment of a formal management team which would meet regularly and formally to manage the function. This would help team working and the sharing of ideas and staffing. There is a strong tradition of collaboration across the various units and this would further reinforce it.

Review of Structure and Activities

2. A review of the placement of activities within each unit. Some (possibly) unusual placements of activities have been established e.g. conferring is part of the International Office. The role and focus of the International Office need to be clarified as has been identified.

Strategic Planning

3. A more explicit linking of the plans and targets of each of the units within the Registrar's function to the Registrar's plan and to the University's overall Strategic Plan 2000 – 2005. While some of the units have made reference to the Strategic Plan, the approach was not consistent nor is there an overall summary plan for Registrar's function.

ITS

4. Continued development of ITS. Current developments, including a web based interface with standard reports, are welcome. There are strong faculty concerns and these need to be managed carefully.

Staff Development

5. A clear view of staff development needs and how these are to be met by the University's "Staff Training and Development" programme.

5. Quality Review Process

The process worked quite well but consideration needs to be given to the following.

Documentation and Elapsed Time

1. Although it was very helpful to have all the materials well in advance of the visit, we found that because the reports had been done some 12- 18 months ago, much had changed. Reviewers need to be ready to ask about what has transpired since the written reports were completed.

Size of the Function for Review

2. Moreover, when a large unit such as the Registrar is reviewed, it might be helpful if each reviewer selected areas for focus rather than having the two look at everything together. We each could have explored some of the areas in depth rather than doing all of them together. This might be a helpful suggestion to make to future reviewers.
3. Time was a problem. More time is needed for a unit of this size and complexity. Some useful conversations had to be cut short and even so we still ran behind schedule. It would be good to build in some additional time for review and reflection and possibly for write-up of the Peer Report. Consideration should be given to a meeting with a group of external stakeholders eg. HEA.

Function Summary

4. There needed to be a summary statement for the unit as a whole. Since this unit actually has several departments within its makeup, such a summary would also help the unit function more as a true unit. The template for a Peer Report does not seem to deal with this situation adequately.

Link with the University's Strategic Plan

5. We would have liked to see a strong link between the individual unit self-assessments and the overall University strategic plan. The units' self-assessments and their work need to be undertaken in light of the overall University objectives and goals. The Peer Report process could include this as additional guidance to functions under review.

Other Matters

6. Finally, there are two other questions which require careful consideration.

   ➢ Should the quality self-assessment not include some benchmarking data?
   ➢ Should the reviewers and staff carrying out the review be asked to comment on structure?

Peer Review Board

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