

**Peer Review Report on NUIM  
Student Services**

## **INTRODUCTION:**

The Student Services Group as currently constituted consists of the Academic Advisory Service, Chaplaincy, Counselling, Creche, Medical Centre, Residence Office, Sports and Physical Recreation and Student Activities. In addition, a variety of other offices serve students in the following areas: Access Office, Careers Development Office, International Office and Students' Union. These offices are all included in the very helpful Directory of Student Services, along with the Admissions, Security and Health and Safety Offices, but were not included in this review process.

A Director of Student Services was appointed in November 2003 'to coordinate the development, promotion and effectiveness of Student Services' in NUIM, but the post has been vacant since the end of February 2006. The vacant Director of Student Services position, as established, included Student Activities and Students' Union administration, but the University has now appointed a separate Student Activities/Students' Union Administrator. The Director of Student Services reported to the Registrar, along with numerous other direct reports.

The Student Services mission statement is: 'Student Services is an integral partner of the University community, enabling the promotion and development of its educational mission. Using a holistic approach, we offer a range of clearly defined services to support and empower students to achieve their academic potentials and so enhance their lives' journeys. We strive to create a community which is open and caring and where diversity is expected and respected.' The first goal of the University Strategic Plan 2006-2011 states that the University will 'maintain a high-quality undergraduate population by becoming a university of choice for increasing numbers of students.' One stated approach for achieving this goal is to 'ensure that issues affecting the retention of students will be addressed thoroughly and effectively.' Student Services promote this strategic goal by supporting the personal, social, academic, spiritual, recreational and health needs of students, both undergraduate and postgraduate.

The majority of the services have been co-located in the Student Services Building since 2004 and this has clearly enhanced their referral capabilities.

## **REVIEW PROCESS:**

We reviewed the Self-Assessment Report, the Strategic Plan and various organisational charts to prepare for our visit. During our on-site visit, from 18 to 20 October, 2006, we had two meetings with the internal reviewers, Professor Jim Walsh and Dr Bernard Mahon, several meetings with Saranne Magennis, Quality Promotion Officer, and we met with the following: staff from the Academic Advisory Office, Chaplaincy, Counselling, Creche, Medical Centre, Residence Office, Sport, Student Activities, the Student Services Executive Assistant, the Registrar, the President, the Personnel Manager, a group of postgraduate students and a group of undergraduate students. We also received a tour of the relevant Student Services facilities.

## **RESPONSE TO SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT:**

The very informative report consisted of an introduction by the Registrar, an organisational chart, a brief introduction to the Student Services Group and a series of self-assessment documents from the Director of Student Services Office, the Student Aid Committee,<sup>1</sup> the Academic Advisory Office, the Chaplaincy, the Counselling Service, the Creche, the Residence Office, the Sports Office and the Medical Centre, followed by a brief account of the methodology of the review and a section containing conclusions and recommendations. Appendices contained the Student Life Survey administered in January 2005, the Student Services Internal Staff Survey, documentation on the Student Mentoring Programme, the findings of a crèche questionnaire, the results from a 2004 student survey on sport and recreation and a SWOT analysis on sport from 2003 and the findings of a Medical Centre Student Questionnaire.

Each service's Self-Assessment document outlined its definition of users, definition of the service, how it collects feedback from users and suggested appropriate measures of performance. The documents also touch upon staff development and communication issues. We will not review each separate department's documents here and instead will focus our comments upon broader organisational and operational issues.

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<sup>1</sup> A committee made up of the Director of Student Services, a Chaplaincy representative, a representative from the Bursar's Office, from Counselling, the Residence Officer, the SU Welfare Officer and the Access Officer.

Staff in the different services are to be commended on the work put into their individual documents; the review was clearly treated seriously and it provided an opportunity for staff to document their service and prompted consideration of possible improvements. It is clear that some of the recommendations included in the report are already being implemented by the services and this is a very positive result of the QA exercise. The self-assessment process also provided an opportunity for dialogue with the Senior Management of the University and this has helped centre to create an awareness of the needs of the area.

The quality of the different documents was somewhat variable, particularly in respect to sections on measures of performance. Some units documented indicators of performance while, in other cases, reporting seemed to be equated with measuring performance. The way in which the report was prepared and presented, as a series of separate documents, resulted in a somewhat fragmented approach overall, with each area focussing on its own needs and concerns, though some services did advert to close links with some other services. There was also some lack of awareness of NUIM's strategic plan in the document and, while the current strategic plan is quite new, staff did not demonstrate a high level of awareness of strategic planning by the University.

While the Self-Assessment Report contained two mentions in passing of the Governing Authority Student Affairs Sub-Committee, it did not give the terms of reference or any details of the committee; given that the terms of reference of this committee include ensuring that satisfactory student support services operate in the University, we felt that more details on this committee and its operations would have been useful.

## CONCLUSIONS:

1. The commitment of staff in the Student Services area is very clear – they are dedicated to the needs of students and it is obvious that staff derive great satisfaction from working with students; they are very aware of the Student Services mission and strive to live up to the claims it makes. Student Services Staff are also very committed to the university and to supporting the academic mission of NUIM. Their contribution to student satisfaction and student retention is considerable.
2. The students with whom we met expressed unanimous appreciation of the work done by Student Services staff and of how willing they are to go that extra mile of behalf of students.
3. Senior members of the University were also very appreciative of the work being done by Student Services and recognised the importance of the area in fulfilling the University's strategic goals. Staff in the services, however, felt that this appreciation was not adequately communicated to them.
4. Staff in NUIM Student Services avail of professional training and of general training offered by the University. Time, however, is a problem when it comes to training.
5. It is clear that, in some instances, staff are under considerable pressure of work; they are working overtime and building up leave that they feel unable to take without compromising the service to students. Several areas have been short-staffed due to a variety of recent personnel changes or absences (Residences, Chaplaincy, Academic Advisory office, Crèche). It can be expected that, if the services were operating at full staff, the pressure on individuals would be lessened; once replacement appointments have been made in some areas, this situation will undoubtedly improve. In some other instances, however, the service (e.g. the Medical Service) appears to be understaffed, given the level of student demand and in comparison to other Irish universities.
6. Staff and students alike regretted the current lack of a Director of Student Services and were warm in their praise of the previous Director. We felt that co-operation and communication between the services was suffering in the absence of a Director.

7. The Student Services Building offers welcoming and appropriate accommodation for the services it houses and it is beneficial for students and staff alike to have the majority of services in the one building. The central floor of this three-storey building is given over to an office whose operations are very separate from the other student services in the building and which has a different reporting line. This is not ideal.
  
8. What is and is not included in Student Services was sometimes confusing to us as reviewers. We found it difficult to discover where, for example, Careers reports; it appears on p. 7 of the Self-Assessment Report as one of the Student Services offices, but does not appear on the organisational chart on p. 5. The Access Office reports to the Registrar but is housed in the Student Services Building, while the Academic Advisory Office is part of Student Services but is located in the Arts Building. We felt that a new organisational chart is needed for all of the Student Services, clearly showing their reporting lines.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. The filling of Director /Dean of Student Services post is imperative. Without this, the developing cohesion within student services will be threatened and there is a danger that individual units, without full awareness of what other units are doing, will begin to duplicate aspects of services. It is clear that communication between the services has suffered in the time since the Director left. We wholeheartedly endorse the decision to appoint a separate Student Activities officer.
2. We recommend that the position of Director of Student Services be afforded more status and responsibility. Page 10 of the Self-Assessment Report says that ‘the aims and objectives of the position are to coordinate the development, promotion and effectiveness of student services’. A co-ordinating role does not, in our view, give the Director sufficient authority vis-à-vis the individual services and does not sufficiently emphasise the leadership dimensions of the role. The Director needs to be given the appropriate financial authority for all the areas reporting to him/her, including a discretionary fund for new initiatives. The Director should be on a par with the Deans of Faculties and other senior administrative offices. The job descriptions of heads of services should specify that their reporting line is to the Director.
3. As regards the profile of the person to be appointed as Director, we recommend the appointment of an individual with the appropriate administrative/managerial experience and leadership and people skills to warrant the position. We discussed the question of whether this individual should come from an academic or an administrative background but, in our opinion, this is much less important than the experience and skills he/she should possess. If the Director has the appropriate academic qualifications, however, he/she then could also be appointed adjunct faculty in one of the departments, further strengthening the connections
4. The Director should continue to report to the Registrar and the Registrar and other senior officers should champion the Student Services area at the Senior Management level. Student Services should also produce an annual report for Academic Council or for the Academic Support Committee, to heighten awareness of the area.
5. The process of drawing up a new job description for this post offers an excellent opportunity to review the structure of Student Services,

including the number of departments which should report to the Director. Consideration should be given to including other offices under the Director, thereby consolidating departments that are clearly student services into one entity.

6. There should be regular communications from Director to students and staff on new developments; this could take the form of all-student or all-staff emails or a newsletter. Communication between services also needs to be strengthened.
7. Regular monthly meetings with all Student Services heads should be held, chaired by the Director of Student Services. Regardless of where offices report now or in the future, all student support services should be represented at these meetings. In addition, a staff development/staff training session could be held at least once a semester for all staff in the Student Services area. There may be sub-groups of the Student Services area which need to meet on a regular basis to discuss relevant student issues- for example, one group could be Counselling, Academic Advisory and Chaplains.
8. The Director should take a lead role in policy development and in cross-service planning. One example of where a plan is needed is for after-hours service to deal with crises; all the appropriate offices should be involved in this.
9. While the Strategic Plan's emphasis on addressing problems relating to student retention is to be welcomed, the importance of student services goes far beyond issues of retention and it would be helpful if the University set strategic goals explicitly related to Student Services. These should then be developed in a Strategic Plan for Student Services.
10. We concur with the suggestion on p. 12 of the Self-Assessment Report that windows of time when student demand is lower should be identified and used for training. Where possible, some courses specifically for Student Services staff should be held, to encourage cohesion among staff, e.g. cultural diversity training.
11. Funding needs to be provided to increase the level of doctor cover in the Medical Service to a full-time equivalent.
12. A review is needed of Executive Assistant positions to clarify their level and compensation, given their roles and responsibilities. Career



opportunities for individuals need to be provided, otherwise staff will tend to move to other positions within the university, with more opportunities for advancement.

13. All departments should conduct annual feedback surveys.
14. All services should have informative, comprehensive websites related to their services and websites need to be updated with current information.
15. Funding should be provided for IT support on a short-term basis to develop these websites where they do not yet exist.
16. Future facility planning should include appropriate input from department heads and staff, e.g., sport and residences.
17. The Counselling Service and the on-campus medical service (excluding the psychiatrist) are both staffed only by women. Gender may be an issue for some male students. Consideration should be given to this.
18. The composition of the Student Services Committee should be reviewed and student representation on the Committee should be increased. A postgraduate student and an international student should be added.
19. The University should, if possible, create a dedicated postgraduate space, with study facilities, including internet access, and a space for socialising.

## **INDIVIDUAL SERVICES: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Academic Advisory Office:**

This office provides aid and advice, both academic and non-academic, to all students. The AAO has steadily increased its numbers from serving 650 in 2001 to 1235 in 2005. This is significant growth that should be analyzed further for the reasons that students seek out assistance and where referrals are made. There may be some duplication of service that could be eliminated.

Student satisfaction surveys and comments from numerous students indicated that the AAO services are extremely valuable. (82% - survey 2004). The Mentoring Programme embraces 1,300 students mentored by 128 staff; 76% of the students found this programme valuable to extremely valuable. Because this area also advises on personal, financial and safety concerns, we recommend that the name of the office should be broadened to reflect the full range of services available (e.g. to Student Advisory Service). Some students indicated that the location of the office was difficult to find and suggested that a location adjacent to the Registrar's Central Office or in the Student Services Building would be more desirable. It appears to us that a location in the Student Services Building would be appropriate and would facilitate communication with the other Student Services.

### **Chaplaincy:**

The Chaplaincy Office has two full-time chaplains and a shared EA; three part-time chaplains are available only by appointment and do not have office space on campus. The documentation provided in the Self-Assessment Report and the feedback from students show an extensive array of activities that students find extremely valuable. The Chaplaincy is in two distinct locations- the Student Services Building and the Arts Building; this makes full-time staffing of both locations very difficult. One full-time chaplain's post is currently vacant, due to a retirement, and it should be filled with either an ordained chaplain or a lay chaplain; if the latter, then the chaplaincy budget needs to include provision for services from a priest.

The part-time EA post should be made full-time until the vacant chaplain's position is filled; at that point a review should consider whether the post should be full- or part-time.

**Counselling:**

The Counselling Service has the equivalent of two full-time counsellors (permanent part-time and contract) and a full-time Senior Executive Assistant. A consultant psychiatrist is available one morning per week during term time. Student feedback in the consultation groups was very positive and the Counselling response to the recent student deaths was praised highly.

Counselling has an excellent data collection system on its users and needs to develop a feedback mechanism from their clients. Counselling would like to develop a system of case conferences with the Medical Service and we would also recommend including other offices as appropriate. We also recommend some provision of hours be provided by a male counsellor.

**Crèche:**

The crèche caters for the children of students and staff; currently it has 38 staff children and 28 student children. The Manager position is currently vacant. There is a very active Crèche Management Committee that is involved in all major decisions regarding the crèche. The crèche is evaluated by the HSE and the NCNA. There are current plans to build an addition that will increase the number of places by 50%. In the future, more places will be reserved for the children of students. We agree that expanded child care for students is needed at NUIM.

An extra staff member, to act as a floater, is desirable. Fees for the crèche are relatively low and some extra fee income could be generated to finance this extra staff member.

**Medical:**

The Medical Centre has one FTE nurse (two nurses job-sharing), a GP for 18 hours weekly and a full-time EA. The EA position was created two years ago and the contract expires in November. We recommend that this post be made permanent; student feedback to us was that the service was much improved by the addition of the EA. The doctor service is contracted out to a local GP, who in turn subcontracts the on-campus service to another GP. Students may also attend his practice off campus at a reduced rate.

Students are very satisfied with the standard of care provided but all of them were very conscious of the waiting time for appointments and a full-time equivalent doctor was very high among students' priorities. Among all of the student services' needs, this appears to us to be one of the highest priorities. NUIM has the lowest doctor:student ratio among Irish universities and the level of service provision has not kept pace with the growth of the university.

A drawback of the contract arrangement is that it does not allow the GP to participate in student services meetings or other university committees. Given that the contract expires in two years, a change in the structure should be considered. NUIM should investigate hiring its own doctor(s) instead of the contract model. NUIM should also consider the provision of doctor services by both male and female providers.

The Centre is anxious to develop a website and extend into health promotion on campus. We would see the website as a necessity and recommend that it be developed as soon as possible.

### **Residences:**

The Residences Office has a full-time Residences Officer, one SEA and two part-time EAs. The student population on campus has grown to c. 900, including undergraduate, postgraduate, mature students and student families. The Halls Supervisor position is currently vacant. The office also provides a service to students seeking off-campus accommodation and runs social events for resident students. The sharing of an EA between Residences and Chaplaincy needs to be resolved.

The Residence Office to date has not completed a survey to determine feedback from users; we would encourage this being done on an annual basis, as well as developing other measures of assessment.

Currently there is a waiting list of c. 300 and the students whom we met wanted more on-campus accommodation. This would contribute to the overall retention of students at NUIM and should be a priority.

Currently off-campus information is provided through paper on email lists; the office should consider developing a web-based list accessible only to NUIM students.

More accommodation year round should be made available- for postgraduates especially. The requirement to move out for summer is very off-putting for postgraduates who need to be on campus for research purposes.

### **Sports and Recreation**

Sport is staffed by a full-time Sports Officer and GAA, Rugby and Swimming Development Officers. The facilities have grown with the addition of a Sports Hall in 2003 and several new pitches. Thirty student clubs are supported by the Sports Department, which also provides recreation classes and intramural competitions. Feedback from the Student Life survey and from students we interviewed showed a high satisfaction rate with the services provided and the staff.

There is some tension between student needs versus revenue raising; students raised this especially in respect to the swimming pool. The new hours limit student and staff swimming to 12-4; students felt that this clashed with classes and that they would prefer to use the pool in the early evening, in particular.

We received consistent feedback that reducing student hours is detrimental to the student experience. As the university continues to grow, the facilities need to continue to expand to cater for demand. Students raised the issue of the contradiction between the university promoting sport and offering scholarships but academic departments then penalising students for missing classes when they were representing the university in sport. The Registrar should clarify with all departments a consistent policy regarding participating in sports and academic requirements.

**Student Aid Committee:**

We understand that the procedures of this committee have been revised since the compilation of the Self-Assessment Report. We feel that it should meet more frequently than was the case and that the advertising of the availability of this aid is necessary.

## **COMMENTS ON THE METHODOLOGY OF THE REVIEW PROCESS:**

Currently quality reviews are conducted at NUIM for each department, whereas the strategic planning cycle is a five-year one. We recommend that the two processes be aligned, with a four-year cycle for reviews and a fifth year devoted to developing the next University plan. The Student Services Director should be involved in the overall Strategic planning effort at NUIM. This would enable Student Services to be a true partner to the academic program. Along with this, we recommend that the Student Services area develop a strategic plan for Student Services that would be reviewed and updated by the Director and the department heads on a yearly basis. Such a plan needs to be connected with the goals and objectives of each separate department within Student Services. The Plan should also outline yearly assessment measures for all the departments.

During the review, we found the amount of time with the leaders of the Student Services departments to be inadequate. When a formal quality review does take place, at least one hour with each department head should be scheduled.

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## Peer Review Board

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