



**University College Dublin**

**Quality Improvement Plan**

---

School of Economics

February 2011

---

## **Contents**

1. Introduction
2. Recommendations for Improvements - Follow-Up Action Taken and/or Planned
3. Prioritised Resource Requirements

## **1. Introduction**

The Quality Assurance Exercise was carried out for the School during the period April 27-29, 2010. The full report was then delivered back to the School in August 2010, with a request for submission of the Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) by end October 2010. Due to other commitments it was not possible to submit the QIP by this date and so it was eventually submitted in February 2011.

A formal Quality Improvement Committee was not established. Instead, a draft of the QIP was prepared by the Head of School, circulated within the School and discussed at a School meeting in January 2011. The School approved the QIP and it was submitted in February 2011.

## 2. Recommendations for Improvements – Follow-Up Action Taken and/or Planned

**CATEGORY 1:** Recommendations concerning academic, organisational and other matters which are entirely under the control of the unit

### **Category 1(a)**

#### **Recommendations already implemented**

**The School should consider a more transparent decision-making process.**

*Action taken: The Head of School outlined a more detailed and transparent decision-making process at the School meeting of September 23, 2010.*

**The School should consider a formal and regular review of various aspects of the curriculum.**

*Action taken: A formal review of course content at undergraduate level is being undertaken by the School Teaching and Learning Committee and will be submitted by end of Semester 2, 2010-2011.*

**Given the issues highlighted in the SAR and elsewhere in this report regarding the high failure rates in Stage 1, the School should consider appointing a Stage 1 co-ordinator from among the academic staff, with specific responsibility for student engagement; co-ordinators for other stages should also be considered.**

*Action taken: Dr Ivan Pastine has been appointed as Stage 1 co-ordinator.*

**The School should consider means to increase the engagement of academic staff in the running of the School.**

*Action taken: The Head of School outlined a more detailed and transparent decision-making process at the School meeting of September 23, 2010. This outlined a specific task for all tenured academic members of staff.*

**The RG noted that the Single Major students did not have a clear perception of themselves as a group of students who are specialists in the discipline until a very late stage in the programme. The School may therefore wish to consider whether the provision of some dedicated teaching might both enable these students to explore some topics in greater depth and send a valuable signal to students who can be nourished as key ambassadors of the programme, both for future students and employers.**

*Action taken: The School established a second dedicated module, Advanced Economic Analysis, for Single Honours Major students only. The module follows a problem-based learning model and is designed to nurture this group as well as to provide training in skills which may not be covered in other modules. Informal responses from students suggest that this module has been very well received.*

**The RG recommends that, if MA students are to be recruited internationally, the School takes steps to ensure that the quality of the intake and the consequent graduates is maintained at a high level.**

*Action taken: The Graduate Studies Committee has been expanded and will work in close liaison with the School Administrator and the online applications group to ensure the quality of admissions to the MA programme.*

**That the School consider the formalisation of fair procedures for allocating research funding.**

*Action taken: The School has established a Finance Committee consisting of the Head of School and two other senior School members who will review applications for all forms of funding, including research funding for sums greater than €100.*

**The staff-student forum, which has recently been re-established, provides an important insight into the student learning experience. The Committee recommends that this process of on-going and regular student consultation continue. The staff-student forum has proved to be an important channel for feedback, and other ways of involving students at different levels in School structures to provide further channels of communication might usefully be considered.**

*Action taken: This forum has continued to operate and has included student representatives elected by the students' union and by the class themselves. Staff members have also continued to attend the meetings organised by the School of Business and Law. The new designated module for Single Honours Major students also incorporates interaction with School members via interviews and coffee afternoons.*

**The Curriculum Committee should review all module offerings in light of the desired skill set to ensure that these are taught across the programme as a whole.**

*Action taken: this is part of the mandate of the review being carried out by the Teaching and Learning Group.*

**The potential for deepening links with the College of Business and Law in terms of shared modules is worth exploration, and a joint Masters in Economics and Finance also merits serious consideration.**

*Action taken: The School has made contact with representatives from the School of Business and the School of Law with a view to discussing the possibility of greater co-operation in terms of undergraduate and postgraduate modules.*

**The potential for collaboration with TCD and NUIM in delivery at Masters level merits careful consideration, with potential advantages and disadvantages for the School and for UCD. If a critical mass of students can be maintained by a (mostly) UCD offering, then allowing one or two modules to be taken at TCD would not entail dilution of the School/UCD brand and would broaden the topics covered. If on the other hand a sufficient number of students was unlikely to be sustained – or if the number of students attracted could be very substantially expanded – then a fully-fledged joint programme would have attractions. The same comments apply to the integration of the PhD programme with that at TCD.**

*Action taken: Following the success of the UCD-Trinity joint PhD bid in the recent PRTL funding round, preliminary discussions have been held with the Head of Economics at Trinity with a view to seeing how co-operation can be extended in the*

*provision of PhD modules. These discussions will also incorporate the possibility of sharing modules at Masters level.*

**The RG recommends that aspects of learning, teaching and assessment other than the curriculum are also reviewed on a rolling basis.**

*Action taken: As indicated above, the Teaching and Learning Group are carrying out a review of the content, as well as the structure, of the Undergraduate programme. The School has also appointed a senior member of staff to act as Exams Officer. Part of this brief will be to review methods of assessment to ensure that a balance of different methods of assessment are achieved. This process began in academic year 2010-2011.*

**The RG recommends a clearer articulation of the twin objectives of the provision of non-specialist and specialist education, and the associated learning outcomes for each, as beneficial both to students and the development of the School's strategy for teaching and learning.**

*Action taken: This issue will be considered within the review of the Undergraduate Programme by the Teaching and Learning Group.*

**The RG recommends that the School considers adjustments to assessments which would allow students to display a greater range of skills and more comprehensive analysis in selected modules.**

*Action taken: As indicated above, a senior School member has been appointed to review the range of assessments currently employed within the School. Following the findings of this review, changes may be made to assessments in some modules. Already the introduction of the new dedicated module for Single Honours Major students has broadened the range of assessments and the initial responses have been positive.*

**That the School consider the formalisation of fair procedures for allocating research funding.**

*Action taken: The School has established a Finance Committee consisting of the Head of School and two senior staff members and this committee has already made decisions with respect to a number of requests for funding. The budgetary situation for 2010-2011 does not appear to be as severe as was previously anticipated and so it is not expected that the constraint on research funding will bind for this year at least. In the meantime, the Finance Committee will consider different models for the allocation of research funding, on the basis that funding constraints are likely to bind in future years. The Committee will prepare a set of proposals for consideration before the end of semester 2, 2010-2011.*

**The staff-student forum, which has recently been re-established, provides an important insight into the student learning experience. The Committee recommends that this process of on-going and regular student consultation continue. The staff-student forum has proved to be an important channel for feedback, and other ways of involving students at different levels in School structures to provide further channels of communication might usefully be considered.**

*Action taken: the staff-student forum has continued into the 2010-2011 academic year. The new dedicated module for Single Honours Major students has also incorporated informal feedback sessions via coffee afternoons etc in an attempt to improve communication channels with students and informal reports suggest that this has been successful.*

**The Curriculum Committee should review all module offerings in light of the desired skill set to ensure that these are taught across the programme as a whole.**

*Action taken: this is explicitly part of the brief of the Teaching and Learning Group in their curriculum review for 2010-2011.*

**Staff who are currently less fully engaged with international academic activity should be encouraged, facilitated and supported in doing so. Participation in funded research networks is one route to sustaining such links, and the Geary Institute has a valuable role in that respect and in providing a channel to international academic activity more generally.**

*Action taken: staff who are not actively engaged with international academic activity receive continued support to do so, as funding for attendance at international conferences has always been provided by the School. Even with the more difficult funding situation this year, support continues to be provided with priority given to those who are presenting papers at conferences or at least otherwise actively engaged in conferences (e.g. designated discussants, chairing sessions, presenting posters etc). The School continues to receive support from and to co-operate with the Geary Institute in terms of international networking.*

### **Category 1(b)**

**Recommendations to be implemented within one year**

**Notwithstanding the desirability of stretching targets, the current version of the workload model should be reconsidered to ensure that the research targets are set at realistic and attainable levels.**

*Action Planned: the Head of School will review the research targets in the School workload model with a view to ensuring that they are realistic and attainable. This will be carried out in the 2010-2011 academic year.*

**That the School undertake planning to mitigate the consequences of expected staff departures.**

*Action planned: the School Executive will meet to explicitly discuss this issue in semester 2 of the academic year, when there is greater certainty with respect to the University budget and also with respect to staff returning from career breaks.*

**The RG recommends that further thought be given to tackling the issue of Stage 1 failure rates.**

*Action planned: It is hoped that the changes introduced to the provision of tutorials etc will lead to improvements in Stage 1 failure rates. The School will continue to monitor these failure rates and consider alternative strategies should there be no improvement. It is also likely that there will be University-wide strategies to address high failure rates in Stage 1 and the School will co-operate with these.*

**The RG recommends a review of the assessment weightings for Semester 1 modules at Stage 1 in the light of the difficulties students appear to face in adapting to University.**

*Action planned: these weightings will be reviewed as part of the general review of Stage 1 results. The School will also consider the timing of mid-terms for Stage 1 students, trading off the necessity of giving students an early indication of their progress while also allowing them time to settle into University life before asking them to undergo assessment.*

**That the School continue to develop and implement its mentoring system.**

*Action planned: the Head of School will review the mentoring system in academic year 2010-2011. It is currently being implemented in a very light-touch fashion and consideration will be given as to whether it needs to be put on a more formal basis, bearing in mind that there is also a University-wide mentoring scheme (currently at an early stage of development).*

**Support from the Teaching and Learning unit could be more widely availed of by staff across the School as they deal with the challenges identified in engaging undergraduate students generally, and with Stage 1 and those with lower maths ability in particular.**

*The School Teaching and Learning Committee will review the range of supports available from the University Teaching and Learning Unit and recommend which, if any, could be of use to School staff (and which are not being availed of at present).*

**There is very little student mobility at undergraduate level, with very few participating in the Erasmus programme. The reasons for this could usefully be explored – in the first instance, it seems that the number of places offered via the School is very low. Efforts could be made to promote participation in the programme and overcome any perceived or actual obstacles. Other international School links via the EDGE network of universities have also led to a disappointing level of flows to and from UCD: the potential of other structured engagements with universities outside the country in this regard could be examined.**

*Action planned: as part of the reorganisation of responsibilities within the School, and recognising the importance of international links, the School will assign the role of International Officer to a School member (this appointment should have been made in the general allocation of tasks in September 2010 but was omitted). This person will have responsibility for all international links including Erasmus, Junior Year Abroad and will investigate ways of broadening these links.*

### **Category 1(c)**

#### **Recommendations to be implemented within five years**

**The RG recommends that the School consider options to provide small-group teaching for Stage 1 students.**

*Action planned: In 2010-2011 the School revised its approach to tutorials for stage 1 and stage 2 students, with the provision of online tutorials and a limited number of drop-in centres and traditional tutorials. The School will review how successful this initiative has proven to be and then review options with respect to small-group teaching, bearing in mind that resources are likely to contract further.*

**A more structured self-reflection process by module co-ordinators in the light of student evaluation of modules should be considered.**



*Action planned: In 2010-2011 the School adopted the University-wide online module evaluation system. This system replaced the School-based one which had been used in previous years. This system offers limited scope for module co-ordinators to tailor their own questions for the module. It remains to be seen how this new evaluation system will evolve in terms of response rate, representativeness of responses etc. Without being sure of how the system will evolve, it is difficult, at the moment, to be specific as to how a more structured self-reflection process should be developed, but it will remain an issue under consideration by the School.*

**Internationalisation at graduate level gives rise to a different set of issues and challenges. The Masters programme at present has predominantly Irish students. With the appropriate (high) level of support from other University units, it might be possible to significantly expand the number of international students at both Masters and doctoral level. As noted in 5.4, stringent admission criteria would need to be maintained if the value of the School and University brand were not to be seriously undermined. Diversity in international intake would also be an important desideratum. (The extent to which this would be seen as a sensible strategy for the School would be influenced by the budgetary issues referred to earlier.)**

*Action planned: this is clearly an ongoing issue. The composition of students at graduate level has become more international in recent years and the School welcomes this development, subject to the admission-quality issues referred to in this and other recommendations. Significant expansion of the number of international students is likely to take place at College level and the School will continue to be fully involved in such initiatives.*

#### **Category 1(d)**

##### **Recommendations which will not be implemented**

**The RG endorses the School's suggestion that Introduction to Quantitative Economics should become a prerequisite for the Intermediate Macroeconomics and Microeconomics modules.**

*Reason for not implementing: Following discussion with the Programme Office for Arts and Humanities, the School was informed that it was only possible to have two modules listed as pre-requisites for progression to stage 2. As it was felt that Introductory Microeconomics and Introductory Macroeconomics would have to be prerequisites, this implied that it was not possible to list Introduction to Quantitative Economics as a prerequisite. However students would be strongly advised that if they wished to progress to stage 2 Economics they should take this module.*

**CATEGORY 2:** Recommendations concerning shortcomings in services, procedures and facilities which are outside the control of the unit

**Category 2(a)**

**Recommendations already implemented**

1. Recommendation:

Action taken:

2. Recommendation:

Action taken:

**Category 2(b)**

**Recommendations to be implemented within one year**

**Concerns were expressed about aspects of the administration of curriculum management and assessment and the impact this has on the functioning of the School. Continuous changes in the curriculum management and assessment procedures were seen to impose a particular burden on School staff; ways of minimising these burdens should be sought.**

*Action planned: essentially this issue is outside the control of the School, and it is possible that the procedures which the School of Economics finds burdensome may be perfectly acceptable to other Schools. As best we can, by highlighting these issues at the appropriate committees, the School will endeavour to find ways to minimise these burdens.*

**If the School were to seek to expand the number of international students (a topic discussed in the next section), intensive support and engagement from other units in the University would be required both at marketing stage and in supporting the School and the students attracted. If the University is able to raise its profile in the marketplace for graduate students then the number entering into the School's programmes will naturally increase.**

*Action planned: the School has already established links with the International Office, following the visit of the College of Human Sciences Delegation to China in November 2010. Following suggestions made at the College Executive, the School will discuss an "internationalisation" policy over the extent to which it is feasible and desirable to attract more international students.*

**In taking on staff from other countries, more structured orientation might usefully be provided both by the University and by the School.**

*Action planned: while the rate of new hiring in the immediate future, whether from Ireland or elsewhere, is likely to be very limited, the School would be more than happy to co-operate with the University in developing a more structured orientation programme for new staff.*

## **Category 2(c)**

### **Recommendations to be implemented within five years**

**In light of anticipated constraints/reductions in the budget, the School should consider capitalising on its research reputation to attract international students. However, recognising the challenges facing the School in other areas, this should only be done if an agreed proportion of the financial benefit is returned in an identifiable way to the School in order to take pressure off other areas.**

*Action planned: The Head of School was part of a delegation to China in November 2010 whose mission was to establish relationships with a view to attracting Chinese postgraduate students. The School will meet in 2011 to discuss practical ways of building upon the relationships which were established during this visit. The issue of how and what proportion of the financial benefit will be returned to the School will be discussed with other schools in the College of Human Sciences as any decisions in this area will be taken at College (and possibly University) level.*

**Recommendation: That the School obtain dedicated space for graduate students in the Newman building.**

*Action planned: The School will continue to lobby for dedicated space for graduate students in the Newman building. The proposed extension to the Newman building, linking it to the Library, may offer the best prospect of success here.*

**A student-to-student mentoring structure would be a very positive initiative; this would require the appointment of an additional Student Advisor at College level, to provide training and support for the student mentors.**

*This issue will be raised at College level. However, given the constraint on resources, it is probably not realistic to expect much progress in the short term.*

## **Category 2(d)**

### **Recommendations which will not be implemented**

1. Recommendation:

Reason for not implementing:

2. Recommendation:

Reason for not implementing:

**CATEGORY 3:** Recommendations concerning inadequate staffing, and/or facilities which require recurrent or capital funding

**Category 3(a)**

**Recommendations already implemented**

**That the University be aware that the retention of the School's current international ranking requires maintenance of staffing levels.**

*Action taken: The School is in continual dialogue with the Principal of the College of Human Sciences concerning staffing levels. The Principal continues to be extremely supportive in this regard, but financial constraints are now binding tighter than ever and the situation is unlikely to improve greatly in the medium term.*

**Category 3(b)**

**Recommendations to be implemented within one year**

**That the University accept the critical importance of replacing academic staff and increasing the number of non-academic staff.**

*Action planned: The School, in liaison with the College Principal, will continue to lobby for increased resources from the University, bearing in mind the continuing difficult position with respect to University finances.*

**Category 3(c)**

**Recommendations to be implemented within five years**

**Recommendation: That funding be sought for a dual-use experimental laboratory/graduate computing facility.**

*Action planned: The School will continue to campaign, on an ongoing basis, for funding for facilities in this area. The School will also look to avail of the recently acquired facilities of the School of Geography, Planning and Environmental Policy (GPEP). GPEP have already indicated that they are happy to share facilities with other Schools in the College of Human Sciences.*

**Category 3(d)**

**Recommendations which will not be implemented**

1. Recommendation:

Reason for not implementing:

2. Recommendation:

Reason for not implementing:

### **3. Prioritised Resource Requirements**

This section should only contain a list, prioritised by the Quality Improvement Committee, of recommendations outlined in the Review Group Report, which require additional resources. The planned action to address each recommendation with an estimate of the cost involved should also be included:

1. Additional administrative staff (cost dependent upon level at which appointment is made)
2. Replacement of academic staff who have retired, passed away or resigned (once again, cost is dependent upon level of appointment).

Note: The Quality Improvement Plan should be used to inform School/Support Unit and College level academic, support service and resource planning activities.