University College Dublin

UCD Quality Office

Writing the Self-assessment Report – Background Notes

The Self-assessment Report (SAR) is the key document through which a unit conveys information about itself. Equally, and perhaps more importantly, it is the starting point for critical reflection by the unit, about the way it is: organised and managed; what mechanisms are used to evaluate the standards and quality of its functions and activities; how do the outputs from these mechanisms enhance the units activities and provision? etc. It is an evidence-based reflection of what the unit believes to be working well and what it believes to be working less well, and what might be done about the latter. The SAR should be full and frank, not attempting to hide problems, but not forgetting to cover strengths; and it should be developmental, offering thoughts on how to improve provision within the unit.

The unit preparing for review, is not required to provide a detailed description of what it does. Some background information will be necessary of course, to set the context for example, but it should be succinct. The emphasis should instead, be on the critical self-evaluation of how effective it believes the various aspects of its provision to be. Set out below, are sample extracts from earlier SARs which illustrate a self-reflective approach, and which were considered by Review Groups to be drafted in a helpful style. The extracts are set out under a number of headings which broadly reflect the SAR content structure (Academic Unit Examples – page 1-7; Support Unit Examples – page 7-11).

(A) Academic Unit Quality Review - Examples

Introduction and Context

Sample extract A1

The School sees this exercise as an opportunity to reflect on our quality standards and processes in view of: (1) identifying shortfalls in resources and providing an externally validated case for change and/or increased resources, (2) identifying weaknesses and shortcomings in our procedures and organisation that can be addressed internally, (3) gaining a deeper understanding of where our strengths lie and encourage discussion on how we as a School can prosper by maintaining and

building on these, and (4) facilitating (in conjunction with the review group report) the preparation of an "action plan" by which the School can continue to work for continuous quality improvement. A summary of the approach taken to conduct this review is described in Appendix X. In this context, the School welcomes comments, constructive criticism and recommendations by the Review Group (RG) with a view to enhancing our overall performance and reputation.

Sample extract A2

Figure 1 shows the organisation of the School Administrative, Technical and Student Support management with the directors of these activities reporting to the Head of School (HoS). The School also operates the committees shown in Figures 2 and 3. Further details relating to the role of these committees and matters arising, are discussed in the later sections of this report. This committee structure has evolved over the past three years to most effectively meet our changing needs since becoming a School. For instance, the most recent revision here is the appointment of a School Web Committee in response to feedback about our current Web presence. This committee is also responsible for Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) management, and the provision of a staff support wiki to facilitate the discussion on various topics arising from internal committee meetings (e.g., Teaching & Learning, Research & Development, Staff-Student Consultation, etc.).
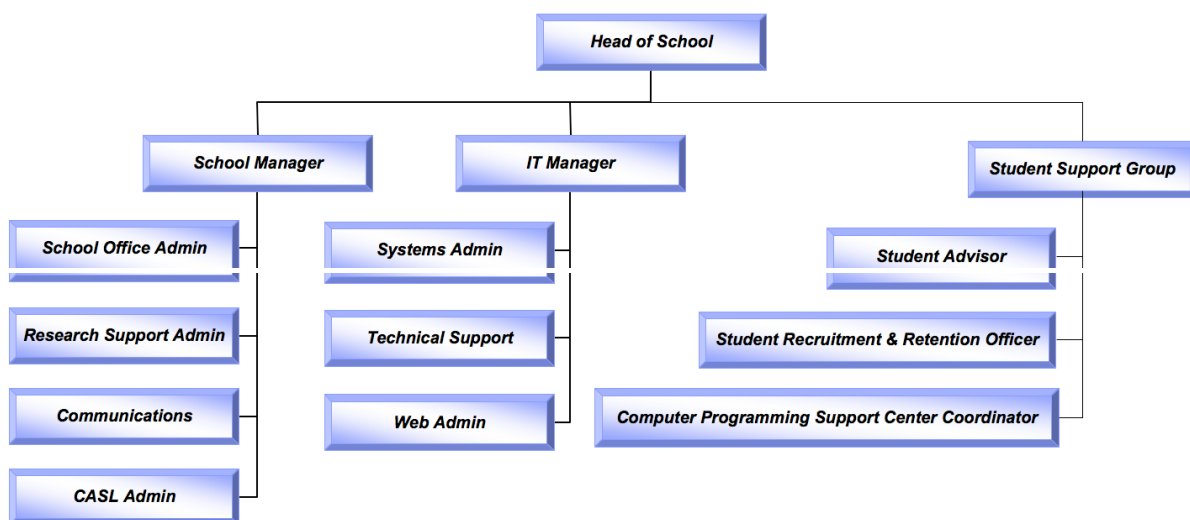

Figure 1: School Support Staff Structure Diagram.

Currently the School does not follow a formal procedure in relation to the rotation/selection of chairs – rotation is carried out informally every 2 to 3 years depending on staff workloads and availability. Given that the current UCD promotions process places a high value on internal committee chairing it would make sense to look at revising how and when these appointments are made in the best interests of all staff.
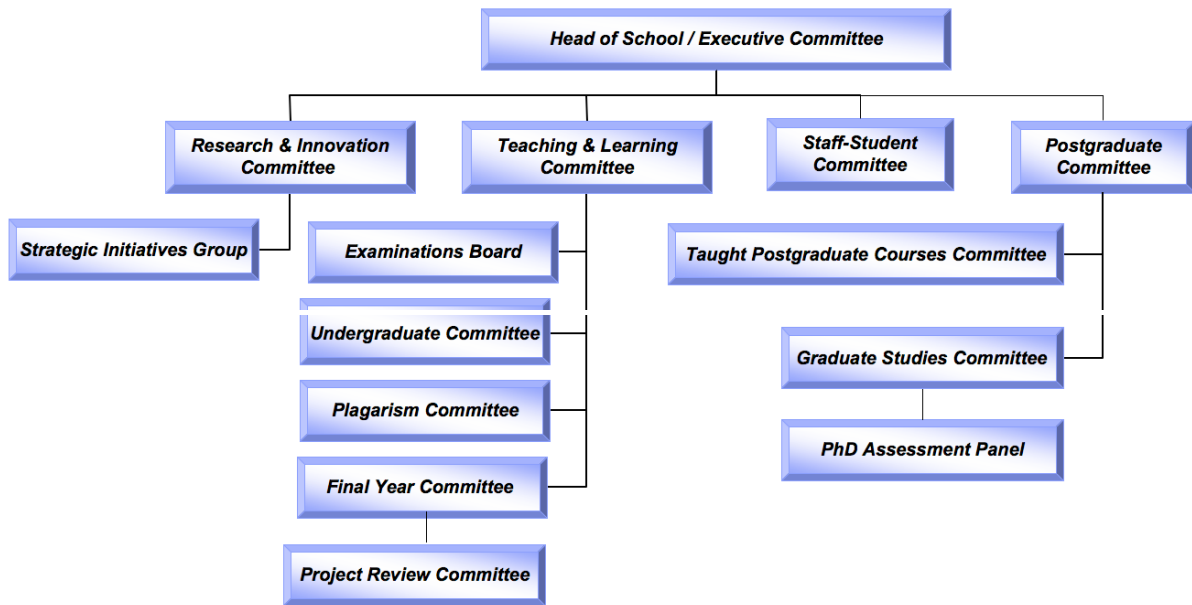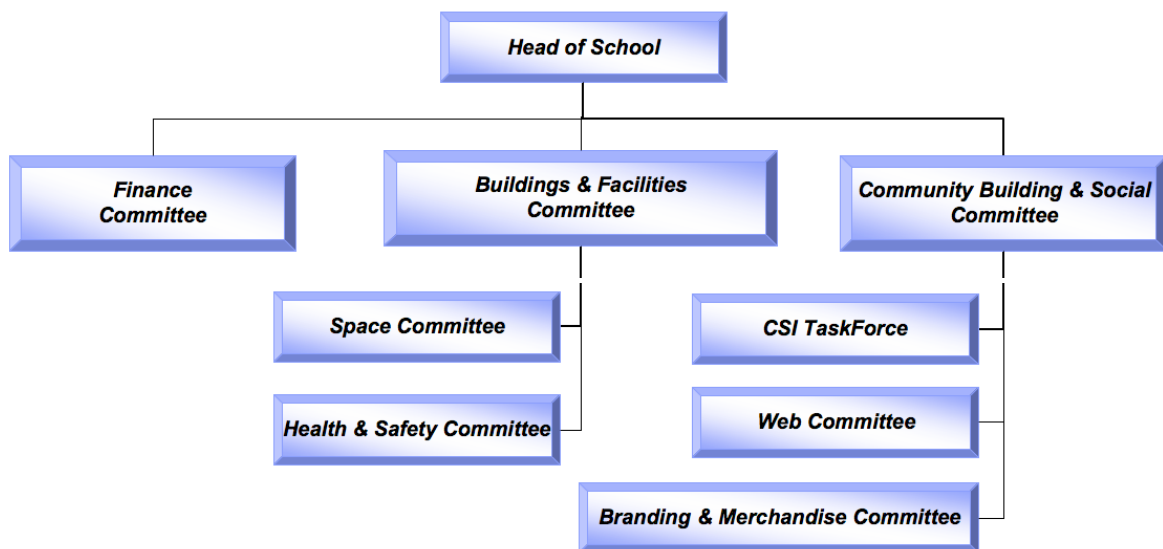
Figure 2: School Academic Committee Structure.

Figure 3: Further School Committee Structures.

Sample extract A3

As a result of the previous QA/QI review process in XXXX, the UCD School of X consciously developed a strategic approach to research. This is reinforced in the School strategic planning process and is currently encapsulated in the School Strategic Plan for Research and Innovation 2007–2012 (see Appendix X). This allows the School to be both coherent and adaptable in its research strategy. The School contributes significantly to UCD's Global Ireland major research theme (see Appendix X - Research, Section 5 in UCD Strategic Plan) and also to the X Institute, the College of X research focus on X.

The School has initiated research themes and clusters and is monitoring their ongoing development with review based on performance. Within the School there are a number of major, on-going research projects at various stages of their life cycle. Many of these are captured under the X research theme (one of the research strands funded through the UCD X Institute under the national Programme for Research in Third-Level Institutions (PRTLI) cycle 4) while others have an international dimension, as collaborative projects with international partners focused on Ireland, such as the X project (Ireland and Canada), the X project in the USA, or focused on other parts of the world, such as the X project in the eastern Mediterranean and the X project (Country).

Organisation and Management

Sample extract A4

The management of the School would benefit from a clearer articulation and understanding by all colleagues of the yearly cycle of activities and key times within it. The institution of a more regular rotation of positions of responsibilities in the School is also required. Currently there is a tendency to leave staff in positions where they have known expertise. More regular rotation would ensure new thinking, sharing of knowledge and provide greater opportunities for career development.

Staff and Facilities

Sample extract A5

The consequence of these changes is that from XXXX to present the School staff-student (FTE) ratio has increased by 70%, from 1:14.5 to 1:25. Comparable figures for staff-student ratios in 28 UK universities (*The Guardian University Guide 2011; Subject*) show that 71% have a ratio of less than 1:15 (the ratio in X University, for example, is 1:12.2), 90% have a ratio of less than 1:20 and none have a ratio that is as high as that in UCD. Staff constraints, while bearable in the short term and in the context of University budgetary constraints, place a significant on-going, additional burden on members of staff, will affect the quality of teaching at both undergraduate and graduate level and are a key factor inhibiting the future development and success of the School.

Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Sample extract A6

The retention and completion rates of *Subject* students are in line with other subjects at UCD and are not a major problem. For example, the failure rate in 1st year *Subject* is 15% on average for the last five years. However, *the School* is facing a number of challenges in connection with undergraduate programmes. In line with national and international trends, there has been a marked falloff in interest in *X* degrees (see Figure 8 (a)), which has resulted in students with lower points taking places in *Subject*. Minimum entry points have dropped from over **XXX** points in 2000 to **XXX-**

130 points for the *Degree 1* programme and **XXX-125** points for the Degree 2 programme in 2007. This is a very serious problem as the academic standard of the students is now much lower than it was five years ago. UCD statistics (see Figure 8(b)) demonstrate that the retention rates for students with lower CAO Leaving Certificate points is lower than for students with higher points. In fact, for students with less than **400** points, more than **56%** of students failed their *first attempt* at their 1st *Discipline* examination. This also suggests that early identification of struggling students and the application of appropriate supports would result in a higher retention and progression rate and allow students to achieve their real potential more rapidly. *The School* has started to address this problem on two fronts: we are looking to improve our marketing strategies to attract better students while at the same time providing more assistance and support to retain the current cohort (more details are given in Section X).
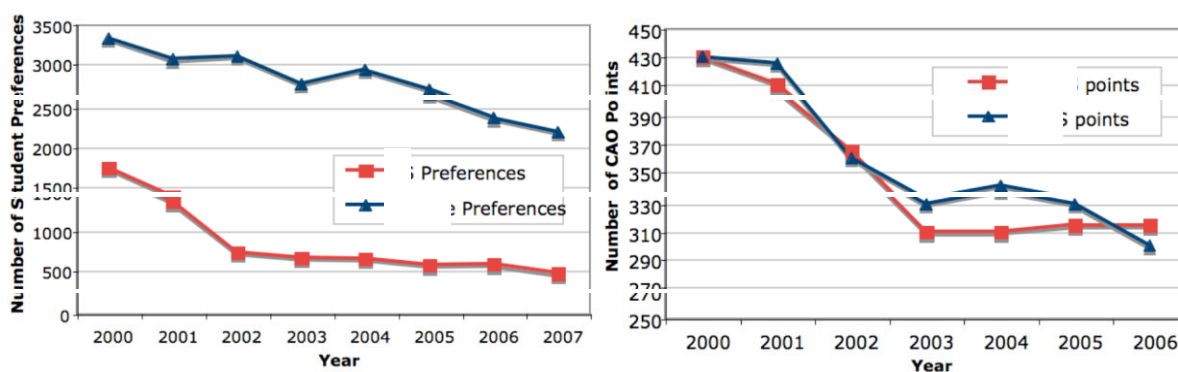

Figure 8: (a) Trends in student CAO preferences for Subject*, and (b) Illustrating the decline in the "academic strength" of our entry students since 2000.*

Research Activity

Sample extract A7

The *listed* themes characterise the broad research fronts within the School. As well as these themes the School focuses on six specialist areas, selected on the basis of scale of current/projected funding and perceived opportunity. The specialist areas are: *U, V, W, X, Y and Z*. The first two of these areas are well established, have critical mass and are growing. The second two are smaller and have been identified as growth opportunities. The last two are emerging areas. These six areas will receive priority in decisions with resource limitations, will inform selection of Thematic PhD programmes and will be target focal areas for *grant* proposals.

Sample extract A8

Research output has been at a consistently high rate for the last four years (see Table *X below*). Almost 20% of publications are in peer-reviewed journals. This is consistent with discipline norms for high performance *Subject* schools. A number of selected outputs are listed in Appendix *X.* to highlight important School research outputs in the last 4 years. Key outputs include *subject specific material,* highly cited books, journal and conference publications.

Table X. Unique publications (* = year to February)

Type *	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Books	X	X	X	X
Books Chapters	X	X	X	X
Edited Book	X	X	X	X
Peer Reviewed Journals	X	X	X	X
Other Journals	X	X	X	X
Conference Publications	X	X	X	X
Total	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**

Quality and Enhancement

Sample extract A9

One of *the School's* key strengths is that since '03 *the School* has appointed it own HEA-funded student adviser to support our students. In this period all staff unanimously agree that the appointment of this post has have brought many academic-related issues to their attention. Surveys carried out by the University, of students who left *Subject* courses, primarily at the end of 1st year, suggested that some students had unrealistic expectations of *the Subject*, found it difficult to grasp the basic academic concepts of the subject and/or failed to adjust to the third-level learning environment. Our student advisor provides exceptional support for undergraduate students in *Subject* courses who have difficulties adjusting to a university environment, by providing advice and information in relation to academic, social, personal and practical issues and, where necessary, by referring them for more specialised advice to members of the academic or administrative staff or to the professional support services. This additional resource has made a significant contribution to student life in the School. Appendix *X* provides an outline of the principal duties associated with this role.

Sample extract A10

The staff student committee provides an excellent forum for undergraduate and postgraduate students to air any concerns. Where possible, issues raised are resolved swiftly. For example, provision of wireless internet access in the Third Year lab last year was a direct result of a request made at the Staff Student Committee. Changes were made to this year's Stage 3 timetable to address issues highlighted by last year's students. Importantly, where issues cannot be resolved, staff can explain why resolution is not possible. Often, once students understand that some things are outside the School's control, and/or that there are reasons why things work the way they do, they are happy to accept the situation. This was the case for example when Stage 2 students requested that more demonstrators be assigned to practical classes.

Sample extract A11

Calendars and Timetabling

The School has had numerous issues regarding online calendars and class schedules as the main schedule on the internal UCD website is not updated at key times (e.g. two weeks before registration) which causes difficulties for groups such as early registering students. The schedule is managed by the Programme Offices and Room Allocations, which do not appear to have the ability to update online information themselves (this is managed through IT Services). Difficulties with the availability, synchronisation and accuracy of this data has caused significant problems for the School over the past three years. This is particularly the case because the School is running a cross-programme degree, the *Degree* which has created major timetabling issues. Overall a number of areas have been identified that would lead to significant improvement in the service provided:

- Provision of an accessible online calendar of dates and weeks listing odd and even weeks by date and including the upcoming academic year.
- Synchronisation of the timetabling schedules that are available to staff and student and update them on an ongoing basis.
- Provision of a cross-university timetabling system which includes joint degrees that run across Colleges.
- Provision of supports for MA class timetabling which is currently very-time consuming to complete locally and will become more difficult to schedule with increasing numbers of joint MA programmes.
- Removal of the Even/Odd week system for the academic year by which the first week of Semester 2 is always an even week, when it should be Week 1 again.

(B) Support Unit Quality Review - Examples

Introduction and Details of the Unit

Sample extract B1

The Report was produced following an in-depth assessment of the activities of the Unit, taking into account the perspectives of both internal staff and the wider University community. Following a request for volunteers, a **Quality Working Group** and a **Self-Assessment Co-ordinating Committee** were established from within *the Unit*, to assemble and assess the information required, using the following processes:

- User Satisfaction Survey

- Focus Groups

- SWOT Analysis

Preparation of the *Self-assessment* Report was found to provide a helpful opportunity and framework for structured reflection on the services currently provided by the Unit, identifying areas where improvements can be made.

The operation of the Unit requires widespread interaction by staff with the University Community at personal, operational and corporate levels. The full implication of this may not always be appreciated by individual members of the Unit as their principal focus is often on task completion. However, it is recognised that the public perception of the University is influenced by *user* experience of *the Unit*.

Sample Extract B2

The team presents a relatively young profile, with 64% of staff currently under the age of 39. However, another significant section of staff (24%) are between 50-65 years. This may present some challenges in the future with regard to staff turnover, loss of organisational knowledge and required replacements due to retirements, etc. Strong succession planning and the ability to replace staff will be important to address this issue. Generally, there are limited staff retention issues in the current climate.

Figure X Staff by Age
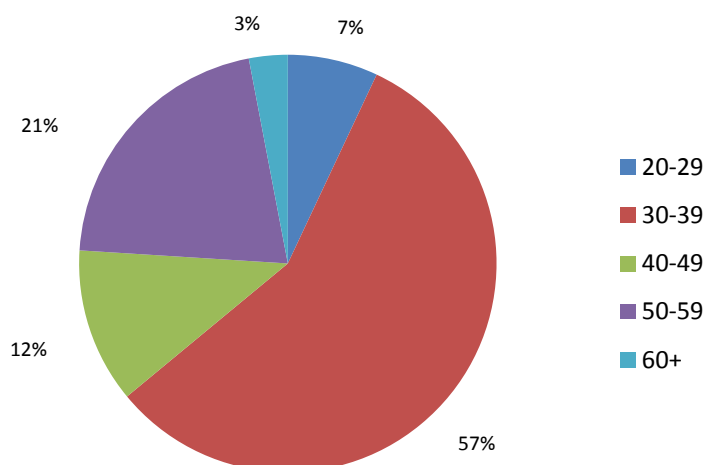
Functions, Activities and Processes

Sample extract B3

A key strength of the Unit is its strong technical knowledge and operational competence. *Unit X* intends to explore ways of codifying, sharing and retaining this knowledge through a number of projects.

Sample extract B4

There is a strong culture of task completion within the X Team; however the process of formally closing out requests needs to improve, so that prompt feedback can be provided. It was noted in the user survey that this is an area where feedback is expected. The implementation of this is being considered.

In relation to the above, a recent pilot trial of altering the close-out stage by the X Manager has assisted in improving the turn-around time and the recording of the close-out of X tasks. This also has the added benefit of recording more details about the task, identification of trends and repeat requests. On the basis of this pilot trial, it is intended to investigate if there are opportunities to implement this approach in other areas.

Sample extract B5

Regular staff meetings keep the members of staff informed of changes in procedures, and of decisions taken in other parts of the University that may affect their work. Staff know the unit's goals relevant to their activity. External communications are ongoing but need to be improved, in particular with college staff and students, whose feedback on this area is not good (Reference Appendix *X*). Moves are already underway to improve online communication towards this end. A newsletter (Reference Appendix *X*) is also published on a regular basis.

Sample extract B6

A clear opportunity exists for the Unit to build on professional partnerships in a systematic way and to focus on enhanced collaboration internally within the team and across the University.

Planning, Organisation and Management

Sample extract B7

An urgent challenge for the Unit is the reported pattern of a decline in standards of staff and student behaviour towards staff of *the Unit*. There is a need to explore this area in partnership with the leadership of the University, in order to promote the development of a more positive collaborative culture, including the need for agreed procedures to ensure that incidents are managed properly post-event to avoid recurrence.

Sample extract B8

Decision-making *in the Unit* can be broken down into a number of distinct groupings:

1. Decisions that impact University strategy/policy generally are subject to the requisite SMT approval. Many of these decisions can be complex with inter-linkages with other policies and knock-on impacts, which have to be carefully considered. As a result, decision-making in some of these areas can sometimes be perceived to be slow. A key feature here relates to *the Unit*

being part of a larger process (for which it only has partial responsibility). The Unit acknowledges that delays in decision-making at this level (mainly outside of *the Unit*) can lead to considerable frustrations.

2. Decisions at cross-directorate level generally arise and are managed through specific projects and through the weekly *manager*-level meeting.

3. Day-to-day *manager*-specific decisions are made by specific managers and their teams within each *management unit*. Due to the presence of these structures, decisions within the control of the Unit are generally made in a prompt and impactful manner. However, again due to the nature of the work of the Unit, some internal decisions carry the potential for significant knock-on impacts across the University. These decisions can take a significant amount of time to fully analyse and resolve. *The Unit* places a value on carefully considering the potential implications of these types of decisions before committing the University to a particular course of action.

Sample extract B9

Hiring, training and development of staff is difficult to plan in a situation where all staff are temporary or part-time. To date, ad hoc courses, seminars have been held but this has not been managed in a strategic way. Development needs are discussed as part of performance reviews where these take place.

Management of Resources

Sample extract B10

A strategic decision was made that the Unit would become a source of information and *discipline* expertise to fulfil its overall role within the University. The establishment of specialised support and management functions such as the X and Y Units are recognition of the need for improved strategic management of resources in order to achieve cost effectiveness.

Sample extract B11

The Unit acknowledges that not all development is achieved through training programmes and there is a value placed on fostering internal expertise and knowledge while developing and sharing this knowledge among the team. Cross-*management unit* projects represent a key mechanism utilised to facilitate this. Feedback from the staff SWOT conducted as part of Quality Review preparations has shown that while cross-*management unit* projects exist, it is considered that this tool could be used more strategically across *the Unit* for all grades of staff in order to improve communication, promote learning and development and to strengthen relationships within the Unit.

Sample extract B12

The following communication channels within the Unit have proved particularly effective in keeping unit staff informed:

- Annual *Unit* Staff Planning Day – Brings all staff together to reflect on the previous year's progress and to plan for the year ahead (annually)

- Quarterly *Unit* staff meetings – Brings all staff together to provide regular cross-team updates (four times a year)

- "Brown Bag Lunch Series"/special briefings – Shares timely information or expertise on particular *Unit* topics/ projects (as needed)

- Individual *management unit* meetings – Brings together all *management unit* staff to share information on work being conducted within the *management unit*, to provide timely cross-*management unit* / University updates (monthly)

- *Management unit* update – Regular emailed update within the *management unit* to provide key update points

UCD Quality Office
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