

**University College Dublin**

**Summary Report of the Periodic Quality Review**

**UCD Applied Language Centre**

**Accepted by the UCD Governing Authority at its meeting on 13 October 2009**

***Introduction***

1.1 This summary report presents the findings of a quality review of the UCD Applied Language Centre (ALC), at University College Dublin. The review was undertaken in April 2009.

***The UCD Quality Review Process***

1.2 Irish Universities have collectively agreed a framework for their quality review and quality improvement systems, which is consistent with both the legislative requirements of the Universities Act 1997, and international good practice. Quality reviews are carried out in academic, administrative and support service units.

1.3 The purpose of periodic review is to assist the University to assure itself of the quality of each of its constituent units, and to utilise learning from this essentially developmental process in order to effect improvement, including :

* To monitor the quality of the student experience, and of teaching and learning opportunities
* To monitor research activity, including: management of research activity; assessing the research performance with regard to: research productivity, research income, and recruiting and supporting doctoral students.
* To provide an opportunity for units to test the effectiveness of their systems and procedures for monitoring and enhancing quality and standards
* To provide a framework within which the unit can continue to work in the future towards quality improvement
* To identify shortfalls in resources and provide an externally validated case for change and/or increased resources
* Identify, encourage and disseminate good practice – to identify challenges and address these
* To provide public information on the University’s capacity to assure the quality and standards of its awards. The University’s implementation of its quality review procedures also enables it to demonstrate how it discharges its responsibilities for assuring the quality and standards of its awards, as required by the Universities Act 1997.

1.4 Typically, the review model comprises of four major elements:

* Preparation of a Self-assessment Report (SAR)
* A visit by a Review Group (RG) that includes UCD staff and external experts, both national and international. The site visit normally will take place over a two or three day period.
* Preparation of a Review Group Report that is made public
* Agreement of an Action Plan for Improvement (Quality Improvement Plan) based on the RG Report’s recommendations; the University will also monitor progress against the Improvement Plan

Full details of the review process can be found on the UCD Quality Office website: [www.ucd.ie/quality](http://www.ucd.ie/quality).

1.5 The composition of the Review Group for UCD Applied Language Centre was as follows:

* Professor Jim Phelan, UCD School of Biology and Environmental Science (Chair)
* Ms Joan Mullan, UCD Quality Office (Rapporteur)
* Dr Eilís Hennessy, UCD School of Psychology
* Professor Ken Hyland, Institute of Education, University of London
* Professor John Klapper, Centre for Modern Languages, University of Birmingham
* Professor David Singleton, Centre for Language & Communication Studies, Trinity College Dublin

1.6 The RG visited the unit from 21st April to 23rd April 2009 and had meetings with ALC staff and a representative group of students. The RG also met with staff from other units in the University including the College Principal; representatives of the ALC Management Board; School of Languages and Literatures academic staff; a representative group of cognates/partners and representatives of the International Office. The ALC’s response to the Review Group Report is attached at Appendix 1. The site visit schedule is attached at Appendix 2.

1.7 In addition to the Self-assessment Report, the RG considered documentation provided by the unit and the University including the draft UCD Internationalisation Strategy; module and course documentation; sample exam scripts; financial reports; draft position paper on English competency, amongst others.

***Preparation of the Self-assessment Report***

1.8 The School set up a Self-assessment Co-ordinating Committee in accordance with the UCD Quality Office Guidelines. The members of the Co-ordinating Committee were:

* Mary Ruane – ALC Director & Chairperson of the Self-assessment Co-ordinating Committee
* Una Condron – External EFL courses/Examinations/Pre-sessional admissions
* Mary Fitzgerald – English language (general courses)
* Ciara Madden – English language/Examinations/Graduate Certificate TESOL
* Anna Nunan – Foreign languages
* Hugo O’Donnell – Centre Management/Administration/Facilities & Resources
* Brian Rice – Administration/ Foreign language modules
* Noelia Ruiz – Foreign languages

1.9 The Co-ordinating Committee met 10 times between September 2008 and the review site visit.

***The University***

1.10 University College Dublin (UCD) is a large and diverse university whose origin dates back to 1854. The University is situated on a large, modern campus, about 4km to the south of the centre of Dublin.

1.11 The University Strategic Plan (a new Strategic Plan 2009-2014 is being finalised) states that the University’s Mission is:

“to advance knowledge, pursue truth and foster learning, in an atmosphere of discovery, creativity, innovation and excellence, drawing out the best in each individual, and contributing to the social, cultural and economic life of Ireland in the wider world”.

The University is organised into 35 Schools in five Colleges;

* UCD College of Arts and Celtic Studies
* UCD College of Human Sciences
* UCD College of Life Sciences
* UCD College of Engineering, Mathematical and Physical Sciences
* UCD College of Business and Law

1.12 As one of the largest universities on the island of Ireland, UCD supports a broad, deep and rich academic community. There are currently over 22,000 (14,000 undergraduates) students registered on University programmes, including over 3,000 international students from more than 110 countries.

***UCD Applied Language Centre (ALC)***

1.13 Founded in 1989, the ALC is a teaching, research and resource unit based in the College of Arts and Celtic Studies. It has built up a national and international reputation for quality and innovation in the field of second and foreign language pedagogy. The ALC is housed in a customised language teaching space located in the first floor of the Daedalus Building, which is centrally based on the UCD Belfield campus.

1.14 The current mission of the ALC is to develop the learning and teaching of languages to students across the whole University and in the wider community. Its activities are underpinned by research and its application. The ALC’s approach aims to combine the enhancement of academic standards with the practice of innovation and entrepreneurship.

* 1. The ALC has a highly diverse range of activities, which include:
  + Provision of foreign language electives to undergraduate and graduate students
  + Provision of English language courses to prospective and current UCD students
  + Provision of taught graduate programme in TESOL (Cert/Grad Dip/MA)
  + A research and innovation programme
  + English language programme for external students
  + English language testing unit for International English Language Testing (IELTS) and Cambridge ESOL

1.16 Although the ALC is a relatively small unit, it supports a high volume of student numbers. In a typical year, there are approximately 2,300 student module places, 1,000 international students taking English, and, 3,200 examination candidates for IELTS and Cambridge ESOL.

***Commendations and Recommendations of the Review Group***

1.17 The detailed findings of the Review Group are contained in the full report, which may be found at [www.ucd.ie/quality](http://www.ucd.ie/quality). The section that follows contains the Review Group’s commendations and recommendations for improvement under each of the key areas.

**A. Management and Organisational Structures**

Commendations

A.1 The University has attempted to address issues of structure and governance in a forward-looking way, by putting the Board of Management in place and including key stakeholders in this structure.

A.2 There appears to be willingness by all stakeholders to move forward with the ALC in a constructive way.

Recommendations

A.3 The ALC should continue to function as a separate unit within the College of Arts and Celtic Studies.

A.4 The ALC should be managed in such a way as to clearly function in an equivalent manner to the other constituent units of the College.

A.5 The Review Group recommends that, in the short term, the ALC should be guided by the Board of Management. The composition of the Board should be enriched by senior users of the Centre’s services, and the inclusion of an additional senior academic from a relevant area (e.g. the Professor of Linguistics). The RG perceives the role of the Board of Management as being to bring to a resolution the current difficulties and uncertainties and manage the transition towards adaptive structures and governance that will enable the ALC to develop its primary relationship with the College.

A.6 The Review Group strongly recommends that, in the medium term, the Board of Management should be replaced by a Steering Committee. This Steering Committee should continue to give strategic oversight and ensure that the views of key stakeholder groups (e.g. Registrar; schools who are key service-users; International Office, etc.) are represented in decisions about developments within the ALC. However, the RG’s view is that the ALC’s primary management relationship should be with the College of Arts and Celtic Studies, as is the case with the other constituent units of the College.

A.7 The composition of the future Steering Committee should, in the unanimous opinion of the Review Group, include the ALC Director; a representative of the International Office; a representative of the School of Business; a representative of the School of Languages and Literatures, and a representative of each College representing in each case the profile of a key user of ALC.

A.8 A more adaptive financial model for the ALC is required - options on alternative approaches to funding should be explored, particularly in the context of the emphasis on the ALC as a service-provider for the UCD community into the future.

A.9 There needs to be greater transparency about the financial situation of the ALC so that all parties share a common understanding of key financial data.

A.10 The strategic goals of the ALC need to be clearly articulated. ALC goals should support University goals and in turn the ALC should be supported by the University in achieving its goals – the commercial activity of the Centre should be complementary to its strategic focus.

A.11 The ALC and other parties need to resolve difficulties that have over-shadowed some of the ALC’s activities in the past as collegially as possible and to move ahead in a spirit of co-operation that will allow both the ALC and University goals to be successfully achieved.

**B. Staffing**

Commendations

B.1 The Director is energetic and highly committed to her role, and she enjoys the trust and support of her staff.

B.2 There is a clear sense of collegiality amongst the staff of the Centre, who identify strongly with the aims and work of the ALC and invest a great deal in seeking to provide excellent courses for students under difficult circumstances.

B.3 The Centre’s tutors are, on the whole, well qualified for the work they perform. Many of them have considerable experience and display great enthusiasm and professional commitment. They are clearly also committed to the success of the ALC.

B.4 Administrative staff show commitment to the Centre and provide excellent support for its academic activities.

B.5 Nothwithstanding challenges with regard to quality assurance process and governance arrangements outlined elsewhere, working relationships appear to be very good and there is evidence that communication between key staff (e.g. in language areas) works well.

Recommendations

B.6 The ALC needs to devise a realistic staffing plan for both its English Language and its Foreign Language modules, including, as a priority, a Senior Language Co-ordinator post with responsibility for all quality assurance matters across *Horizons* languages and stages. In due course, this post should be supported by Language Co-ordinators, initially in French and Spanish, who might typically take responsibility for co-ordinating their own and for overseeing and providing support for tutors of one or two of the less commonly taught languages in the Centre. As languages such as Chinese and Japanese grow, they will also require co-ordination by a full-time member of staff.

B.7 There is an urgent need for the appointment of a core of full-time academic staff to coordinate existing programme offerings and to develop the EAP support programmes. The Centre has done an excellent job with current patterns of staffing, but this is not sustainable in the longer term.

B.8 As part of the move to a new staffing structure, arrangements should be put in place for staff development review and opportunities for tutors to engage in pedagogical development and to enhance their scholarly profile.

**C. Teaching and Learning – Foreign Languages**

Commendations

C.1 The FL modules reflect good practice in second and foreign language pedagogy, including aspects of independent and blended learning, communicative and task-based methodology, and use of portfolios.

C.2 The FL programme is highly efficient in terms of its system of common levels across languages, its approach to module design and its assessment procedures.

C.3 Courses are pegged to the Common European Framework and prerequisite and exit language levels are clearly advertised.

C.4 Student learning packs for individual languages and supplementary materials, such as vocabulary support booklets, are well organised and provide good support to learners.

C.5 Attendance rates at class are high. This is all the more commendable in view of the inevitable need to timetable many modules at less popular times. The high attendance rates are consistent with the positive student feedback received by the Review Group.

C.6 There is a high response rate for student course questionnaires. These provide evidence of high satisfaction ratings for teaching, especially for the tutors’ interactive approach. This positive feedback is supported by the personal testimony of students with whom the RG met. Students are content with the amount of contact they have with tutors, they value access to native speaker teachers, are grateful for the support they receive, and praise tutors for their availability, prompt responses to email queries and other requests for help.

C.7 Feedback on the FL programme from academic partners/client schools across campus is very positive. Schools appear to value highly the courses which ALC provides for its students, seeing them as an inherently valuable educational opportunity for their students as well as acting as a recruitment tool. In this sense, ALC’s FL modules serve the important function of supporting academic programmes across the whole of UCD.

C.8 The ALC’s Director has made every effort to learn from good pedagogical practice in language centres across Europe and has been most effective in disseminating lessons learnt to the Centre’s teaching staff.

C.9 The Centre has played a significant role in the development and use of the European Language Portfolio.

C.10 The ALC has been quick to respond to developments in the world of language teaching, has made a number of sound strategic decisions and has enjoyed a degree of success in attracting external funding for specific projects.

C.11 The ALC contributes significantly to the internationalisation of the University.

C.12 The Centre’s website is clear, informative and well organised, acting as an effective marketing tool.

Recommendations

C.13 The Management Board, in collaboration with the College of Arts and Celtic Studies, should ensure that all existing FL modules undergo normal academic approval processes and that this becomes a standard procedure for all future modules.

C.14 Until a more satisfactory staffing structure and more transparent quality assurance procedures are in place, the ALC should be cautious about further expanding the FL *Horizons* programme but should focus on supporting students to make informed module choices about progressing to higher levels of FL achievement and on recruiting students from across all schools.

C.15 The Centre should introduce an appropriate number of external examiners for FL modules.

C.16 The ALC and SLL should establish a forum to clarify respective areas of activity and to explore potential future collaboration. This should be an incremental process and in the short-term should focus on avoiding overlap in the provision of language elective modules and improving the advertising of all UCD language electives.

**D. Teaching and Learning – The Teaching of English and Graduate   
 Programmes in TESOL**

Commendations

D.1 The Centre provides a very wide range of English language programmes at undergraduate level and an innovative graduate pathway of nested courses for teacher education in TESOL.

D.2 The Centre has been successful in securing external funding and in developing income-generating programmes which have met a demand for general English and graduate teacher education in the field of TESOL. These require continued support, particularly in terms of rooms for summer teaching.

D.3 The Centre has established an efficient administrative system for managing large numbers of part time staff and copes with large numbers of students and test-candidates.

D.4 The Centre has established itself as the leading IELTS testing centre in Ireland and not only attracts considerable income, but also contributes to the profile of the ALC and the University itself.

D.5 The commercial unit of the ALC has been successful in its outreach activities and in establishing links with universities and individuals overseas through its summer English programmes. These connections are of considerable potential value to the University.

Recommendations

D.6 The RG recommends that the ALC should restructure its commercial activities so that they become ancillary to its core role of supporting UCD students. Self-funding should continue to play a role in the provision of pre-sessional support, EFL programmes, English language testing, and postgraduate TESOL programmes while surpluses from this commercial income stream will enable the Centre to develop its infrastructure and technological needs.

D.7 The ALC needs to work with key stakeholders to support internationalisation through provision of pre-sessional and insessional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. It should be recognised that insessional programmes may not be self-financing and must be supported.

D.8 The ALC should progress its objective of becoming professionally accredited by the British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes (BALEAP).

D.9 The RG recommends that the University recognises the ALC as the sole provider of English language courses and is of the view that other University units who provide similar courses (e.g. the Irish Institute for Chinese Studies) should end provision.

**E. Research and Innovation**

Commendations

E.1 Even within constraints identified, the ALC has managed to be research active and achieve moderate research output.

E.2 The Centre has identified appropriate research intentions about areas for investigation.

E.3 The scope of activity in the ALC provides many opportunities for research. Researchers external to UCD currently access the rich data generated through ALC activity.

Recommendations

E.4 The immediate priority for the ALC should be to strengthen its organisational capacity and academic credibility by getting appropriate structures and staffing in place.

E.5 The ALC’s research intentions would be well served by identifying and collaborating with partners both internal and external to UCD as appropriate, who may have the capacity to enhance the ALC’s research potential.

E.6 The ALC should be encouraged and supported in developing its research capability over time as structures and staffing allow.

**F. Management of Quality and Enhancement**

Commendations

F.1 The ALC employs a range of evaluative processes to monitor students’ learning experiences.

F.2 Students commented favourably on the quality of the staff and the modules that they had taken. There was some concern that language modules are scheduled at lunch time or in the evenings from 6pm to 8pm.

F.3 The development of foreign language modules is informed by theories of applied linguistics and with reference to European-wide standards in language teaching and learning.

F.4 The ALC is clearly aware of quality issues regarding staffing, and how the absence of language coordinators may impact on the quality of their teaching.

Recommendations

F.5 A system needs to be put in place to ensure external validation of the quality of the modules and their assessment processes. This may include an overview of newly developed modules at the level of the UUPB and of existing modules through the module enhancement process. The quality of all modules needs to be monitored through the appointment of external examiners.

F.6 The appointment of Language Coordinators to give oversight to language teaching is critical – the lack of such oversight in the current situation, where large numbers of hourly paid staff are involved in the delivery of modules, presents a threat to quality.

F.7 The current practice of administrative staff taking on roles that would normally fall to academics should be regularised appropriately as soon as is practicable when staffing issues are addressed.

F.8 The ALC should develop a system for ensuring that the information that is collected from students in the form of end of semester questionnaires/focus groups on teaching quality is fed back into the enhancement process. Information on this system should be made available to staff and students of the ALC.

F.9 The ALC should consider establishing a student forum that would allow students to raise issues of concern.

**Appendix 1**

**UCD Applied Language Centre Response to the Review Group Report**

The ALC staff welcome the Review Group (RG)’s report on the Centre’s role and achievements - in particular its endorsement and commendation of the ALC’s strategies and activities. The ALC staff have benefited from the different stages of the quality process so far. The site visit enabled them to engage in constructive debate with the members of the panel about the Centre’s work and its options for the future. They have also been able to raise matters of concern.

One of the key factors in making the process so successful was the RG’s knowledge and experience of language education planning in an international higher education context. The discipline of modern languages has changed greatly in recent years and faces many challenges. Choosing the right strategies is essential if academic and financial goals are to be attained. The ALC wishes to thank the RG for engaging so thoroughly with the Centre’s specific features and its UCD context. This assured and succinct report has captured the essence of the main issues and sets out the areas for action. Its comments and recommendations will serve as significant reference points and benchmarks for many years to come.

The RG report acknowledges that recent years have been difficult for the ALC, but its findings confirm that the Centre’s decision-making has been strategic and effective. It commends the ALC’s overall approach as being aligned with international best practice and as being fully sustainable. The Centre has initiated a large-scale and successful expansion in its multilingual programme for students across all Colleges. It has created an innovative graduate pathway for the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Its research activities, though small in scale to date, are well-conceived and should be supported - particularly in the areas of language learning, language teaching, and language testing. It has a successful record of external revenue generation.

Despite these achievements, the RG clearly confirms that the Centre faces a number of threats to its future. The overwhelming threat is a long-standing shortage of staff across both the academic and administrative areas. The current staffing structure is quite inadequate to enable the Centre achieve the university’s strategic goals in internationalisation and related areas. This matter needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency, and funding needs to be provided directly by the university rather than from the ALC’s commercial activities.

One of the RG’s principal recommendations to the university is to actualise ‘the potential demonstrated by the achievements of the ALC’. The Centre welcomes this proposal and looks forward to playing a role in its implementation. As part of this process, it will continue to build constructive collaborative relations across the university and work towards the establishment of a revised management structure which, in the RG’s term, would be ‘fit for purpose’.

In the time allocated, and in light of its remit, the RG could not examine all aspects of the Centre’s activities and operations. The ALC notes that some issues which were raised in the Self-Assessment Report (SAR) process did not feature in the RG report. It is hoped that these can be examined in the next stage of the process which is the preparation of the Quality Improvement Plan (QIP).

Finally, the ALC wishes to reiterate its gratitude to the RG for its commendations and guidance, and for its attention to the details of the Centre’s circumstances and achievements. It also wishes to record its thanks to the Director and staff of the UCD Quality Office for their support and patience throughout the process. It looks forward to working with them in the next phase of this constructive process.

**Appendix 2**

**Site-Visit Schedule**



**UCD Applied Language Centre**

**21 – 23 April 2009**

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| **DAY 1: Tuesday, 21 April 2009** | |
|  |  |
|  | Arrival of the Review Group |
|  |  |
| 17.00-18.30 | Review Group (with UCD Director of Quality) ***only*** meet at hotel to agree final work schedule and assignment of tasks for the following two days. |
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| 18.30-19.10 | Meeting with **representatives of the ALC Management Board** |
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| 19.30 | Dinner – hosted by UCD Registrar and Deputy President |
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| **DAY 2: Wednesday, 22 April 2009** | |
| **Venue: Room 3, Daedalus Building** | |
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| 08.45-09.15 | Private meeting of Review Group |
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| 09.15-10.45 | Meeting with **Head of ALC** (including 5 minute presentation) |
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| 10.45-11.00 | Break |
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| 11.00-12.00 | Meeting with a **representative group of** **ALC staff** |
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| 12.00-12.15 | Break |
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| --- | --- |
| 12.15-13.15 | Meeting with a **representative group of students** |
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| 13.15-13.45 | Lunch |
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| 13.45-14.05 | Meeting with **Professor of Linguistics, School of Irish, Celtic Studies, Irish Folklore & Linguistics** |
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| 14.05-14.15 | Break |
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| 14.15-15.00 | Meeting with a **representative group of cognates/partners** |
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| 15.00-15.15 | Break |
|  |  |
| 15.15-15.45 | Meeting with **representatives from the International Office** |
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| 15.45-16.00 | Break |
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| 16.00-16.45 | Meeting with **College Principal** |
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| 16.45-17.00 | Break |
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| 17.00-17.45 | Private meeting of Review Group – to review findings, identify aspects to be clarified and finalise tasks for the following day |
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| 17.45 | Review Group depart |
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| **DAY 3: Thursday, 23 April 2009** | |
| **Venue: Room 3, Daedalus Building** | |
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| 08.30-09.15 | Review Group Meet |
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| 09.15-10.00 | Meeting with a representative group of academic staff from the **UCD School of Languages and Literatures** |
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| 10.00-10.15 | Break |
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| 10.15-10.45 | **Tour of ALC facilities** |
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| 10.45-11.00 | Break |
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| 11.00-12.15 | RG **available for private individual staff meetings (on request to UCD Quality Office)** |
|  |  |
| 12.15-12.45 | RG meeting with **Head of ALC** – sweep-up meeting |
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| 12.45-13.00 | Review Group – **private meeting to review findings** |
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| 13.00-13.30 | Lunch |
|  |  |
| 13.30-16.30 | Review Group work on first draft of Review Group Report and prepare headline comments for exit presentation |
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| 16.45 | Exit presentation to available staff of the unit |
|  |  |
| 17.00 | Review Group depart |
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