



**Trinity College Dublin**

Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath

The University of Dublin

**Report to Council on the Quality  
Review of the Tutorial Service**

**8-10 February 2016**

**Reviewers:**

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## **Reviewers' Report – Trinity College Dublin Tutorial Service Review 8-10 February 2016**

### **1. Executive Summary**

**1.1.1** The main focus of the Review was the key elements of Trinity College Dublin's Tutorial Service (TS): the Senior Tutor's Office (STO) and the UG Tutors; the Postgraduate Advisory Service (PAS) and Postgraduate Advisors.

**1.1.2** During the course of the review, the Reviewers met and engaged in discussion with a wide range of academic and administrative staff and students directly involved in the delivery of the service or with a significant interest in its effectiveness in achieving the College's mission and strategic goals. The Reviewers were highly impressed by the commitment and expertise of all staff involved in the TS, by the value accorded to the TS in general, and by the services provided by the STO and PAS in particular.

#### **1.1.3 Strategic Development and Planning**

The Reviewers found that the overall mission and aims of the TS are well aligned with key elements of College's Mission and Strategic plan in those areas that relate to the student experience, and that the TS has the potential significantly, or even essentially, to contribute to the achievement of its stated aims. However strategic development is hampered by the absence of Performance Indicators that address the achievement of the service's Mission, and of robust management data. This is further mentioned in section 1.5.

#### **1.1.4 Structure and management**

The successful delivery of the TS is dependent on the collaborative working relationships between several differently located and managed services, and in particular Tutors and Postgraduate Advisors, the STO and PAS staff, Student Services, and the administrative staff who support the latter, particularly those in the Academic Registry. The Reviewers believe that the different, and in some cases rather weak, line-management arrangements are not optimally effective for making best use of the resources available and coordinating the overall TS provision as a professional service for College students. The dispersed physical locations also inhibit collaborative working.

#### **1.1.5 Assessment of performance**

The primary means used in the assessment of TS performance has been student and staff survey. Overall satisfaction rates are pleasingly high, but a relatively small, but nonetheless significant proportion of students who have used the TS and PAS have expressed dissatisfaction with some aspects of the provision.

The review draws attention to the desirability of developing a monitoring and evaluation strategy to measure the effectiveness of the TS and PAS in enhancing the progression and achievement of the increasingly diverse College student population. This will require the collection of more extensive and robust data on students' interaction with all elements of the TS.

**Two** areas that were flagged for attention in the 2007 review remain outstanding: ensuring that all Tutors attend the compulsory training sessions; and that there is a consistent, College-wide understanding and implementation of a Tutor's role as a student's advocate.

#### **1.1.6 Resources**

There is clearly an insufficient number of Tutors meeting the College's aspirations for the TS as articulated in the Strategic Plan. The Reviewers offer a number of suggestions that might make the role of Tutor more attractive to academic staff, including enhancing its status by ensuring that a Tutor's contribution to student progression and wellbeing is recognised in promotion procedures and in work allocation models; and by developing more effective advice and guidance for Tutors who are supporting students presenting with complex needs, or exhibiting challenging behaviour.

The Reviewers were also encouraged to evaluate the relative merits of the College's current system, in which Tutors volunteer to take on that role, against that found in many UK institutions, where tutoring is seen as a requisite part of any teaching academic's duties (see section 6).

Concerns are raised by the Reviewers about the administrative resource currently devoted to the TS, and to Student Services, particularly the Counselling Service, which act as the main referral point for tutors.

The Reviewers are also concerned about the current physical infrastructure and the lack of a clear plan that might result in co-location of all elements of the TS, including the STO and the PAS, Health, Counselling, Careers, Disability, Chaplaincy, Sports, and the Day Nursery. They draw attention to the strong trend in the UK to co-locate those delivering separate professional services to students in order to be able to offer holistic information, advice and guidance to students.

#### **1.1.7 Systems and processes**

Concerns are raised about the lack of consistency in record keeping, particularly in respect of Tutors' interactions with their students. Reliable and consistent records could provide vital management information that could help ensure consistency of tutorial provision for students, and inform resource allocation. They could also help ensure consistency and continuity of appropriate support. There are a number of IT systems in use in UK HEIs that can be used to record student interactions.

One of the areas of concern consistently raised in the meetings the Reviewers held with many categories of staff was the time taken in processing Student Cases, and the resultant increase in stress and distress experienced by students, and indeed frustration on the part of their Tutors. The Reviewers encourage review of not only the administrative systems that support Student Case decision-making, but also of the College's academic progression rules, to ensure that these are consistent across the institution. The Reviewers welcome the development of College-wide guidance on what constitutes acceptable 'exceptional

circumstances' and the evidence that would be required to support a request for these to be taken into account.

### **1.1.8 Relationships and external engagement**

The Reviewers strongly encourage the College to strengthen the relationships between the STO, PAS and Student Services with the College's broad academic community. Their view is that the TS should be more closely aligned with, and indeed conceived as an element of, the overall academic provision. The primary purpose of the TS is to help students to achieve their academic goals by raising their aspirations, and minimising the impact of any difficulties they may face, and the advice and guidance offered through the TS will be vital in helping the College to achieve its goal of renewing the Trinity Education. One way of achieving this would be to establish a forum that includes academic, TS, PAS and student members, with clearly defined confidentiality protocols, for regular 'student case' discussions and review.

The reviewers note the relationships established with relevant Irish and International networks, and encourage the continuation of such involvement, including staff exchanges. However, missing from the current list of professional networks linked with the TS is AMOSSHE, the UK Student Services organisation. Strengthening links with the UK, where tutorial systems are well established in many HEIs, could be invaluable in helping to develop the TS and enhance its contribution to the achievement of the College mission.

### **1.1.9 Communication**

The report raises concerns about the relatively poor level of awareness among staff and students of the TS and the PAS across the College, particularly in respect of the latter. The Reviewers were not able to find evidence of a consistent approach to the use of social media to raise awareness of the support available to students. They also encourage the College to redesign their leaflets in order to give the services a higher visibility amongst the student body.

## **1.2 Summary of key recommendations for improvement.**

The Tutorial Service at Trinity College is clearly highly valued by staff and students, and makes an important contribution to the achievement and wellbeing of the student body. Its staff are knowledgeable and committed, and the work of the TS is valued highly across the institution. The achievement of its potential and future development are however currently held back by a number of factors, most crucially by a shortage of staff, including Tutors, and appropriate premises.

The Reviewers recommendations address:

- the need for Performance Indicators and for a monitoring and evaluation strategy, as well as for appropriate management information to inform an assessment of the progress made in achieving the TS mission and the effectiveness of its impact on student progression and achievement (1 ,3 and 8);

- the desirability of reviewing the management arrangements for the disparate elements of the TS to ensure that these are more closely aligned and better integrated (2);
- the role of Tutors, including their advocacy role and their engagement with the training they are offered (5, 4);
- the ways in which the number of Tutors can be increased by making the role more attractive to academic staff. This includes an exploration of the option of making the role compulsory for all teaching staff (6);
- the low level of administrative support and inadequate physical infrastructure provided for the service (7);
- the Student Case decision-making and administrative processes (9);
- ensuring closer alignment between the TS and the academic body, through, for example, the establishment of a forum for regular discussion of student matters (10);
- the desirability of the development of a more effective communications strategy (11).

## **2. Reviewers' Preamble**

The main focus of the Trinity College Tutorial Service Review was the workings and contribution of four interconnected elements of the College's Tutorial Service: the Senior Tutor's Office and the UG Tutors, and the Postgraduate Advisory Service and Postgraduate Advisors.

The formal review took place over a period of two-and-a-half days from 8-10 February 2016. Prior to the review visit the two Reviewers were provided with a wide range of documentation, including a detailed Self-Assessment Document (SAD), extensive background material and relevant web links. Additional information requested by the Reviewers was provided quickly and efficiently.

The review process consisted largely of group meetings with a wide range of College staff, including: the Pro-Vice-Provost/Chief Academic Officer, the Academic Secretary, the Dean of Students and the Quality Officer; the Senior Tutor and her staff, including the Postgraduate Student Support Officer; current College Tutors, Postgraduate Advisers, Heads of School and academic staff, some of whom had previously been Tutors and some who chosen not to take on that role; Directors of Teaching and Learning and course administrators; staff in the Academic Registry; members of the UG Student Cases Team, including the Senior Lecturer, Student Services and Global Relations staff; Graduate Studies staff, Postgraduate Course Directors and postgraduate research supervisors; a wide range of other relevant administrative staff; and Sabbatical Officers of the Students' Union and Graduate Students' Union and other undergraduate and postgraduate students. The Reviewers were provided with a note-taker who recorded the points raised and matters discussed during the meetings; this was very helpful. The efficiency and helpfulness of all College administrative staff involved at all stages of the review process, including the post-review report writing, was excellent. We would particularly like to thank Dr. Liz Donnellan for conducting the preliminary tele-conference, and Helen Condon for her ongoing support and attention. Dr. Martine Smith, who had the role of Internal Facilitator, was with us throughout the visit,

and gave extremely generously of her time. Her knowledge of the College and her guidance and insight were absolutely invaluable and for this we are greatly indebted.

The Reviewers were highly impressed by the openness and helpfulness of all who attended the meetings, by the enthusiasm expressed for the Tutorial Service (TS), and by the commitment and level of expertise and helpfulness of the Senior Tutor (ST), and the staff of both the Senior Tutor's Office (STO) and the Postgraduate Advisory Service (PAS). Without exception, each individual we met recognised the important contribution to student life made by the individuals who are part of the TS, and the additional benefits for students and the College that would accrue if it were to be further developed and strengthened.

Those attending the meetings with the Reviewers also gave their frank and constructive ideas about what they perceived as the aspects of the TS that might be strengthened and developed. The aim of this report is therefore to focus on these latter, but in doing so, we would not wish the strengths of the current system, and the dedication of those who deliver it to be forgotten.

### **3. Strategic Development & Planning**

There are several key elements of the College's Mission and Strategic plan where the TS has the potential to contribute significantly, indeed possibly essentially, to the achievement of its stated aims. These include:

- TCD's mission to encompass an ever more diverse student community [...] and a transformative student experience;
- TCD's goal to strengthen community, by increasing student diversity, including recruitment of more international students, and improving retention rates, especially from year 1 to 2;
- TCD's goal to promote community life. The Strategic Plan makes explicit reference to the role of the TS in its aim: *to promote Trinity's distinctive personal tutor system which ensures that all students to have access to an individual member of academic staff who is appointed to look after the welfare and development of the students in his/her care;*
- TCD's goal to renew the Trinity Education, particularly in respect of objectives A3.1 and A3.2.

The mission of the TS (SAD 2.1): *to provide high quality opportunities for UG and PG student development in an inclusive, caring and cost-effective way* is well aligned with the College's mission and goals. The TS's aims, however, would benefit from review in order to give them a more strategic focus: currently many of the aims read as action points that do not articulate clear purpose in respect of the achievement of either the TS's or the College's mission.

The extent to which the TS is achieving its aims is difficult to judge in the absence of appropriate and robust data on, for example, the numbers of students who seek help from their Tutor and the STO, the nature of the queries that they present, and the numbers of individual students who seek help from one or more of the student services responsible for student wellbeing. These latter are the main referral point for tutors when students present

with complex difficulties or concerns that necessitate professional intervention, including those relating to mental health.

The Reviewers recommend that a review of the aims of the TS Mission and Strategy (SAD pp. 15 to 16), be undertaken, and that Performance Indicators be developed to ensure that progress in the achievement of each aim can be assessed on at least an annual basis. At the same time due consideration should be given to ensuring that the appropriate range of management data be collected.

#### **4. Organisational structure and management**

The contribution and efficiency of the TCD Tutorial system is dependent on the individual capacity of separate services and staff, the effectiveness of their collaborative working relations, and the level of their mutual understanding. There are very many members of College staff who are stakeholders in, and/or contribute to the delivery of the TS. This was explicitly recognised in the wide range of staff members and students who were invited to meet the Reviewers during their visit. Key amongst these are:

- the individuals who have taken on the role of Tutor or Postgraduate Advisors;
- the Senior Tutor and the Senior Tutor's Office and Postgraduate Advisory Service administrative staff;
- Student Services staff, in particular those working in the Counselling and Disability services, and, from February 2016 onwards, the new Director of Services, as the post holder begins to develop and implement a plan for the latter's management and development.

Those working in the Academic Registry, including the Student Cases team, play an important administrative role, and the Global Officers' network and the Students' Unions are also key players. But in the time available the Reviewers were not able to conduct a detailed evaluation of their role in the delivery of the TS. The Student Cases process is however discussed further in Section 7.

**Tutors**, as members of the academic community, are managed in respect of their core teaching and research functions by their Heads of School, but this management does not appear to extend to their tutorial function. Also, the fact that an individual Tutor may be responsible for students who are not studying in their own particular School, makes evaluation of the effectiveness of the TS in respect of its contribution to students' progression and achievement challenging.

**The Senior Tutor (ST)** recruits and trains academic staff in respect of their tutorial role, and her ongoing support and guidance is clearly essential, and indeed much valued by Tutors. However, the role holder is in practice in a position only to influence their work, and not formally to manage it. There does not appear to be an effective process for regular performance management of those who take on the role of Tutor, either by the STO or their Head of School. Those not fulfilling their roles to the expected standards can be advised and encouraged, but not required, by the ST either to attend compulsory training to improve their skills or to relinquish their roles. Given that Tutors' contracts are of five years' duration, there is a significant risk that some students may be less well advised and



supported than others throughout their degree course. Tutor training is theoretically compulsory, but in practice not all Tutors attend the number of courses expected, without any penalty (see Section 6).

The position of the ST as an Elected Officer reporting directly to the Provost inevitably results in very loose line-management for this role holder. This raises concerns for the Reviewers in respect of the pivotal role the ST plays in drawing together the disparate elements of the TS, and the concomitant demands placed on the role holder. The Reviewers are concerned that recruitment to this essential role might be compromised by the current restrictions on eligibility for the post: we understand that only current Tutors can apply for the post, and not those with previous experience as a Tutor or in another relevant role. It would also be helpful if the time commitment required to undertake the role effectively were to be reviewed and clarified.

The ST role holder would seem to be best placed within the College to be responsible for the performance management of Tutors, in collaboration and consultation with the Tutor's Head of School. The time may have come to consider changing the nature of the ST's role from that of an Elected Officer to one that, whilst retaining the close academic links and status, is more firmly embedded within the College systems and structures.

The impact of the creation of the new post of **Head of Services**, responsible for the operation of the counselling, disability, health, sport, nursery and Academic Registry services, is not yet tested. There is a clear opportunity here to co-ordinate more effectively the key professional services that both guide and support students and are the referral point for Tutors when the nature of the student concerns raised and difficulties presented necessitate prompt additional professional intervention. The Reviewers believe that these services are vital to the effective functioning of the TS and should, with the latter, be more explicitly recognized as a key part of the academic function of the College, and more closely aligned with it. They are not convinced that the current location of the Head of (Student) Services within the Corporate Services Division is the most appropriate location to achieve this.

Whilst recognising that the College is very space-restricted, the Reviewers note that the different elements of the student service network underpinning the Tutorial Service are currently scattered across the TCD campus and are almost as far apart as they could conceivably be (see section 5 for further comment). Whilst the Student Life Committee provides the opportunity for regular discussion of policy matters, it is not a management group, and although the Senior Tutor is a member, there appear to be no representatives specifically there to represent the views of Tutors, apart from the Senior Tutor. The SLC meets only monthly, and its minutes are circulated only to Council, and not more widely across the College, including to academic staff. The Reviewers are somewhat uncertain about the role of the Dean of Students (DoS) and how well his overall duties and responsibilities are linked to the delivery of the TS, other than as the Chair of the SLC; there appears to be the potential for confusion amongst stakeholders between the roles and responsibility of the DoS and the ST.

The College's Strategic plan makes specific reference to the need for an *improvement in the way the 'systems' of the university are organized*. A more coherent and appropriate management structure, with a higher profile afforded to the TS and the PAS, could significantly increase both efficiency and effectiveness. Clarity of accountability, and for the TS, maximum proximity of physical location, and therefore of key staff, can only increase the likelihood of the College meeting the challenge of delivering the holistic approach to student support to which its Strategy Plan rightly aspires.

The Reviewers therefore recommend that a substantive review of the line-management, strategic and day-to-day relationships between all the different elements of the TS network referred to above be undertaken. This review should include consideration of the role of Senior Tutor, clarifying the duties and the time commitment necessary, and remunerating the role holder on a scale commensurate with the responsibilities of the role.

## **5. Assessment of Performance**

There are no published benchmarks or quality standards for Tutorial Services *per se*, neither for Ireland nor for the UK. In the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Areas* the most relevant comment is in Section 1.5, *Learning Resources and Student Support*, where the Standard specified is that: *institutions should ensure that the resources available for the support of student learning are adequate and appropriate for each programme offered*. The Guidelines statement includes access to tutors and other advisers as part of the support mechanisms that might be offered to students to support their learning.

The primary means by which the routine monitoring and review required by the Standards and Guidelines document has been undertaken to date is through the student surveys referred to above. Overall satisfaction rates for the STO, PAS and the support offered by Tutors are in general pleasingly high, but the experiences of some students have been less than satisfactory. The very low response rate to the PAS survey limits the value of the results and reinforces Reviewers' concerns about the relatively low visibility of this service; this is further discussed in Section 9 below. It was not made clear to the Reviewers how the College itself will follow up survey outcomes, but it is important that they do so.

The student survey data provided in the SAD (Appendix 6) is useful in establishing an overview of the performance of the TS, but the surveys are not administered sufficiently frequently to be able to take timely action to address difficulties, or monitor changes in the way that the service is perceived by students, and trends in students' help-seeking behaviour. The PAS does keep data on both student usage and the nature of the queries presented (SAD Appendix 7), and this is to be commended. It is unfortunate that the survey questions used were not the same as those used in the UG survey, making it difficult to make meaningful comparisons between the experiences of UG and PG students.

We therefore recommend that the College develop a monitoring and evaluation strategy that could measure the effectiveness of the TS in supporting student progression and achievement. This would require investigating an effective, and appropriately confidential means of recording student interaction with all the elements of the TS, including the Tutors

themselves, in order to make it possible, for example, to assess the effectiveness of the interrelationship between the different elements of the TS, and their impact on the progression and achievement of College students. Such data should also facilitate measurement of the impact of the TS on each of the diverse student groups that constitute the College's student population, and timely action should be taken whenever appropriate. This will also be particularly important if the College's aim to increase the number of international students and those from diverse backgrounds is to be achieved and sustained.

The importance of record-keeping is further discussed in Section 7 below.

The other benchmarks available to the Reviewers were the recommendations of the 2007 review (SAD 1.2). Some of these are followed up elsewhere within this report, but we would also like to note here:

- (SAD 1.5) that action taken to follow up on the recommendation that training workshops for tutors be made mandatory appears not yet to have ensured full attendance. We recommend that the College consider further ways of ensuring that all Tutors attend the requisite training by, for example, offering sessions outside teaching time, or, as was suggested during our visit, making payment of TSS funding conditional on training session attendance;
- (SAD 1.4) that notwithstanding the clarification of advocacy provided by the guidelines in the 2015-16 Tutor's Handbook (pp.3-4), following the 2007 report's recommendation (4.4. p.7), there still appears to be considerable variation, and therefore inconsistency, in the implementation of this element of the Tutor's role in the context of academic appeals and disciplinary matters. From our meetings with present and past tutors it was clear that some tutors vigorously support their students' causes even when the merits of the individual case are perceived to be at best not very strong, and sometimes even in the absence of the student themselves. Others opt not to follow the guidelines and refer cases to the Senior Tutor. Tutors we met stated on more than one occasion that, given the significant variation in discharging of the advocate's role, individual students could be advantaged or disadvantaged by the extent of the proactive advocacy offered by their Tutor.

We therefore recommend that further consideration be given to whether consistent and appropriate provision of tutorial support is best achieved by the College's present interpretation of the advocacy role. An interpretation that focuses more on aiding the student in their own formulation and presentation of their case might better reflect a view of students as adult learners, as well as ensure greater consistency of support across campus.

## **6. Resources**

There is clearly an insufficient number of Tutors to meet the College's aspirations for the TS, as articulated in the goals set by the Strategic Plan, (*a distinctive personal tutor system which ensures that all students to have access to an individual member of academic staff*

*who is appointed to look after the welfare and development of the students in his/her care), or even to ensure that all current students can be certain of timely access to a tutor.*

The TS Self-Assessment document identified the current capacity of the TS as a key area for consideration by the review team (SAD 1.4), and requested Reviewers to consider and recommend ways of making tutorship more attractive to academic staff. The SAD also asked, inter alia, if all members of academic staff should take on the role of tutor at some point in their career. Therefore, one of the foci of the Reviewers' questioning was to tease out ways in which the capacity of the TS could be increased by recruiting more academics to the role.

One present barrier to the recruitment of a larger cohort of Tutors that was mentioned in many of the meetings was the perceived low status of the tutoring role at TCD, reinforced by the lack of explicit recognition of the role in promotion procedures, other than as what was referred to as a 'mere tick-box exercise'. Measures taken in comparable UK HEIs to enhance the status of the role, include:

- establishing a twin-track career progression, with teaching and research accorded equal status in promotion criteria;
- annual staff appraisal, including evaluation of the tutorial support provided. Measuring teaching and tutoring, whilst more challenging than measuring research output, can nevertheless, if properly designed and managed and consistently applied, be achieved via such means as student and peer feedback and critical self-evaluation;
- ensuring that the time devoted to tutorial work is fully recognised in work allocation models that are consistently applied.

The Reviewers also noted concerns expressed in meetings with present and past Tutors and those unwilling to undertake the role, about the demands placed on the role by rising student expectations, not least in relation to the rise in mental health cases, now a common concern across the UK tertiary sector.

The Reviewers believe that further guidance on defining the boundaries of the Tutor's role, with an emphasis on the importance of timely referral to the appropriate professional source of advice and support on serious non-academic issues, could contribute significantly to allaying Tutors' apprehensions about the increasing challenges of their role, particularly in respect of their support of students with mental health difficulties. In addition to the guidance already available from the STO and Student Services colleagues, the potential for the further development of paper and web-based guidance documents and relevant on-line resources might be further considered.

We also recommend that the College consider the merits and demerits of the opt-in (TCD) system vis-à-vis an opt-out system, whereby all or most teaching academics are expected to take on a tutorial role as part and parcel of their normal academic duties, unless they have

very good reason for exceptional exemption from this duty. This expectation is commonplace in the majority of UK HEIs.

Established suitability for the role, and commitment to supporting students' academic and personal development, are undoubted benefits of TCD's present opt-in tutorial system. These qualities, and dedication to, even passion for, their tutorial support role, was evident in all meetings with Tutors. Nonetheless, the overall satisfaction levels recorded in the survey responses, indicated that while generally high, some students were not fully satisfied with tutorial support provision (SAD Appendix 6).

The consistent impression gained from Reviewers' discussions with Tutorial staff is that the size of chambers (97.3 full-chamber average) makes it very difficult, if not impossible, for full attention to be given to the needs of all students in a chamber, and to fulfil what can be seen as a key element of the personal tutor's role: monitoring a student's overall academic and personal development. The reviewers learned that in practice the current TS is often able only to provide a 'fire-fighting' service, responding to crises as and when these arise, but with little capacity to fulfill a more rounded and proactive academic and pastoral role. The kind of personal tutoring system in the Reviewers' home institutions, where the role is compulsory for all academics engaged in teaching, unless they can present an exceptionally strong case for exemption to their Head of Department, results in a significantly lower average tutorial load (ca. 25-30). It is therefore possible to stipulate minimum requirements, such as termly, or, for first year undergraduates, bi-termly, one-to-one meetings with UG tutees throughout their courses. Under such systems Tutors are able to monitor their tutees' academic progress, with their tutees more likely to disclose difficulties potentially impacting on their ability to study to someone they know and trust, and who may have been teaching them (in both reviewers' institutions tutors are exclusively based in their tutees' own departments, thereby also increasing the likelihood of accurate and informed academic advice). Also, in both reviewers' home institutions, personal tutors are supported by a Department Senior Tutor, an experienced member of staff who oversees the delivery of personal tutoring in their area, and is the conduit through which information can be disseminated to all tutors. They also liaise with relevant institutional staff and the cross institutional Senior Tutor network.

Any reflection on the relative merits of different TS staffing models should also consider the potential limitations of a compulsory system. These include the possibility that students will receive a variable level of support depending on the suitability and commitment of individual tutors. However, the reviewers' experience of operating a compulsory system suggests that appropriate specialist mandatory training can equip tutors with the skills and knowledge to ensure that any variation in individual support offered is minimised. The Reviewers also note that overall student satisfaction levels with the TS at TCD are equivalent to those in their home institutions, despite personal tutoring being compulsory for all academic teaching staff in the latter.

We do not make a specific recommendation in favour of one system or another, but rather encourage the College to consider all options available to increase the number of staff who take on the role of Tutor. We also note that the majority of, but not all, views expressed by

TCD tutorial staff, including both present and past practitioners, were in favour of the present model.

We therefore recommend that in order to meet student demand the College give serious consideration to the merits and demerits summarised above of the 'opt-in' and 'opt-out' tutorial systems, along with the other measures outlined above that might improve the attractiveness of the role to academic staff, including ensuring more explicit reward for those who perform well as Tutors, and better guidance and support, particularly when students present with complex or challenging difficulties, together with College-wide work allocation models that recognise the time devoted by staff to their tutorial role.

### **Administrative staff support**

The STO and PAS operate with what might not unreasonably be considered skeleton administrative staff support. Whilst recognising the College's financial constraints, we believe that low investment in this area risks reinforcing a view voiced by many during the review process that these services are not sufficiently highly valued by the College to merit appropriate investment. The present short-term contract arrangements for key administrative staff also appear to be inappropriate for continuity and consistency of delivery of efficient and effective tutorial services, and further undermine confidence in the College's commitment to the TS.

The Reviewers were concerned to learn that a significant proportion of administrative staff time in the **STO** and **PAS** (ca. 75% for the Undergraduate Student Support Officer and up to 90% for one of the members of the PAS team) is necessarily devoted to the administration of student finances. Additionally, they were surprised to learn that none of the current Student Services include staff whose professional role is specifically to offer advice to students on managing their finances. In the UK Student Services sector, financial advice and the administration of any discretionary funds, are normally a key area of student service provision and play an important role in enhancing student retention by helping students to access the funding they are entitled to and to manage their financial resources efficiently. Integration within Student Services, and further investment in this area would have a range of benefits, including enabling Tutors and administrators to devote more time to academic and personal support, and enhancing student retention.

While the scope of the review did not include the professional student support services, nonetheless as the key referral points for Tutors, the current pressure on these, and in particular on the Counselling and Disability Services, has a negative impact on the functioning of the TS. Tutors reported that they can be left to hold or support students with significant mental health difficulties, without the appropriate training. Such situations present risks to the welfare of both students and tutors.

The physical infrastructure is also a significant weakness, and the Reviewers were concerned to learn that there are no definite plans for the improvement of the physical resources. Closer grouping of, or ideally co-locating, the core Tutorial and student support services would enhance visibility and student access and visibility, staff communication, efficiency and value for money. The trend in the UK HE sector has been for co-location of separate specialist services with a single reception point, in order to provide more holistic approach

to student pastoral support and guidance: separately located and quasi-independent specialist student services are increasingly rare. This approach benefits both students and professional staff, and allows significant administrative efficiencies.

The Reviewers' overall opinion is that the resources allocated to the different elements of the Tutorial Service and associated support services are currently inadequate to meet the College's aspirations as articulated in its Mission and Strategic Plan, and recommend that the resource allocation is reassessed in this light.

## **7. Systems and Processes**

There was insufficient time to focus specifically on administrative processes during the review, but two areas that we wish to comment on are record keeping and what the College refers to as Student Cases.

### **7.1 Record-keeping.**

We were concerned to note that record keeping of meetings with students is variable, with some Tutors keeping notes on meeting for future reference, and others not. Appropriately concise and non-judgmental records of meetings with students would facilitate continuity and consistency of provision of tutoring support. Reliable data on student appointments and engagement would also provide management information that could inform the allocation of any additional resources.

We therefore recommend that the College ensure a consistent and appropriately confidential approach to record keeping of Tutor meetings with students and investigate IT options to facilitate this process, many of which are already in place in UK HEIs.

### **7.2 Student Cases**

What was referred to in the Review as 'student cases' was an aspect of the work of Tutors and the STO that was flagged many times during the meetings as a cause of considerable concern, and indeed often distress, for students and staff alike. Particularly worrying was the length of time taken from the point when a student makes a request to, for example, temporarily withdraw due to ill-health, to the moment when a decision is reached and communicated to the student in response. We are aware that the administrative processes have recently been reviewed in order to speed these up, but we are concerned that the fundamental problem may lie not in the administrative process *per se*, but in the complexity of the decision-making. Our understanding is that for any one request a number of different staff, academic and administrative, may have to be consulted, at least in part because there is wide variation in progression rules across the College. Within the UK sector a great deal of work has been undertaken in recent years to ensure cross-institutional consistency, and therefore perceived fairness for all students in respect of the rules and regulations that govern academic progression, concessions, appeals, complaints and the like, even for students on professional courses. With clear, consistent, well-documented and transparent rules, once the relevant evidence has been submitted

to support a student's request or concern, decisions can be made quickly and consistently. We also recommend that, in order to expedite notification, and therefore reduce further stress, the final decision be communicated to the personal tutor and the student simultaneously.

The Reviewers were pleased to note that as part of a review of the Appeals process, led by the Senior Lecturer, a detailed document, *Guidelines on Evidence in Support of an ad misericordiam Appeal*, has recently been produced to clarify for all involved what constitutes an acceptable 'exceptional circumstance' when a concession is being requested, and what evidence is required to support such a request. We recommend that this document be prominently publicised to students as well as to staff.

The Reviewers recommend that the College undertake a more extensive review of Student Case decision-making and that this review should not be limited to the administrative elements of the process, but should take particular account of the academic processes and progression rules that underpin it.

We also recommend that the new Exceptional Circumstances Guidelines be monitored during their first year of implementation, with a view to testing and, if appropriate, fine-tuning them in the light of case practice.

## **8. Relationships and external engagement**

It is the view of both Reviewers that tutorial and student pastoral support are most appropriately conceived as an essentially academic, rather than administrative, provision: their main focus must be to ensure that students are enabled to achieve their academic goals by providing both proactive and responsive advice and guidance that raise aspirations and help ensure that students can overcome any difficulties that might impact negatively on their academic achievement. The advice and guidance offered by Tutors will be vital in helping the College to achieve its goal to renew the Trinity Education, as articulated in its current strategy document.

More specifically we recommend that the College establish a forum where key staff from across the College, including the ST, counsellors, disability advisers and, where appropriate, Tutors and other academic staff, meet to discuss both general student matters at an operational level, and individual students who have been flagged as a serious cause for concern (for example due to ill-health, significant lack of academic progress or financial or other difficulties) and are at serious risk of detriment to health, course failure or withdrawal. Such 'student case meetings', as they are normally referred to in the UK, are commonplace and meet under clearly defined rules of confidentiality. Our experience of such meetings indicates that they can also function as informal staff development sessions, as colleagues from different student support areas share their professional expertise and enhance mutual understanding and good practice.



In respect of external engagement, the Reviewers noted that the TS is a member of a number of Irish and International networks, and has arranged exchanges to facilitate sharing of good practice; the continuation of this practice is to be encouraged. However, missing from the list of professional networks with which the TS is linked is AMOSSHE, the [UK Higher Education Student Services organisation](#). Membership of AMOSSHE would give access to a wide range of resources and would help the College to benchmark its own provision, share good practice, and develop professional networks with the UK, where there is likely to be the closest alignment with the College's tutorial and student service provision.

There is current interest in the UK, evidenced by recent activity on email discussion lists ([PERSONAL-TUTORING@JISCMAIL.AC.UK](mailto:PERSONAL-TUTORING@JISCMAIL.AC.UK)), in sharing good practice in tutoring and in the development of standards for tutorial advice and support. Strengthening connections with the UK, where the majority of HEIs, particularly those in the pre-1992 sector, have well-established tutorial systems, could be invaluable for the College.

## 9. Communication

An area of concern for the Reviewers is the relatively poor level of awareness of tutorial services across the student body as a whole: this is evidenced in both the recent survey results and discussions with students during the visit. The responses to the 2015 UG survey indicated that a large proportion (69%) of the UG respondents thought that the TS should be better advertised (SAD Appendix p. 28) and that the quality of the services would be improved by raising awareness of the service (49%) and making tutors more accessible (49%) (SAD Appendix p. 29).

The poor awareness of the PAS is even more concerning. The questions used in the PG survey (SAD Appendix, p. 30) are less specific than in the UG survey, but 36% said that they had not heard of the PAS. Responses to the survey's free text questions, and comments made by the PG students and relevant academic staff who attended meetings with the Reviewers, suggest a concerning lack of awareness of a key resource that should be very well understood by all PG students.

Booklets and other publicity materials that advertise and explain the TS and PAS would benefit from redesign to make them more striking and visually attractive and thus give the services a higher profile. The modern generation of students is exposed to very high quality promotional and advertising materials in almost every aspect of their lives. The promotional material shown to the Reviewers, for example the *Managing College* booklet, could easily be overlooked by students, particularly when they are bombarded with information from many sources at the start of the academic year. The Reviewers were not able to find evidence of the effective use of social media to promote the TS and PAS.

The Reviewers recommend that there be greater involvement of students in devising a communications strategy that more effectively promotes the advice and support available to both UG and PG students.

## **10. Governance compliance**

There are currently no procedures known of by the Reviewers that regulate tutorial service governance, although there are legal requirements, particularly in respect of adherence to equality and diversity legislation. These latter may have increasing importance, as the College meets its aspiration to increase the diversity of the student population.

## **11. Reviewers' recommendations**

The Reviewers recommend:

1. that a review of the aims of the TS Mission and Strategy (SAD pp. 15-16), be undertaken, and Performance Indicators developed to ensure that progress in the achievement of each aim can to be assessed on at least an annual basis. At the same time due consideration should be given to ensuring that the appropriate range of management data is collected (Section 3);
2. that a substantive review of the line-management, strategic and day-to-day relationships between all the different elements of the TS network be undertaken. This review should include consideration of the role of Senior Tutor, clarifying the duties and responsibilities and the time commitment necessary, and remunerating the role holder on a scale commensurate with these latter (Section 4);
3. that the College develop a monitoring and evaluation strategy that could measure the effectiveness of the TS in supporting student progression and achievement (Section 5);
4. that the College consider further ways of ensuring that all Tutors attend the requisite training by, for example, offering sessions outside teaching time, or, as was suggested during our visit, making payment of TSS funding conditional on training session attendance (Section 5);
5. that further consideration be given to whether consistent and appropriate provision of tutorial support is best achieved by the College's present interpretation of the advocacy role (Section 5);
6. that in order to meet student demand the College give serious consideration to the merits and demerits of the 'opt-in' and 'opt-out' tutorial systems, along with other measures that might improve the attractiveness of the role to academic staff, including: ensuring more explicit reward for those who perform well as Tutors; better guidance and support, particularly when students present with complex or challenging difficulties; and College-wide work allocation models that recognise the time devoted by staff to their tutorial role (Section 6);

7. that the current resource allocation, and premises currently provided, be reassessed, in response to the finding by the Reviewers that the resources allocated to student support services and the administrative support available to the TS are currently inadequate to meet the College's aspirations, as articulated in its Mission and Strategic Plan (Section 6);
8. that the College ensure that there is a consistent approach to record keeping of Tutors' meetings with students and investigate IT options to facilitate this process (Section 7);
9. that the College undertake a more extensive review of Student Case decision-making and that this review should not be limited to the administrative elements of the process, but should take particular account of the academic processes and progression rules that underpin it. The new Exceptional Circumstances Guidelines should be monitored during their first year of implementation, with a view to testing and, if appropriate, fine-tuning them in the light of case practice and their impact on student wellbeing and progression (Section 7);
10. that the College establish a forum for regular 'student case' discussion and review, where key staff, including the ST, counsellors, disability advisers and Tutors and other relevant academic staff, meet to discuss both general student matters and individuals who have been flagged as a serious cause for concern (for example due to ill-health, significant lack of academic progress or financial or other difficulties) and are at risk of severe detriment to health, course failure or withdrawal (Section 8);
11. that there be greater involvement of students in devising a communications strategy that more effectively promotes the advice and support available to both UG and PG students (Section 9).

Dr. Annie Grant, University of East Anglia  
Stephen Lamb, University of Warwick

March 2016

## Review of the Senior Tutor's Office, Tutorial Service and Postgraduate Advisory Service

### Response to the Reviewers' Report by the Senior Tutor and Senior Tutor Elect

First of all, we would like to thank the two reviewers, Dr. Annie Grant, University of East Anglia and Mr Stephen Lamb, University of Warwick for their engagement with all the participants in the review meetings. The contribution of the internal facilitator, Professor Martine Smith, was also invaluable as was the help and support provided by the Quality Office during the whole process.

We welcome the thoroughness of the analyses of the reviewers although we regret that they did not give more attention to the Postgraduate Advisory Service.

The wealth of their joint experience of tutorial services in the UK informed their recommendations but it seems to us that in some cases, these recommendations may not easily translate to an Irish setting due to the somewhat different culture at play in UK universities. The role of tutors in British universities is often more focused on monitoring the academic progression and achievement of students and less on providing pastoral and personal support and advice, or advocating for students. In recommendation 5, they highlight some concerns regarding the advocacy function but we believe that the role of tutors as advocates for students is well understood and valued in College. Whilst there are undeniably individual differences between tutors, the advocacy role is clearly defined in the Tutors' Handbook. Students who feel that their tutor is not providing the level of advocacy they wish for, can bring their case to the Senior Tutor, thus ensuring parity of treatment.

We warmly welcome the recommendations of the reviewers regarding the role of the Senior Tutor (recommendation 2); the attractiveness of tutorship (part of recommendation 6); the training of tutors (recommendation 4); resources (premises and staffing in particular (recommendation 7) and Student Cases (recommendation 9). In the latter case, we are aware that some of the issues highlighted will most likely be addressed by the Trinity Education Project. Whilst we agree with the suggestion to devise a communication strategy in conjunction with students (recommendation 11), we are mindful of the implications of maintaining an active social media presence on staff workloads.

Some of the recommendations would, we believe, need to be considered carefully as they raise substantial issues. Recommendations 1, 3 and 8 all call for introducing processes that would allow the definition of KPIs, the collection of management data and more formal record keeping by individual tutors, to allow better monitoring and reporting of the tutorial service and Postgraduate Advisory Service activities. Whilst we appreciate that a step in this direction may be useful, very careful consideration should be given to the type of 'management data' collected as well as the means of collection. There is a concern amongst tutors, advisors and STO staff that an over-emphasis on data collection, record keeping and paperwork might bring a real risk to

the quality of the service and dilute our student-centred spirit and philosophy, which must remain at the forefront.

Finally (recommendation 6), the reviewers urge College to “give serious consideration to the merits and demerits of the ‘opt-in’ and ‘opt-out’ tutorial systems”. The majority of tutors believe that the current opt-in model is the most appropriate in the Trinity context, provided that chambers are of a more reasonable size and that the value of tutorship is better recognised by College and Schools, for example through its systematic and equitable inclusion in workload models and through the promotion process.

We also want to highlight that increasing the number of tutors either by continuing to reduce the size of chambers or by choosing the opt-out model common in the UK will have repercussions on the workload of the Senior Tutor and the STO staff (more tutors to train and support, more TSSF accounts to manage, etc.).

The analyses of the reviewers and their recommendations present College, the Tutorial Service and PAS with a number of challenges that will need to be addressed over the next couple of years. Several recommendations have significant resources implications, whilst some can only be addressed at College level. We look forward to engaging with all relevant parties to respond to those that fall within the remit of the Tutorial Service.

Claire Laudet, Senior Tutor and Aidan Seery, Senior Tutor Elect