



Trinity College Dublin

Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath

The University of Dublin

Quality Review of Academic Affairs

31 January - 2 February 2023

Review Team:

Mr Paul O'Donovan, Academic Secretary, University College Cork

Dr Alexandra Paffen, Policy Officer, Quality Assurance Education, University of Amsterdam

Dr Mark Hollingsworth, Deputy Chief Operating Officer, City, University of London

Internal Facilitator:

Ms Victoria Butler, Assistant Secretary, Secretary's Office, TCD

Table of Contents

1.	Reviewers' Report	1
2.	Response from the Academic Secretary, Head of Trinity Teaching and Learning	14
3.	Response from the Assistant Academic Secretary, Academic Affairs	14

Quality Review of Academic Affairs, Trinity College Dublin

February 2023

Dr Alexandra Paffen, University of Amsterdam (Chair)
Dr Mark Hollingsworth, City, University of London
Paul O'Donovan, University College Cork

Table of Contents

<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>COMMENDATIONS</u>	<u>4</u>
<u>RESPONSE TO TERMS OF REFERENCE</u>	<u>4</u>
<u>SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS</u>	<u>8</u>
<u>APPENDICES</u>	<u>10</u>

Introduction

The review of Academic Affairs (AA) took place between 31 January and 2 February 2023 and consisted of a series of in-depth discussions with a large range of staff and other stakeholders (See Appendix 1). A high-quality and detailed Self-Assessment Report (SAR) and other documentation, provided in advance, allowed the review team to develop a clear understanding of the work and impact of AA, and scope for future enhancements.

All three external reviewers lead, or have responsibility for, units similar to AA in internationally leading research-intensive Universities. The review team comprised of:

Dr Mark Hollingworth

Mark is currently Deputy COO of City, University of London having formerly been Director of Academic Services at the University of Birmingham with responsibility for Academic Partnership; Curriculum Development and Management; Governance and Risk; Pedagogic Practice; Registry Services; Student and Academic Support; and Quality Assurance (QA) and Enhancement. Mark has previously contributed to, and led, panels undertaking accreditation and quality assurance reviews for HE delivery at school and institutional level in the UK, Europe, and the ASEAN region.

Dr Alexandra Paffen (Chair)

Alexandra is currently senior Quality Assurance officer within Academic Affairs at the University of Amsterdam (the Netherlands). She advises the board of the university on all matters concerning QA, that includes e.g., accreditation processes both on programme level and institutional level and new programmes. Formerly she was deputy director at QANU (Quality Assurance Netherlands University), an agency that coordinated accreditation processes at universities.

Paul O'Donovan

Paul is Academic Secretary & Assistant Registrar at UCC and leads the Office of Academic Affairs and Governance. He was appointed in 2012, reports to the Deputy President & Registrar and has a strategic focus on academic governance, institutional reform, inter-institutional relations, quality assurance and academic policy development.

This report and recommendations have been agreed on unanimously by the review team.

The terms of reference (TOR) for the review were set out for the team as follows:

- (i) The extent to which the current programme/module proposal development and approval process ensures the integrity of resulting curricula and academic awards and supports academic staff in curriculum development and renewal.*
- (ii) The extent to which academic policy and regulation development (undergraduate and postgraduate education) promotes the knowledge and ownership of policies by Faculties and Schools.*
- (iii) How the Academic Affairs' structure can be best positioned in the future in order to contribute to the Goals* of the Trinity Strategic Plan 2020-25.*
- (iv) The extent to which current resources (human and financial), and governance and structure achieve the remit of Academic Affairs.*

The report begins with an overview of the commendations followed by looking in more detail at each of the TOR and the additional questions asked in the SAR regarding:

- the role and responsibilities of the *Assistant Academic Secretary: Graduate Education* and the *Office of the Dean of Graduate Studies* relative to that of the *Assistant Academic Secretary: Academic Affairs* with regard to for example the management of Calendar Part III and the review and development of academic policies
- the curriculum review process, namely on the extent of changes that should occur at School level without academic committee approval.

The report ends with a short summary of the most important priorities according to the review team.

Commendations

The staff of AA are highly regarded across the university and in all meetings the outstanding expertise and commitment of AA was praised: especially the high-quality support for new course development and approval. There is evidently a significant level of respect and confidence in AA's expertise across the university, a view shared by the review team. The panel was impressed by the range, scale and quality of activities presented in the SAR and discussed in review meetings. This is an exceptional level of achievement for such a small team as was also recognised by almost all participants in the meetings.

The review team would specifically like to commend AA and the university for the following:

1. Quality of Self-Assessment Report and pre-review information;
2. Range of meetings and openness of participants;
3. High level of commitment of all AA staff to the university and genuine desire to see success and the maintenance of high standards;
4. The Assistant Academic Secretary: Academic Affairs is highly regarded by her peers;
5. AA team is proactive in picking up issues and has an outstanding work ethic;
6. Linked providers noted the tone and interactions had become more helpful since AA was established as a separate unit;
7. Under the Assistant Academic Secretary's leadership, the quality of the website and supporting materials was considered to have improved;
8. Pockets of excellence in some Schools (e.g., Medicine) in relation to course development, portfolio management of courses and School-level approval;
9. Academic Affairs had shown remarkable speed and agility in dealing with course approval for HCI Pillar 3 and micro credentials;
10. An extensive website is provided which provides clear and relevant information.

Response to Terms of Reference

Terms of Reference

1. *The extent to which the current programme/module proposal development and approval process ensures the integrity of resulting curricula and academic awards and supports academic staff in curriculum development and renewal.*

The following points were noted by the review team with regard to the first TOR:
The current programme/module proposal development and approval process is unclear and over-dependent on manual forms, email correspondence, and tacit knowledge of key AA staff. This means that the current process is not only very vulnerable – due to the expertise of one or two staff members - but also open to variability due to the dependency on manual forms rather than a digital system.

- The current process would benefit from being reconsidered as an end-to-end collaborative process starting at the School and Faculty level; ending with formal committee approval and with a further downstream process to Academic Registry and input from Academic Practice. The process should have a more unified and LEAN approach. Appropriate process management would introduce stage gates and shared responsibility, with far more ownership at School and Faculty level, and allow more attention to be paid to quality enhancement (AA) and academic practice (AP) as well as architecture and compliance matters. The specific and highly-devolved governance structures of TCD need not be a barrier to reconsidering the processes, in fact, more shared responsibility would appear to complement TCD governance.
- QQI's Core Statutory Quality Assurance (QA) Guidelines envisage that courses are subject to re-approval or periodic review. The university may wish to consider how this will be formalised in the future and the respective roles of AA and the Quality Office in this regard. Because it would make sense to see re-approval and periodic review as a part of the PDCA¹- cycle of programmes and therefore within the remit of AA or at least in tight collaboration with AA.
- Specifically for course/module changes – a shorter, LEAN, and risk-management-based process should be developed. This could involve creating a table of programme attributes that could be approved/ signed off at different levels in the university, e.g., course titles at university level; module learning outcomes at School level etc. This schedule can be refined and used as an input and specification for the development of the full IT system when it is financed and procured.
- Overall, the review panel consider that the current programme/module proposal development and approval process supports the integrity of resulting curricula and academic awards and assists academic staff in curriculum development and renewal in a limited sense, but that this is neither sustainable nor scalable. It is the view of the panel that the process is vulnerable and that this represents an institutional risk. It is recommended that this is urgently addressed, and that sufficient commitment is made to simplify and modernise the process, spreading risk and responsibility along the full process chain.

2. The extent to which academic policy and regulation development (undergraduate and postgraduate education) promotes the knowledge and ownership of policies by Faculties and Schools.

¹ Plan, Do, Check, Act

Faculties and Schools are generally aware of policies but knowledge and ownership of policies, and their operation, is limited at that level. This appears to be related to an institutional lack of clarity about responsibility rather than current structures.

- As outlined in dot one above, a reconsidered process with more shared responsibility is needed. The visibility of AA and a clearer understanding of their role at Faculty/School level would be beneficial and it was suggested multiple times in our meetings that “workshops” and/or “training” by AA, maybe together with AP, would help understanding of the most used and important policies.
- For example, there is some blurring of the lines between new course initiation; development and support for new courses; validation, and approval. While the correct governance is in place – in that Council has the responsibility for formally approving programmes – the current process involves AA acting as gatekeepers before programme proposals can reach USC or GSC and then Council. This is helpful to ensure that Council only receives sufficiently developed proposals but serves to increase the workload of AA during the development phase and enables academic colleagues to form a dependence on the guidance of the team.

3. How the Academic Affairs’ structure can be best positioned in the future in order to contribute to the Goals of the Trinity Strategic Plan 2020-25.*

- As outlined above, there should be a shared responsibility for programme development and approval between School, Faculties and the university. This should be based on a renewed understanding of the Programme Design & Approval Policy² with AA (and AP) providing support, advice and technical input.
- There is a need to (re)consider the core elements of AA’s remit and develop the most effective deployment of the existing resources and to deliver the most added-value and impact. In other words, AA should stop doing some activities (e.g. the intensive and iterative assistance provided to Schools) to avoid putting other strategic priorities at risk. In order to realise their full potential to contribute to the Goals of the Trinity Strategic Plan 2020-25, AA are advised to seek to operate in a situation where a higher percentage of work is planned and programmed from a strategic point of view and in line with strategic priorities.
- The review team recommends that consideration is given (via, e.g., an away day) to developing a sustainable strategy and vision of AA and their role in supporting and working within both the TT&L, and in relation to Faculties and Schools. This will require advocacy and support from the Academic Secretary, the Assistant Academic Secretary: Graduate Education, and the office of the Dean of GS as it requires pan-institutional change which AA cannot achieve on their own.
- It is notable that at TCD there is no central oversight to ensure student involvement in the development and renewal of programmes and modules - e.g. by AA seeking

² <https://www.tcd.ie/teaching-learning/academic-policies/assets/new-prog-design-approval-jan2020.pdf>

confirmation that such involvement has taken place. The involvement of students in “co-creation” is becoming widespread across the sector elsewhere in Europe. This is practice that would support Goal 3 ‘We will practice next generation teaching and learning’. Such student co-creation of curriculum could be considered and implemented in partnership by AA and AP.

- Beyond wider institutional learning, AA should reflect with the Academic Secretary’s teams (AP, Quality Office) on their own specific experience of TEP and the lessons learnt during its implementation as the PG Renewal Process commences. It would also be beneficial to benchmark and share experience with other like-minded universities in Ireland and internationally.

4. The extent to which current resources (human and financial), and governance and structure achieve the remit of Academic Affairs.

- In contrast to other comparator institutions, the AA function is under-resourced both in terms of staff numbers and IT support. For a university of the size and reputation of TCD, a team of 6-8 FTE would be more usual.
- If no extra resources are available in the short term, then a refocus of the remit and tasks should be undertaken immediately to balance the workload with the availability of staff. This is a priority because of the vulnerability and risk due to the current resource and capacity. It appears likely that new IT systems will be provided in the medium term. In the interim, the University should investigate providing support to AA through the development of existing enterprise systems such as MS Power Automate and MS Forms.
- The AA and the AP teams are small and excessively reliant on individual staff members. The teams would benefit from joining forces particularly in the area of course development and approval to enhance quality and ensure the academic integrity of courses.
- As noted above, the current understanding of the role of AA across the institution (i.e., the language of ‘approval’ sitting in their remit, rather than with Council), and the proactive approach of the team to acting as coaches, and akin to PhD-supervisors to academic colleagues, means that insufficient responsibility is taken for holding knowledge or expertise at Faculty or School level. This level of support provided by the AA team is impressive but, given current resources, unsustainable and inappropriate. If further resource or systems improvements are not available then this ownership by AA should be ceded. This may mean that fewer courses are approved at the Council stage and Council may need to strategically prioritise which courses go forward for approval.

Additional SAR Questions:

Relationship between AA and Graduate Education:

- Meetings and discussions suggest that there is some confusion in relation to the role of the Assistant Academic Secretary – PG and the remit of AA although it was noted

that roles will become better defined as the PG Renewal Project proceeds. The PG Renewal Project is also likely to be the route for further IT and process enhancements in the medium term. It is positive that clarity and enhancement is signalled as being forthcoming but this should be monitored closely to ensure that they do. Without greater definition of the PG role and delineation of the separation of responsibilities with AA, the status quo represents a risk – particularly in the context of such limited resources.

The second additional SAR question was addressed at the first TOR, dot three.

Summary and recommendations

The contribution that AA can and does make to the University is pivotal as it encompasses the quality and integrity of the TCD curriculum; helps realise course innovation in Faculties and Schools; and underpins the maintenance of the University's status as a degree-awarding body.

It cannot be stressed enough that most of the issues raised above are very recognisable to this review team and have been encountered in our own institutions.

We recognise the current limitations on financial and human resources in the Irish university system. Based on our assessment and response to the Terms of Reference above, we make the following key recommendations:

1. AA should be supported by the University to assess current (and potential) workload capacity, particularly in the area of course approval, and then seek support for/make case to the University to be more strategic in terms of business cases for new courses. This might involve the creation of a multi-year calendar with visibility of the pipeline so that work is more proactive rather than reactive. Spare capacity would need to be built in to provide for response to Government initiatives such as the Human Capital Initiative.
2. AA should consider its portfolio of tasks and responsibilities in light of their current capacity and the requirements of the TCD strategic plan. In particular, the responsibility and ownership for all stages of course development and approval should be clarified: ideally AA would reposition their role in the process as being a source of support and advice in a collaborative partnership with Faculties and Schools, and TT&L, rather than AA being seen as 'delivering' approval.
3. Capitalise on current pockets of good practice (e.g. in Medicine) as models for renewed partnership models of working and seek to spread these in other areas. The expansion of induction training for Directors of Teaching & Learning (Postgraduate) and Directors of Undergraduate Teaching & Learning would also be useful in this regard.

4. AA and the Assistant Academic Secretary could benefit from enhanced peer-support from, and team building between, other sections in TT&L to provide action learning and good practice examples of, e.g. dealing with the demands of the rest of the University. It may be that some resource pooling across and between areas can also act as a short-term amelioration of resourcing challenges.
5. The University should consider more student input in terms of co-creation in the development and enhancement of courses.
6. With regard to the PG Renewal, there should be clear sight of the role of AA in the project and capacity provided for AA to participate. Ideally the involvement of AA should be structured so that it contributes to the development of new IT solutions and enhanced ways of working.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Meeting Schedule

Quality Review of Academic Affairs, Trinity College Dublin **31st January – 2nd February 2023**

External Reviewers:

1. **Mr Paul O'Donovan**, Academic Secretary, University College Cork
2. **Dr Alexandra Paffen**, Policy Officer, Quality Assurance Education, University of Amsterdam
3. **Dr Mark Hollingsworth**, Deputy Chief Operating Officer, City, University of London

Internal Facilitator: Ms Victoria Butler, Assistant Secretary, Secretary's Office

Day 1: Tuesday 31st January 2023

Time	Meeting
09.00 – 09.15	Collect Reviewers from the hotel
09.15 – 10.00	<u>Meeting 1</u> Introductory meeting with College Officers
10.00 – 10.40	<u>Meeting 2</u> Meeting with Assistant Academic Secretary: Academic Affairs Assistant Academic Secretary: Graduate Education to join the meeting (10.30am)
10.40 – 11.10	Private Meeting Time
11.10 – 11.50	<u>Meeting 3</u> Meeting with Academic Affairs staff

Day 1: Tuesday 31st January 2023

Time	Meeting
11.50 – 12.20 (DTLPs)	<u>Meeting 4a</u> Meeting with Postgraduate Directors of Teaching and Learning
12.25 – 12.55 (DUTLs)	<u>Meeting 4b</u> Meeting with Undergraduate Directors of Teaching and Learning
12.55 – 14.00	Private Meeting Time and Lunch
14.00 – 14.45	<u>Meeting 5</u> Meeting with Trinity Elective and Micro-credential subcommittee members
14.50 – 15.20	<u>Meeting 6</u> Meeting with student representatives
15.20 – 15.45	<u>Private Meeting Time</u>
15.45 – 16.30	<u>Meeting 7</u> Meeting with academic staff who have submitted undergraduate course proposals

Day 2: Wednesday 1st February 2023

Time	Meeting
08.45 – 09.00	Collect Reviewers from the hotel
09.00 – 09.45	<u>Meeting 1</u> Meeting with Linked Providers, MIE and RIAM
09:45-10:00	<u>Break</u>
10.00 – 10.45	<u>Meeting 2</u> Meeting with Academic Officers
10.45 – 11.30	<u>Break</u>
11.30 – 12.15	<u>Meeting 3</u> Meeting with academic staff who have submitted a postgraduate course proposal
12.15 – 13.00	<u>Meeting 4 –</u> Meeting with Trinity Teaching and Learning Directors and those involved in Initiatives (TEP, PG Renewal, SATLE)
13.00 – 14:00	<u>Reviewer Meeting and Lunch</u>
14.00 – 14.45	<u>Meeting 5</u> Meeting with Professional Staff
14.45 – 15.30	<u>Meeting 6</u> Meeting with School Managers, Course Office Managers, and Tangent

Day 3: Thursday 2nd February 2023

Time	Meeting
09.00 – 09.15	Collect reviewers from hotel
09.00 – 12.45	Reviewers work on draft report and review findings
12.45 – 13:45	<u>Lunch</u>
13.45 –14:15	Wrap-up meeting with Assistant Academic Secretary: Academic Affairs
14.15 – 14.45	Wrap-up meeting with College Officers
14.45 – 15.00	Exit Presentation



Trinity College Dublin

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Responses to the Quality Review of Academic Affairs, Trinity Teaching & Learning (TT&L)

(i) Response from the Academic Secretary; Head Trinity Teaching and Learning

Since 2019, Academic Affairs has been transformed under the leadership of the Assistant Academic Secretary: Academic Affairs. The review panel was “impressed by the range, scale, and quality of (AA) activities” and with “...an exceptional level of achievement for such a small team...” Academic Affairs contributes to ensuring the quality and integrity of the curriculum, which underpins the University’s status as a degree awarding body. Since the review we have been fortunate to have approval for two additional staff members, bringing the total number of staff in the unit to six, which will provide a good baseline to address some of the review recommendations. I look forward to supporting the AA team develop and deliver the Implementation Plan.

I would like to thank the reviewers for a comprehensive report and congratulate the team on their considerable achievements since 2019.

Patricia Callaghan
Academic Secretary

(ii) Response from the Assistant Academic Secretary: Academic Affairs

The Quality Review provided the Academic Affairs’ Office with the opportunity for critical reflection and self-assessment of the delivery of core activities under its [remit](#). The Review was timely as Academic Affairs (AA) as a distinct unit within TT&L was established four years ago following the appointment of the Assistant Academic Secretary: Academic Affairs in January 2019. The Review provided the AA team with the opportunity to recognise its achievements and the successful delivery of its remit during a challenging time for the University and additional external commitments brought about by the HCI Pillar 3 and SATLE funded initiatives, which were in addition to its workload. The review has also provided the small team with the opportunity to take time out to reflect on areas requiring further review and development, and is timely from the perspective of postgraduate renewal, which will see AA leading out on developments relating to new postgraduate proposal development.

The assessment of the delivery of AA activities by the External Review Panel, experts in the field, is very welcome as it enables AA to consider best practice and how this may be achieved. I extend my appreciation and thanks to the Review Team for their time, collegial approach to the review, and for their careful and considered deliberations. I would also like to thank Ms Victoria Butler, Assistant Secretary for acting as Internal Facilitator, and the Quality Office for its assistance with the process. I extend my thanks and appreciation to all members of the College community and Trinity’s Linked Providers, Marino Institute of Education (MIE) and the Royal Irish Academy of Music (RIAM), who generously took time out of their busy schedules to respond to surveys and to participating in focus groups as part of the AA self-assessment process, and to meeting the External Review Panel to discuss and share their experiences and reflections of the work of Academic Affairs. Their feedback has been invaluable.



Response to the Report and Recommendations

Academic Affairs welcomes the Report, Commendations, and Recommendations of the External Review Panel. The team appreciates the positive feedback on how AA is regarded across the University and the commitment of the team to the delivery of the AA remit. In terms of the recommendations presented in the report, AA notes that these relate primarily to programme proposal development and approval and the streamlining of existing and introduction of new processes to enhance the overall programme proposal development and approval process. AA welcomes these recommendations, some of which are well advanced as proposals as part of PG Renewal and it is anticipated that the proposals will be expanded to include undergraduate programme proposals in the future. AA also welcomes the opportunity for it to reflect on its practices and how these may be transformed to 'reposition its role in the programme development process as a source of support and advise in a collaborative partnership with Faculties and Schools.' Recommendations on resourcing and systems available to AA are particularly welcome and AA will review its activities to ensure a balanced workload, greater consideration of other strategic priorities, and will explore the availability of systems to support the programme proposal development process.

I look forward to reflecting on and considering the Review's recommendations with the AA team in the development of the implementation plan and to collaborating with the College community in progressing the delivery of actions under the plan.

Linda Darbey,

Assistant Academic Secretary: Academic Affairs

12th April 2023