National College of Ireland

Quality Assurance

Assessment Quality Review
Report of the Peer Review Group
February 2014

Contents

1   Introduction

This is the report of the Peer Review Group appointed by National College of Ireland (NCI) which carried out a review its Assessment Support Services in February 2014.

National College of Ireland's quality system is reflective of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality Assurance (ENQA 2009). In order to support the academic activities of the College each of the administrative and support functions must also engage in systematic evaluation of its services and operations. This is an internal quality assurance process and must be completed by each function once every five years or as directed by Academic Council and/or Executive Board.

The panel members were

- Dr. Stephen Cassidy, Dean Quality Enhancement, Cork IT
- Dr. Brendan Ryder, Assistant Registrar, Dundalk IT
- Ms. Mary Jordan, Academic Administration and Student Services Manager, IT Carlow

Ms. Sinéad O'Sullivan, Director Quality Assurance & Statistical Services, NCI provided administrative assistance to the panel and acted as rapporteur on the day.

The panel received documentation (self-evaluation report & appendices and NCI) quality framework for support services) 2 weeks prior to the event. The College's strategic plan and annual report for 2011-12 was made available at a later date. The panel also had an opportunity to review additional documents, the student portal and it met several stakeholder groups throughout the day. The groups met and membership is outlined in Appendix 1.

1.1   Findings
The panel made 1 commendations and 9 recommendations which are outlined below

Commendations:
1. The commitment by all members of staff met to students, the College and to quality
2. There is a clear desire on all those involved in the assessment process to ensure a quality student learning experience.

Recommendations

1. The panel are of the view that the implementation and management of the process should be consistent across schools and that faculty should be closely involved in the assessment process and that the management of assessment should be closely aligned to the Schools.
2. There should be clarity and an awareness of the roles of Exams Office staff, Programme Co-Ordinators, Vice Deans, Programme Directors and Faculty in the entire assessment process

3. The good practice evident in departments needs to be documented and shared so that it becomes embedded and systematic

4. Existing IT systems should be used more effectively to manage and systemise the process
5. The College needs to address the issue of space, in terms of examination venues and in particular, a separate area for the preparation and storage of assessment materials to ensure that the security of the assessment process is not compromised.
6. An exploration should be made of the options available for electronic communication of assessment documentation
7. That a high level approach for the external examining of coursework is used and that it should be batched and sent by the Programme Co-ordinator
8. That the full module set should be highlighted to external examiners on appointment so that they are fully aware of what they are committing to and can advise if any particular module will cause them difficulty
9. An investigation into the impact of broadening assessment techniques on administrative support of assessment should be undertaken
10. The action plan that accompanied the self-assessment document should be incorporated into College planning

2   Overview

2.1   Background

The National College of Ireland (NCI) has an immensely proud history as a third level educational institution. Established by the Jesuit order in 1951 as the Catholic Workers College it quickly gained recognition for excellence in its subject fields, particularly human resource management and industrial relations, and for the provision of high quality educational opportunities for employees entering third level education. In the late 1990's the College became the National College of Ireland and entered a new phase of its development expanding its part-time provision to a number of off-campus locations throughout the country and extending its full-time undergraduate programmes to include accountancy, finance and informatics. In 2002 the College moved from its original site in Ranelagh to a new 'State of the Art' purpose built premises in Dublin's International Financial Services Centre.

NCI's educational philosophy and operational structure embody participation, collaboration and applied problem solving strategies. These are enabled by a faculty whose qualifications and professional experience help integrate academic theory with current practical application. The College assesses both the quality of its academic programmes and the

academic achievement of its students and utilises the results of these assessments to improve academic and institutional quality.

The primary focus of NCI is on maintaining a centre of excellence that is centred on the changing needs of today's students. National College of Ireland provides a broad range of high-quality education programmes for today's knowledge-based society.

In line with its mission of widening access to education, the College places a strong emphasis on the needs of the student, bringing a unique student-centred approach to all aspects of its teaching and research. National College of Ireland provides a range of learning options that extend beyond traditional classroom dynamics, including distance learning and internet-based learning programmes.

The College has a diverse student profile. Approximately 50% of NCI's students are part-time students and study at its IFSC campus or at one of its locations in its Network (part-time students only). In 2013/14, 7% of full-time students had registered with the Disability Support Service. Over 50 nationalities are represented, mainly from the immigrant communities in the Greater Dublin area.

Governing Body Membership	
Mr. Denis O'Brien	Independent Chairman
Mr. William Attley	Former General Secretary SIPTU
Fr. Noel Barber S.J	Jesuit Community
Professor Áine Hyland	Professor Emeritus of Education UCC
Mr. James Duffy	President NCI Students' Union
Ms. Aine Casey	NCI Non-Academic Staff Member
Mr. John McGarrigle	NCI Registrar & Company Secretary
Mr. Paul Stynes	NCI Academic Staff Member
Mr. Brendan McGinty	Director, IBEC
Mr. Peter McLoone	Former General Secretary Impact Trade Union
Dr. Phillip Matthews	President NCI

Mr. Eddie Sullivan	Former Secretary General Dept. of Finance
Dr. Tony White	Former Director Chartered Institute of Cost and Management Accountants

Table 1: Governing Body Representative Members

Overall governance of the College is managed by the Governing Body, which consists of an independent chairperson and representatives from national trade union bodies, education and business, the Jesuit Community, and representatives from different functions within the College such as the President as well as staff and student representatives. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the current membership of the Governing Body.

Management of the College is undertaken by the Executive Board that comprises the President, the Director of Finance, the Vice President Academic & Research, Registrar, Deans of School, Director of HR, Director of Marketing, Commercial Manager and Director of Quality Assurance & Statistical Services.

NCI's programmes are accredited by the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), the Chartered Institute of Personal Development (CIPD) and most recently, the Institute of Commercial Management (ICM). The Teaching Council also recognises graduates from the Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching & Learning for Further Education teaching.

Programmes in Accounting and Finance enjoy recognition by professional bodies such as the Chartered Accountants Ireland, (formerly the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Ireland (ACA)), the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA), and the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA). National College of Ireland is the largest provider of Chartered Institute of Professional Development (CIPD) accredited programmes in the Human Resource Management area in Ireland.

QASS

The following table outlines the profile of NCI students by NFQ level, School and mode of study:

School	Level	Mode of Study FT	Mode of Study PT	Total	%
College Total		1,706	1,682	3,388	100%
		51%	49%		
School of Business		1,043	1,081	2,124	63%
School of Computing		663	601	1,264	37%
Student Profile	**NFQ Level**				
	5	0.20%	1.50%		1.70%
	6	7.90%	5.50%		13.40%
	7	2.30%	11.90%		14.20%
	8	37.40%	22.00%		59.40%
	9	4.20%	7.00%		11.30%
	10	0.00%	0.10%		0.10%

Table 2: NCI Student Profile 2013/14 as at 8.01.14

Other Statistics relating to Student profiles;

- There are 170 International students, which equates to 5% of the total number of students.

- There are 443 Springboard/ICT Skills students which equates to 13% of the total number of students.

- There are 130 students (which equates to 7% of the total full time cohort and 0.9% of the total part time cohort) registered with the Disability Office. Each of these students has additional assessment and exam requirements.

NCI has two schools, the School of Business and the School of Computing. They offer a wide range of full-time and part-time programmes as follows:

The School of Business offers 28 programmes from level 5 (or equivalent) to Level 9 on the National Framework of Qualifications. The School's level 5 equivalent programmes are professional training programmes accredited by the Chartered Institute of Professional Development (CIPD) which are at NVQ Level 3 on the UK qualifications framework. As at

December 2013 there are approximately 20 full-time and 117 associate faculty lecturers in the School of Business (this number can change each semester as module allocations change, staff take maternity leave etc.).

The School of Computing offers 12 programmes from level 6 to level 10 on the National Framework of Qualifications. The School was approved in 2008 to run a PhD in Technology Enhanced Learning on a case by case basis. As at December 2013 there are approximately 14 full-time and 71 associate faculty lecturers in the School of Computing (this number can change each semester as module allocations change, staff take maternity leave etc.).

Part time programmes across both Schools, are run through several modes of delivery including evening delivery, block release, weekend delivery and a limited amount of blended learning. Programmes are run throughout the calendar year. Most programmes run on a semester basis.

2.2   NCI Mission and Vision

During 2010-11 the College reviewed its mission and vision statements. The new statements reflect the College's understanding of the impact of education on society, something that has been rooted in our ethos since 1951, as well as a clear understanding of the national need for education to provide graduates that are ready to contribute to society. The NCI Mission and Vision are:

NCI Mission: *To change lives through education*

NCI Vision: *NCI will provide an inspiring educational experience that is innovative, responsive and enterprise focused.*

Today, NCI continues to hold leadership positions in the areas of access, widening participation, early years learning, lifelong learning and workforce re-skilling. The College has made a significant and positive impact in community development, social inclusion and educational opportunity and is well placed to drive change in these areas at a regional and a national level.

Having completed the review of the College's mission, vision and values, the Executive Board developed a revised Strategic Plan for 2011 to 2015. Once again the staff volunteer group worked in parallel with Executive Board, this time, to develop a programme of revenue generating initiatives and structures that would enable the College to meet the challenges of a changing educational landscape and economic climate.

In order to execute the revised strategic plan, NCI's Executive Board worked to develop a new set of eight strategic objectives that would reflect the College's key priorities during the plan period. In order to ensure that we deliver on these objectives, each of the eight objectives (below) has a key set of actions with clear ownership, KPI's and timelines.

1. Provide a student-centred and high quality learning environment, supported by academic rigour;
2. Increase student numbers by developing a targeted programme and market strategy;
3. Widen participation and provide access to higher education;
4. Develop organisational capacity in research, creativity, innovation and enterprise;
5. Further NCI's ability to remain connected with and responsive to the needs of business and community;
6. Foster an organisation culture that is student-centred, high-performing, innovative and inspiring, where staff and faculty can fulfil their potential;
7. Ensure that the College has effective planning processes and resources required to execute the strategic plan;
8. Maintain fully compliant academic and corporate governance procedures.

2.3   NCI Funding Model

NCI is a not-for-profit, state assisted third level institution. The College enjoys state support and funding in relation to full-time students only. As a result the College has had to be innovative in its programmes and funding activities. This culture has contributed enormously to the establishment of NCI's current physical facilities, its recognised position as being 'market responsive' and its access initiatives. NCI differs from many other institutions in the higher education sector in that NCI relies heavily on income from private fees from part-time students and fees from international students. This reliance is due to the fact that NCI's state funding from the Department of Education & Science (DES) is restricted to 925 in the number of full-time students funded under the Free Fees Initiative – which effectively caps the income which NCI receives from DES funding.

To supplement this capping of funding, NCI actively seeks 'ancillary income' which is made possible due to the excellent campus physical facilities developed over the past ten years.

3   Quality Review of the Assessment Service

NCI has introduced a quality assurance framework for its service and support functions which complements the quinquennial programmatic review. This process commenced in

2011 and this is the third such review. The Library & Information Service and Student Support Services underwent review in 2011/12 and 2012/13.

3.1 Terms of Reference

The terms of reference agreed by Academic Council for all service reviews are outlined below.

- This review will consider the present and future performance of the assessment structures, policies and procedures in terms of the objectives of the College.
- The review will be conducted in the context of the strategic plans of the College, the schools, exams office and the administrative departments.
- It will examine the examination/assessment processes, procedures and policies in the context of the student experience, faculty experience, exams office experience and external bodies such as the awarding bodies and external examiners.
- The review will be also conducted in the context of the standards and guidelines offered by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.
- The quality of the assessment service will be considered with reference to national and international trends, best practice in the sector, published research and benchmarking activities.

This allows consistency of reporting across each of the services over time. The framework allows for specific areas of a function to be reviewed in addition. The specific areas of the Assessment Services under review are:

- A review of the current assessment processes and policies.
- A review of the organisational structure, training and deployment of staffing resources.
- A review of the assessment service to the student body.
- A review of roles played by the assessment office, academic departments and the school administration staff in support of the assessment function in NCI.
- A review of the assessment of Research Degrees.

3.2 Methodology used to undertake the review

A number of methods were used to gain feedback in inform the review.
- Workshops were conducted to determine the effectiveness of current policy and areas requiring improvement.
- Surveys were electronically circulated to academic and school administration staff and students
- Site visits to other HEIs/bodies for benchmarking purposes.
- External Examiner Feedback analysis from the Annual Reports.

4   Findings in Relation to the Terms of Reference[1]

4.1   Strategic Direction and Alignment with Strategic Objectives of the College

Over the last number of years, NCI has diversified and extended its offerings in discipline areas, level of programme and in extending to the international marketing. In addition, changes in assessment structures and the introduction of various modes of blended learning and block delivery, has challenged the existing structures within the College and has highlighted a need to evaluate how the assessment as a whole is managed.

The College's business model which uses a large number of associate (part-time) faculty brings with it challenges regarding availability at examination venues and at examination boards. This is consistently addressed at induction but it does remain a challenge.

The College is also confident that large scale innovation e.g. introduction of practical examinations for computing, implementation of the learning, teaching & assessment strategy tends to be managed well through stakeholders, however individual innovation can sometimes cause issues if individuals do not think to consult.

In general the assessment function is aligned with the strategic objectives of the College, however the panel recommends that a review of the impact of service innovation on administrative and support services is undertaken, particularly when scaling up initiatives.

4.2   Organisation & Management of the Function
4.2.1   Organisational Structure

Discussions have been held within NCI regarding the consolidation of the management of assessment into one unit that manages all aspects of assessment rather than the current and more traditional split of a centrally based 'Examinations Office' that manages traditional examinations and coursework is managed through School Administration. During the course of the meetings various staff members proffered views on the advantages of the model. The main advantages perceived were a single location to address queries and a belief that it would bring better consistency of the treatment of assessment, particularly as more coursework is being introduced into programmes.

There were no expressed disadvantages of the model other than a belief that regardless of the organisational place of assessment, more fundamental issues regarding the role and responsibilities of key stakeholders, particularly faculty responsibility for entering results and management of those who did not comply with agreed schedules, were required to be resolved.

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[1] The findings of the panel are presented with reference to the required terms of reference used are those outlined in NCI's Services Quality Assurance Framework

Panel members have experience of the model that NCI currently operates and that of a centralised examinations office. Whilst the decision regarding structure is NCI's to make, the panel is of the view that the implementation and management of the process should be consistent across schools and that faculty should be closely involved in the assessment process and that the management of assessment should be closely aligned to the Schools

4.2.2   Roles & Responsibilities

As highlighted in the self-assessment report and during the course of the meetings, there appears to be a lack of clarity about the appropriate role for each set of administrative staff. It appeared that the same activity was being carried out by both Exams Office staff and Programme Co-ordinators. The Exams Office staff appear to be taking on additional responsibility (checking broadsheets, missing results etc.) which in the view of the panel is not appropriate and should be carried out at School level. However, School staff also seem be involved in this activity. The role of senior academic staff and Programme Director in following up on exceptions should also be clarified. A recommendation of the panel is that a full helicopter view of the process is undertaken which clearly outlines the steps in the process and where the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder start and end is clarified.

4.2.3   Management of Exam Papers/Document sets for External Examiners

The central issues that arose in this area relate to the security of assessment, exploration of electronic methods of communicating assessment material to external examiners and ensuring that external examiners are fully aware of the range of modules on their programme.

School admin staff raised a concern that due to the open plan nature of their offices and relative ease of access particularly in the School of Computing to administrator desks, the integrity of the process could be breached. Whilst absolute care is taken at all times, this is an area of concern raised by staff.

Some exploration of the external examining of electronic artefacts has been made in the School of Computing where the external examiner has reviewed submissions on Moodle. Staff have expressed a wish to also explore the use of soft copies of exam papers both for the internal peer review process and for review by the external examiner. This should make the process more streamlined and speedy.

Another issue that arose was the nature and timing of the external examination of coursework. There are differing practices within Schools which should be streamlined. The panel recommends that rather than pieces of coursework being individually sent to external examiners for approval, a high level approach to coursework is agreed with the examiner

and that these are sent in batch mode through the School office. This could include, for instance, indicative essay titles, previous years test etc. together with a clear marking scheme / sample answers / assessment rubric depending on the nature of the coursework element. This documentation, once approved, and seen to be working may then remain unchanged over a number of iterations of the module.

4.3 Functions' services to internal/external stakeholders as appropriate

4.3.1 Research Students

The management of research students is a special consideration of this review. The panel did not address this in detail during the meeting and recommends that the recommendations outlined in the self-assessment report are carried out.

4.3.2 Students with Special Requirements

The panel is satisfied that students who require additional supports for assessment receive them. It has a recommendation that the use of devices with pre-recorded material on them could be used to alleviate the space issues caused by the need to accommodate multiple learners who require readers. A concern raised by staff is the number of amendments that can take place at the last minute which would make this approach difficult to implement at NCI. This should be addressed at an earlier stage in the process and should be exceptional.

An additional concern is that with increasing student numbers and a move from exams to more coursework throughout the semester that this may require additional pool of supports to be put in place to cope with this increased demand.

In general, the students met by the panel appeared to be happy with the assessment process. The students that were met by the panel had mixed experiences and knowledge about some processes such as availability of module descriptors, feedback and general programme information.

4.4 The use of evidence to support decision making

The panel found evidence of good practice in some areas where information was being used to manage processes and support decision making. This however, is not consistent across the schools and the panel is of the view that practices such as the setting up of a central coursework register for external examining currently in the School of Computing could be introduced across the College. This would assist in highlighting issues with the effectiveness of the key quality assurances processes to senior academic staff such external examining, peer review, 2nd marking etc. The panel found that more use could be made of management

information systems which would reduce the manual and ad hoc nature of some activities, in particular timetabling of assessment/examinations and the production of the semester assessment schedule. Whilst these processes may have been easily managed before, as the College has grown and requirements have become more complex, it is no longer effective use of resources. The panel agrees that software requirements to ensure that the College's student record system and QQI's management information system are compatible should be implemented.

4.5   Cross College engagement and communication

The self-assessment report raises the issue of cross college communication. As outlined above, there is a lack of clarity regarding the roles of stakeholders in the process. The panel suggests that a forum is set up where school and central administrative staff can meet to discuss issues and agree and share practice. Information systems can be used to aid cross college communication with opportunities for the expansion of the use of Coursebuilder, the use of the CRM tool recently implemented and MS Sharepoint.

4.6   How the function supports compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG)

The recommendations of the panel and of the self-assessment document support further compliance and strengthening of the implementation of the ESG in the areas of procedures for quality assurance of assessment, public information, use of information systems and evidence for decision making and fair and consistent assessment of learners.

5   Conclusion

It is clear to the panel both from the documentation supplied and through participation in discussions with the stakeholder groups, that the College has as a whole engaged with, and benefited from, this process. The panel commends and thanks the staff involved for the manner in which they approached the process and the open manner in which they engaged in deliberations on the day. The panel wishes the team well in implementing the recommendations of their self-evaluation and of those contained in this report and looks forward to reviewing the follow-up report a year hence.

7   Appendix 1: Agenda & Participants

Agenda

Services Quality Review

Service under Review	Exams/Assessment
Date of Review	6th/7th February 2014
NCI Lead	Ms. Niamh McAuley, Director Student Services
Panel Members:	
Chair	Dr. Stephen Cassidy, Dean Quality Enhancement, Cork IT
	Dr. Brendan Ryder, Assistant Registrar, Dundalk IT
	Ms. Mary Jordan, Academic Administration and Student Services Manager, IT Carlow
Rapporteur	Ms. Sinéad O'Sullivan

Agenda

Time	Session	Personnel Involved
6-7.30pm	Pre-meeting at NCI followed by dinner at Clarion Hotel, IFSC	PRG, DQASS
9.00-9.15	Briefing/Meeting of Panel with QASS office	PRG, DQASS
9.15am-10.15am	Meeting with President/Vice President , Registrar & Director Student Services	PRG, PRES/VPRES, REG, DSS
10.15-10.30	Coffee & Panel Deliberation	
10.30-11.30 noon	Meeting With Exams Office Staff	EX STAFF
11.30-12.30	Meeting with Academic Staff	Deans/Vice Deans
12.30-1.45pm	Review of Supporting material and lunch	PRG
1.45-2.15	Meeting with Programme Co-Ordinators	Programme Co-ordinators
2.15-2.45pm	Meeting with other functions	(SS, AT, IT,PREM)
2.45pm-3pm	Coffee & Panel Deliberation	PRG
3-3.30PM	Meeting with Learners	
3.30-4.30	Panel Deliberation and Draft Report	PRG
4.30-5PM	Oral Feedback to Registrar & Direct Student Services/Team	PRG

Documents Provided to the Panel:

- **Terms of Reference**

QASS
- Self Evaluation Report & Appendices
- NCI policy on Services Review

Staff Met

Session 1:   Management Team

Dr. Phillip Matthews, President

Prof. Jimmy Hill, Vice President

Mr. John McGarrigle, Registrar

Ms. Niamh McAuley, Direct Student Services

Session2:   Examinations Office

Ms. Orla Heslin, Exams Officer

Ms. Sinéad Kavanagh

Ms. Isabel Caulfield

Session 3: Senior Academic Staff

Prof. Jimmy Hill, Vice President/Dean School of Business

Dr Pramod Pathak, Dean School of Computing

Dr Colette Darcy, Vice Dean Postgraduate & Research, School of Business

Mr Paul Stynes, Vice Dean, School of Computing

Dr Horacio Gonzalez-Velez, Head Cloud Competency Centre

Session 4:   Programme Coordinators

Ms Louise Devlin, Snr Programme Coordinator, School of Computing

QASS

Ms Helen Power, Programme Coordinator, School of Computing

Ms. Barbara Flynn, Programme Coordinator, School of Computing

Ms Laura Fallon, Programme Coordinator, School of Business

Ms Leah Kinsella, Programme Coordinator, School of Business

Ms. Margaret Brennan, Programme Coordinator, School of Business

Ms. Olivia Lee, Programme Coordinator, School of Business

Session 5:   Administrative Departments

Ms. Geraldine Minogue, IT Manager

Ms Karen Mooney, Disability Officer

Ms Ann Fogarty, Assistive Technology Officer

Ms. Sarah Duignan, Admissions Officer

Ms. Sigita Germanaviciute, Premises/Commercial Office

Session 6:   Learners

Ms. Ruth Doran   BSc Hons Computing, Year 1

Ms. Gillian Darcy   BA (Hons) Accounting, Year 2

Mr. Cian Farrell   MA HRM