

National College of Ireland

Quality Assurance



Student Support Quality Review
Report of the Peer Review Group
October 2012

QASS

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1 Introduction

This is the report of the Peer Review Group appointed by National College of Ireland (NCI) which carried out a review of its Student Support Services in September 2012. The services under review were:

- Learning Support
- Mathematics Support
- Disability Support
- Assistive Technology Support
- Computing Support
- Student Support & Recreation
- Careers & Employability

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. Bernadette Walsh, Director Student Affairs, University of Limerick (Chair)
- Dr. Gillian Jack, Director Student Services, University of Glamorgan
- Ms. Ann O'Brien, Director of Access (ret'd), NUI, Maynooth
- Mr. Dave Kilmartin, Head of Careers Services, Dublin Institute of Technology
- Mr. Gerard Gallagher, Postgraduate Student, UCD and formerly Equality Officer, Union of Students of Ireland.

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's quality framework for support services) 3 weeks prior to the event. The College's strategic plan and annual report for 2010-11 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 found that the Student Support Service offered an excellent support service to learners and that there was evidence of many instances of best practice.

The panel made 7 commendations and 12 recommendations which are outlined below

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Commendations:

- The process which has been undertaken to date and the quality of the documentation provided
- The positivity around all of the services which is evident amongst learners. The open door policy of all of the services reinforces the student centred approach that is evident in the College through such things as the Wall of Excellence
- New simple initiatives that appear to have already made a difference e.g. photographs on the Educational Needs Assessment (ENA) reports, the inclusion of support staff on the common 1st Year Programme Committee in the School of Business
- The Academic Writing Club is an excellent initiative
- The panel commends the college-wide approach to the development of the Mental Health policy
- The questionnaire distributed to incoming students at orientation that asks the students to reflect on their intended learning journey and its follow-up at the end of 1st year.
- The panel also commends the college's approach towards gaining a holistic view of the students' engagement through initiatives such as the CRM project, attendance monitoring and the appointment of the Student Attendance and Retention Officer.

Recommendations

Strategic

- The panel recommends that the Director of Student Services develops a strategic plan for student support services with goals, targets and action plan. This strategic plan to be informed by NCI's Strategic Plan (2011–2015) and goals.
- The development of this plan should also evaluate and examine the current structure of the delivery of support services to students with a view to further improving the effectiveness, better cohesion of the different services and the development of a team identity. The panel recommends reducing the number of distinct units from seven to three.
- Whilst the panel commends the recommendations made by the entire Student Services group to date, it also recommends that these be revisited in the context of the strategic plan to ensure that these recommendations are cohesive, fully thought through and their implementation is feasible.
- The required investment and workforce planning to support the plan must be a consideration.
- It is strongly recommended that the CRM project be given support through to implementation as soon as is possible.
- The College should consider creating an Employability Strategy which would detail goals around knowledge and skills development, career development learning as well as work based and work related learning for programmes in NCI. Implications for teaching and learning strategies should also be considered.

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- A policy for supporting international students with a disability and international students who find themselves in financial difficulty should be developed.

Communication & Engagement

- The support services should consider methods by which they can engage with academic staff to better inform universal design of curricula and the use of assistive technology for all students.
- The Student Services' voice should be more evident in decision making committees.
- The Careers Service should be included in programme development and invited to contribute to advisory boards.
- A greater academic resource should be provided from the Schools to assist the Careers Service source work placements for learners on diverse programmes.
- There is a need to evaluate the issues presenting in academic support services so that these can be presented to academic colleagues in order to be addressed in the classroom as appropriate.
- There should be greater use of evaluation data from the Medical and Counselling Services so as to inform Student Support activities and appropriate awareness campaigns.
- An evaluation of the standard operating procedures for each of the services should be undertaken and reported on in the follow-up report.
- Provision of pre arrival information in preparation for elements of specific study (e.g. formulae/symbols in maths) and management of academic expectations.

2 Overview of National College of Ireland

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

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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 centered on the changing needs of today's learner. 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 learner, bringing a unique student-centered 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 learner profile. Approximately 50% of NCI's learners are part-time learners and study at its IFSC campus or at one of its locations in its Off-Campus Network (part-time learners only). In 2009-10, 7% of full-time learners had registered with the Disability Support Service. Over 50 nationalities are represented, mainly from the immigrant communities in the Greater Dublin area.

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 learner representatives.

Management of the College is undertaken by a Senior Management Team that comprises the President, the Director of Finance, the Vice President, and an Executive Board chaired by the Vice President. The day-to-day operations of the College are managed by the Executive Board which comprises: the Registrar; Deans of School, the Director of Finance, and Heads of support functions.

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NCI's programmes are accredited by the Higher Education & Training Awards Council (HETAC), the Further Education & Training Awards Council (FETAC), the Chartered Institute of Personal Development (CIPD) and most recently, the Institute of Commercial Management (ICM).

Programmes in Accounting and Finance enjoy recognition by such professional bodies 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.

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

The School of Business offers 26 programmes from level 5 (or equivalent) to Level 9 on the National Framework of Qualifications. The School's level 5 equivalent programmes are mainly professional training programmes accredited by the Chartered Institute of Professional Development (CIPD) which are at NVQ Level 3 on the UK qualifications framework.

The School of Computing offers programmes from level 6 to level 10 on the National Framework of Qualifications. The School has recently had approval to run a PhD in Technology Enhanced Learning on a case by case basis.

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. A limited number of programmes are offered in centres outside of the main campus. These form the National Campus Network but can also include employer premises and community based locations.

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*

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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 then 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.

3 Student Support Service

3.1 Purpose of Quality Review of Student Support Services at NCI

The purpose of the review of the Student Support Services is to assess the overall service quality of Student Support Services from the users' perspectives and to investigate the

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essential attributes of each service whilst identifying strategies to improve service provision for all internal and external users.

3.1.1 Terms of Reference

In undertaking this review, the Student Support Services team examined the quality of its services to its users centred on five broad headings: Student Centred; Cohesive; Effectiveness; Holistic; Innovative. These were interpreted as follows:

Student Centred: Student Support promotes academic, social and professional development within National College of Ireland and strives to ensure that each individual student can successfully engage with and complete their studies. As a student centred unit, Student Support maintains the College's mission to change lives through education by fostering a collaborative, flexible, inclusive and holistic learning environment that is rooted in national and international good practices.

Cohesive: Both in terms of location and cross-functioning, Student Support aims to be a collaborative and cohesive unit. This cohesiveness is crucial for cross-departmental projects such as orientation, research, referrals or conference organisation.

Effectiveness: Student Support aims to provide flagship services that positively influence each student's journey through higher education. The effectiveness of each service in student support is gauged annually through surveys from students, and in some cases, further reviewed in relation to pass rates, interventions, participation in clubs and societies and peer feedback.

Holistic: Student Support takes a whole-person approach to education and provides academic, social as well as pastoral support to all students.

Innovative: Subscribing to national and international good practices, each service aims to embrace emerging technologies, pedagogies and strategies in order to maximise flexibility and to communicate effectively with students.

In general the review considered:

- The performance of Student Support Services in terms of its stated objectives as a College service, as well as commenting on the feasibility of its plans for the future;
- The context of the strategic plans of the College, the Schools and of other administrative departments;
- User Experience of Student Support Services at the College;
- The context of the standards and guidelines offered by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education;

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- The quality of Student Support Services with reference to national best practice, published research and quality activities Student Support Services has entered into.

These terms of reference did not refer directly to the terms of reference outlined in the College's framework for Quality Assurance for support functions; however the panel is satisfied that in the main, these were covered within the review as a whole.

4 Findings in Relation to the Terms of Reference¹

4.1 Strategic Direction and Alignment with Strategic Objectives of the College

The meeting with Senior Management and all subsequent groups demonstrated an alignment between the College's strategic objective of a positive learning environment and widening participation. The College is aware of the impact that its reputation for providing support is having in terms of attracting students and the need to carefully manage increasing numbers of students from diverse backgrounds and with diverse support needs.

The self-evaluation report highlighted a need to develop a shared vision for the services providing support to students. This is endorsed by the panel and it notes that the development of this shared vision may provide a structure by which the recommendations noted in the self-evaluation report can be reviewed in a holistic manner and an overall team identity can be created. The panel does not agree that the creation of a Committee is the best approach to develop this strategy and recommends that it is led and directed by the Director of Student Services. Notwithstanding this, it is clear from interaction with the group and with students that the College's goals of providing a student centred environment and widening participation are being well supported by the support services.

Given that key priorities for NCI are the retention of all their students and their subsequent employability, the panel recommends, commitment to enhancing the 1st Year Experience (for F/T and P/T students), follow-up on any student withdrawals and an employability policy and strategy for their diverse cohorts of students.

4.2 Organisation & Management of the Function

The self-evaluation report outlined each of the services provided and the number of staff involved. It also highlighted resourcing issues and recommendations for increasing service provision. The panel noted the reporting lines within the group providing support services – Director of Student Services, IT Manager and Dean of School. In addition, the International Office also has a role in providing support to students. Whilst the panel observed that this seemed to add complexity to the overall structure of service provision, the students met did

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

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not seem to find it a barrier. The panel notes the current and planned expansion of work-placements in the curriculum and recommends that the resourcing of the Careers Service is closely monitored. The panel recommends that the structure of service delivery be further evaluated and examined with a view to reducing the number of distinct units from seven to three to ensure that it is providing the most effective and efficient service to students within the existing resources available to the College. This coupled with the implementation of the CRM system and greater use of technology in providing services may address some of the resourcing issues highlighted.

The self-evaluation report did not address an evaluation of the standard operating procedures of each of the services which was an expected feature of this review process. The panel recommends that this be addressed over the coming year and a report on it be included in the progress report.

4.3 Functions' services to internal/external stakeholders as appropriate

The self-evaluation report outlined the broad and extensive range of services offered to students. The panel commends the delivery of these services, particularly given the resource constraints that the College operates under. There are a number of examples of excellent practice such as the HRM mentoring scheme and the creation of the Academic Writing Club. The College's recognition of the importance of the Support functions is evident the embedding of posts such as the Disability Officer and Assistive Technology Officer in the core staff complement and the recent appointment of the Student Attendance and Retention Co-ordinator. In recognition of the resource constraints currently placed on the College, the individual support providers are indicating a move away from one-to-one interaction with students to where appropriate, group support using technology to support those interactions. The panel recommends improving awareness of the needs of international students and a strategy for dealing with those who have a disability, those facing hardship and students' place(s) of residence.

Overall the students met and evidence from the focus groups conducted as part of the review indicated that students are satisfied with the services provided. Students indicate that each service has an open door policy that is welcomed. Students also indicate that in some cases e.g. for mature or international learners, advance reading or preparatory work prior to registration would be welcome in order to ease the transition. There is some evidence that suggests that the feedback loop between issues raised and resolution could be speeded up or better information provided whilst resolution is found.

4.4 The use of evidence to support decision making

Each of the services conducts evaluations of service, however it is accepted that this information can be used better to inform service provision. The College's proposed project to implement a system to provide a single source of communication and engagement information on the student and other stakeholders is to be commended. Whilst the panel recognises the resource constraints placed on the College, it recommends that this implementation should be progressed as soon as possible. The panel also commends the recruitment of the Student Attendance & Retention Co-ordinator and the intention to engage in research on the impacts of attendance, performance, extra-curricular activities and other indicators on overall retention.

The services could also benefit from greater evaluation of issues presenting with the Medical and Counselling services so that these can inform information campaigns within the student body. Greater evaluation of the issues presenting at academic support services could provide insights into teaching practices or module content within the Schools.

4.5 Cross college engagement and communication

Evidence both from the self-evaluation report and the staff and faculty met through the review indicates that the support services need to be better represented and engaged with school and programme activities. There is however, evidence that this integration has already commenced as a result of the review process which is encouraging. The new academic structure of the College through the appointment of Vice Deans appears to be facilitating this integration. However, the panel recommends that rather than nominate a disability liaison person within each School, it should be broadened to an overall 'Student Support' liaison role. An area of concern was the lack of connection and/or knowledge between what is happening in programme development in the Schools e.g. use of advisory board, consultation with employers, programme and module learning outcome links to transferable skills and the plans of the Careers Service. The panel recommends the development of an Employability Strategy and the involvement of the Careers Service with the Schools and others, as necessary, in its development.

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

This process has raised the awareness of quality assurance within the services among staff. In having a quality assurance system for service functions, NCI is ensuring that guidelines relating to appropriate learner resources and staff development are met. These services provided are also critical to the College's compliance with the guidelines on programme development and assessment and this review has highlighted where greater integration of the support services in these areas can take place.

It is clear to the panel both from the documentation supplied and through participation in discussions with all stakeholder groups that the student support services have engaged with, and benefited from, this process. Overall the service provided to students is excellent; however the College may not be in a position to sustain this over time and in the current resource environment and within the current structure of the services. 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.

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6 Appendix 1: Agenda & Participants

Service under Review	Student Support Service
Date of Review	25–26 th September 2012
NCI Lead	Ms. Niamh McAuley, Director Student Services
Panel Members:	
Chair	Dr. Bernadette Walsh, Director Student Affairs, UL (Chair)
	Dr. Gill Jack, Director Student Services, Univ of Glamorgan
	Ms. Ann O'Brien, Director of Access, NUIM (ret'd)
	Mr. Dave Kilmartin, Head of Careers Service, DIT
	Mr. Ger Gallagher, Former Equality Officer, USI; Postgraduate Student, UCD
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 Student Support Staff Gp 1 (possibly Learning Dev/Maths Support/Disability)	SS STAFF
11.30–12.30	Meeting with Student Support Staff Gp 2 (Careers/Placement/Recreation)	SS STAFF
12.30–1.45pm	Review of Supporting material and lunch	PRG
1.45–2.15	Meeting with Academic and School Staff	Faculty/Prog Co-ordinators
2.15–2.45pm	Meeting with other functions	(IT, FIN, PREM, Lib, HR; INTL)
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

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Documents Provided to the Panel:

- Terms of Reference
- Self Evaluation Report & Appendices
- NCI policy on Services Review

PRG:	Peer Review Group
PRES:	President
REG:	Registrar
LIB:	Librarian
DQASS:	Director Quality Assurance & Statistical Services
FIN:	Finance Office
IT:	IT Department
SS:	Student Services & Support
HR:	HR Dept
PREM:	Premises
INTL:	International Office

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Session 1 (9.15–10.15)

Dialogue on overall College strategy and the Student Support function

Attendees: Prof. Jimmy Hill, Vice President Academic Administration & Research
Mr. John McGarrigle, Registrar & Company Secretary
Ms. Niamh McAuley, Director of Student Services

Session 2 (10.30 – 11.30)

Dialogue on Academic Support Services

Attendees:

Dr. Mike Goldrick, Learning Development Officer
Mr. Jonathan Lambert, Maths Support
Mr. Stiofán Mac Conmara, Student Attendance & Retention Co-ordinator
Ms. Catherine Elliot, Learning Support Officer
Ms. Karen Mooney, Disability Officer
Ms. Ann Fogarty, Assistive Technology Officer
Ms. Frances Sheridan, Computing Support

Session 3 (11.30 – 12.30)

Dialogue on Careers Advisory, Workplacement & Student Welfare & Well-being

Attendees:

Ms. Caroline Kennedy, Careers Officer
Ms. Aoife Russell, Careers Service
Ms. Siobhan Mockler, Workplacement Officer
Ms. Kate Coughlan, Workplacement Officer
Mr. Corrie Adams, Student Recreation Officer
Dr. Mike Goldrick, Learning Development Officer

Session 4 (1.45–2.15)

Dialogue on Cross College communication and interaction – Academic & School Staff

Attendees:

Dr. Pramod Pathak, Dean School of Computing
Dr. Keith Maycock, School of Computing
Dr. Eugene O'Loughlin, School of Computing
Ms. Shauna Cassidy, Snr. Programme Co-Ordinator, School of Computing
Dr. Colette Darcy, Vice Dean Postgraduate Studies & Research, School of Business
Mr. Colin Whitston, Vice Dean, Undergraduate Studies, School of Business
Ms. Corina Sheerin, School of Business
Ms. Olivia Lee, Programme Co-ordinator, School of Business
Ms. Brigina Crowe, Early Learning Initiative

Session 5 (2.15–2.45)

Dialogue on Cross College communication and interaction – Administrative & Support Function Staff

Attendees

Ms. Geraldine Minogue, IT Manager
Ms. Mary Buckley, Librarian
Ms. Patricia Ryan, Finance Office
Mr. Donnchadh Ó Madagáin, Director Finance
Mr. Bertie Kelly, Commercial Manager (Facilities)
Ms. Nicola Carroll, Head International Office
Ms. Therese Brown, HR

Session 6 (2.45–3.15)

Meeting with Learners

Name	Programme	Year
Mr. Colm Burke	BSc Hons Business Information Systems	2
Mr. Gaby Kos	BSc Hons Computing	4
Mr. Damien Mc Loughlin	Higher Cert in Computing (PT)	2
Ms. Sandra Couch	BSc Hons Computing	2
Mr. Oladapo (Victor) Oluwatosin	MSc Finance	1
Mr. Peter Ibekwe	BSc Computing	4
Ms. Laura Payne	BSc Computing	1
Mr. Laura Feely	BSc Computing	2

Ms. Jeanette Simms – ISL interpreter for Gaby Kos

Session 7 (4.30pm)

Oral Feedback Session

Dr. Phillip Matthews, President
 Prof. Jimmy Hill, Vice President Academic Administration & Research
 Mr. John McGarrigle, Registrar & Company Secretary
 Ms. Niamh McAuley, Director of Student Services