A Response to the Report of the External Review Panel
on the Quality Review of Student Support at the National College of Ireland

This report marks the culmination of one phase of a quality review of Student Support at the National College of Ireland and sets the scene for future developments and the on-going review of Student Support into the future.

The process of continued review of Student Support began in December 2011 and the initial stages of the process took the form of a reflective examination process of each unit comprising Student Support. Investigations of different parts of each service were embarked upon using the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) evaluation method. In support of this reflective process, internal feedback on each individual service was sought, through group interviews, with present students and staff members. Following this, each service carried out an external site visit to another institution. Finally, this phase of the quality review of Student Support was finished through a review of all gathered evidence by an external panel of experts in the fields of student support.

The Student Support team would like to extend their gratitude to all members of the external review panel and for their time and thorough exploration of Student Support and its' performance with respect to best practice both nationally and internationally. In particular, our appreciation is extended to:

- 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.

Overall the review process has met and in many instances exceeded the expectations of Student Support. The process and in particular the report of the external panel, has in many cases agreed with the outputs of the Student Support review and in addition has identified many other areas and themes that Student Support should consider going forward.

Student Support is extremely grateful to the review panel. Student Support are also very pleased with the many commendations made by the panel and are currently in a phase of development of a new aligned strategic plan that encompasses the many recommendations with the strategic direction and operational constraints of the college.

The key areas that stand out to be addressed over the next three years are:

- Development of a Student Support Strategic Plan that embeds the recommendations of the external panel and ensures that the direction of Student Support is in line with the newly created Strategic Plan for NCI;

- Engagement of Student Support within college wide decision making committees to ensure that Student Support knowledge and expertise contributes to, for example: programme development; curriculum design and the use of assistive technology for all students; knowledge and skills development, career development learning as well as work based and work related learning for programmes in NCI;

- The exploitation of data 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;

- The support of International Students and the support of international students that find themselves in financial difficulties;

- 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.

Key to delivery and completion of the many recommendations is the development of the Student Support Strategic Plan up-to 2015. This process has begun in January of 2013 and is expected to be complete by June 2013.

The quality review of Student Support would not have been possible without the hard work and dedication from the Student Support team: Caroline Kennedy, Careers and Employability Officer; Jonathan Lambert, Mathematics Development and Support Officer; Michael Goldrick, Learning Development and Support Officer; Corrie Adams, Student Support and Recreation Coordinator; Frances Sheridan, Computing Support Tutor; Ann Fogarty, Assistive Technology; Karen Mooney, Disability Officer; Catherine Elliot, Learning Support Tutor; and Stiofan Mac Conmara, Student Retention and Attendance Coordinator. Finally, Student Support would like to thank John McGarrigle, Registrar; Sinead O'Sullivan, Director of Quality Assurance and all other colleagues at the National College of Ireland for their support through this process.

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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 to be 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;

The commendations and recommendation of the External Review Panel are as follows:

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;
- 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.

A Note on 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;

> The Development of the Student Support Strategic Plan began in January 2013 and is envisaged to be ready for presentation to the Executive Board in May/June. The Strategic Plan will consider each of the above strategic recommendations and ensure that these are embedded within the plan.
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> **Action**: Development of Student Support Strategic Plan 2015
> **Date**: June 2013

- It is strongly recommended that the CRM project be given support through to implementation as soon as is possible;

> The Careers Service welcomes this recommendation and has championed the urgent need for a CRM system for a number of years. The service has participated in all workshops and presentations on the system and has submitted a detailed list of requirements. As this request has been on-going for a number of years we would welcome a timescale on the project and will pursue this further.
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> **Action**: CRM Implementation Timeframe
> **Date**: On-going College Project

- 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;

> Developing and delivering an employability strategy requires the support of the Executive Board and the LTA Committee. The need to focus on employability in the new Learning and Teaching strategy was brought up by the Careers Office at the LTA Committee meeting in December 2012. In the absence of Executive Board support for developing an Employability Strategy, careers staff will work towards this goal though are likely to receive limited support from academic and senior members of staff until such provision is recognised as an institutional goal. The overarching theme of the new Student Support Strategic Plan will be Employability and each units contribution from Access; Progression; Retention and through to student Completion.
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> **Action**:
> **Date**:

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

  A draft policy for supporting international students in assessments has been tabled for discussion and debated as part of a faculty training day in September 2012. Building on this, the Disability Service is currently examining good practices in relation to supporting international students with disabilities. In relation to financial assistance to international students, NCI already supports those students who are in financial difficulty and the Service is working with the International Office in order to further improve student acclimatisation in the 2013-2014 academic year.

  Action: Learning Support to Develop
  Date: Completed

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 recommendations of Student Support from this review process have included a number of initiatives to tackle this point. In particular the representation of Student Support at a programme development stage should be considered and Student Support will forward this position through the Deans of School.

  Action: To Confirm with Deans of School
  Date: May 2013

- The Careers Service should be included in programme development and invited to contribute to advisory boards;

  The Careers Service would welcome the opportunity to be involved in programme development and to contribute to advisory boards. The Service had asked to be included on an informal basis before the review and has formally asked the Dean of the School of Business, Dean of the School of Computing and the Director of Quality Assurance that it be included in all future programme development committees at an early stage and that it be invited to contribute to advisory boards.

  Action: To Confirm with Deans of School and Quality Assurance
  Date: May 2013

- A greater academic resource should be provided from the Schools to assist the Careers Service source work placements for learners on diverse programmes;

  This is a decision that lies with the Executive Board and the individual schools. The Careers Service however would welcome increased involvement from the schools in relation to their involvement with industry – this would include providing the careers service access to the industry advisory boards, advising the careers service of their interaction with industry, increased involvement by academics at industry events and meetings, promoting the courses to their network of contacts.

  Action: To Confirm with Deans of School
  Date: June 2013

- 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;

    With regard to this recommendation it is planned that Student Support in Collaboration with the Director for Learning and Teaching undertake regular seminars for academic staff through the Lunchtime Seminar Series as a way of communicating and instigating discussions around the challenges that students face in their academic journey. This process has begun with presentations from the Learning Support Tutor around the challenges and issues that students face with regard to Dyslexia and Dyspraxia.

    Action: On-going Seminars Now in Place
    Date: On-going

- 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;

    Data collection from the Medical Services has begun. The characteristics of Medical Service users are reported to Student Support on a monthly basis. An annual report of Counselling Services is planned for summer 2013 in order to identify challenges, trends and issues facing NCI students. This data will then be used to direct new initiatives and student-led campaigns to promote positive mental health. In Support of this, Learning Development, in association with the Counselling Service and Disability Service will design a dedicated Service for students with mental health difficulties. The nature of this service will be based on existing national good practices, such as TCD and DCU's Unilink Service.

    Action:
    Date: Completed

- An evaluation of the standard operating procedures for each of the services should be undertaken and reported on in the follow-up report;

    Student Support recognises the real need for Standard Operating Procedures and has begun the development of these for each individual unit. These will be complete for all units in July 2013. This process has begun in a number of areas, for example: the Learning Development and Support Service has already complied procedural manuals for the *Student Assistance Fund* and *Dyslexia Screening*. Further procedures will be developed in the summer of 2013. These procedures will include a set of policies and guidelines with regards to how the Service supports and refers to other internal functions within the College such as Examinations, Programme Development and Assessment. This will allow us to improve our college-wide Quality Assurance Processes.

    Action: To complete Operating Procedures
    Date: June 2013

- Provision of pre arrival information in preparation for elements of specific study (e.g. formulae/symbols in maths) and management of academic expectations.

    Mathematics Development and Support have finished the development of entry level Mathematical Formulae and Tables for all first year School of Business students. The service is currently developing a similar resource for School of Computing programmes. With respect to dissemination and the preparation of students for their specific programmes of study and their Mathematical component, Foundational workshops will be embedded in the Student Support

Induction programme so as to introduce a student and prepare the student for the mathematical requirements of their programme.

Action: To develop Transitional Resources
Date: On-going