University College Dublin

UCD Quality Office

Writing the Self-assessment Report

Guidance Notes

UCD Quality Office

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Writing the Self-assessment Report – Background Notes

The Self-assessment Report (SAR) is the key document through which a unit conveys information about itself. Equally, and perhaps more importantly, it is the starting point for critical reflection by the unit, about the way it is: organised and managed; what mechanisms are used to evaluate the standards and quality of its functions and activities; how do the outputs from these mechanisms enhance the units activities and provision? etc. It is an evidence-based reflection of what the unit believes to be working well and what it believes to be working less well, and what might be done about the latter. The SAR should be full and frank, not attempting to hide problems, but not forgetting to cover strengths; and it should be developmental, offering thoughts on how to improve provision within the unit.

The unit preparing for review, is not required to provide a detailed description of what it does. Some background information will be necessary of course, to set the context for example, but it should be succinct. The emphasis should instead, be on the critical self-evaluation of how effective it believes the various aspects of its provision to be.

Feedback from Review Groups indicates that overall, UCD units prepare well for Quality Review, with the majority of Self-assessment Reports providing a useful analysis of the unit's core activities. One Reviewer's comments echoed the views of a number of reviewers:

'A reasoned analysis admitting a problem is likely to lead to a more productive discussion.'

However, the words 'reasoned analysis' should be stressed: 'admitting a problem' on its own would be insufficient without analysis, thoughts about approaches to resolving it and intentions to do so.

Set out below, are sample extracts from earlier SARs which illustrate a self-reflective approach, and which were considered by Review Groups to be drafted in a helpful style. The extracts are set out under a number of headings which broadly reflect the SAR content structure (Academic Unit Examples – page 3-22; Support Unit Examples – page 23-28).

(A) Academic Unit Quality Review - Examples

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Sample extract A1

The School sees this exercise as an opportunity to reflect on our quality standards and processes in view of: (1) identifying shortfalls in resources and providing an externally validated case for change and/or increased resources, (2) identifying weaknesses and shortcomings in our procedures and organisation that can be addressed internally, (3) gaining a deeper understanding of where our strengths lie and encourage discussion on how we as a School can prosper by maintaining and building on these, and (4) facilitating (in conjunction with the review group report) the preparation of an "action plan" by which the School can continue to work for continuous quality improvement. A summary of the approach taken to conduct this review is described in Appendix X. In this context, the School welcomes comments, constructive criticism and recommendations by the Review Group (RG) with a view to enhancing our overall performance and reputation.

Sample extract A2

Figure 1 shows the organisation of the School Administrative, Technical and Student Support management with the directors of these activities reporting to the Head of School (HoS). The School also operates the committees shown in Figures 2 and 3. Further details relating to the role of these committees and matters arising, are discussed in the later sections of this report. This committee structure has evolved over the past three years to most effectively meet our changing needs since becoming a School. For instance, the most recent revision here is the appointment of a School Web Committee in response to feedback about our current Web presence. This committee is also responsible for Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) management, and the provision of a staff support wiki to facilitate the discussion on various topics arising from internal committee meetings (e.g., Teaching & Learning, Research & Development, Staff-Student Consultation, etc.).

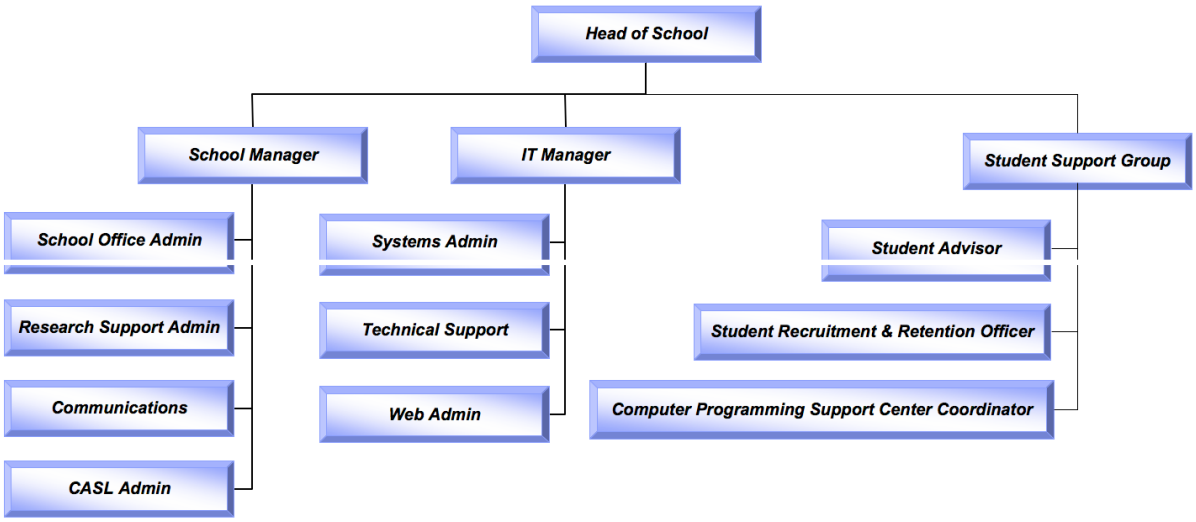


Figure 1: School Support Staff Structure Diagram.

Currently the School does not follow a formal procedure in relation to the rotation/selection of chairs – rotation is carried out informally every 2 to 3 years depending on staff workloads and availability. Given that the current UCD promotions process places a high value on internal committee chairing it would make sense to look at revising how and when these appointments are made in the best interests of all staff.

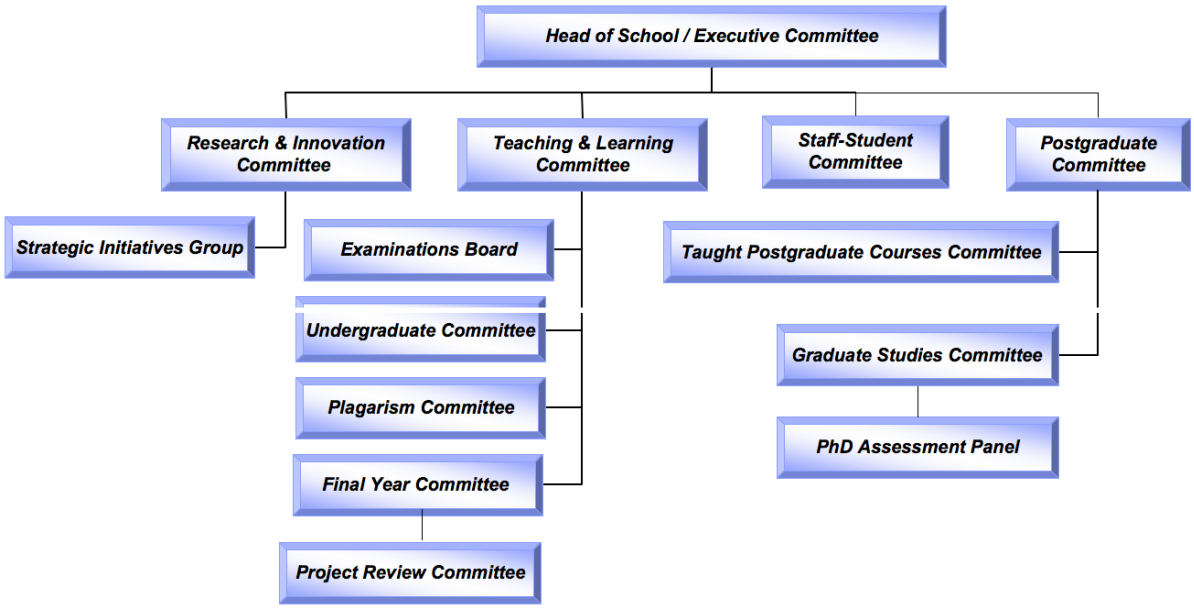


Figure 2: School Academic Committee Structure.

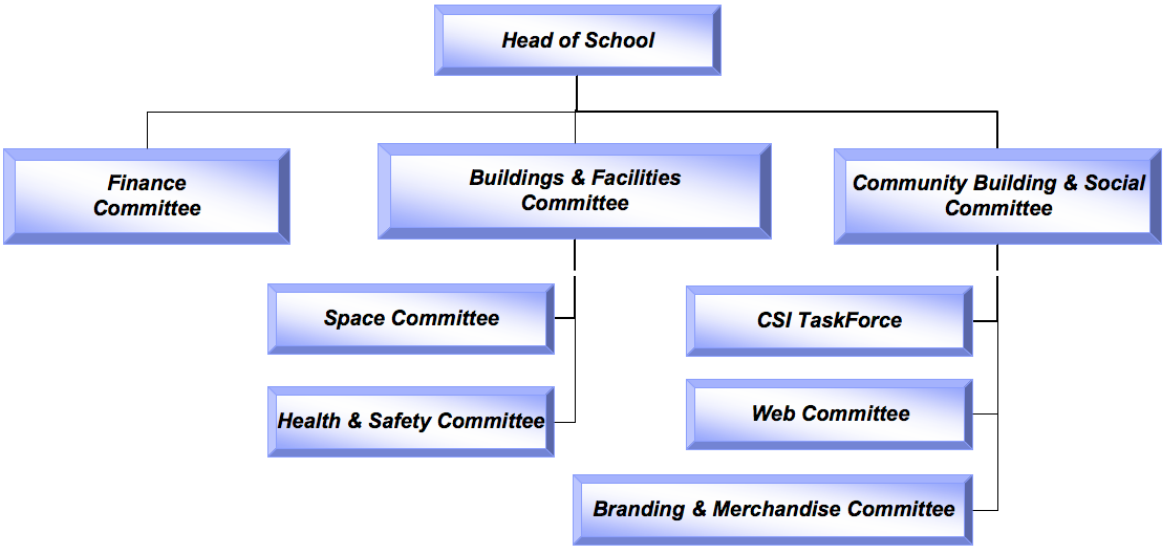


Figure 3: Further School Committee Structures.

Sample extract A3

As a result of the previous QA/QI review process in XXXX, the UCD School of X consciously developed a strategic approach to research. This is reinforced in the School strategic planning process and is currently encapsulated in the School Strategic Plan for Research and Innovation 2007–2012 (see Appendix X). This allows the School to be both coherent and adaptable in its research strategy. The School contributes significantly to UCD's Global Ireland major research theme (see Appendix X - Research, Section 5 in UCD Strategic Plan) and also to the X Institute, the College of X research focus on X.

The School has initiated research themes and clusters and is monitoring their ongoing development with review based on performance. Within the School there are a number of major, on-going research projects at various stages of their life cycle. Many of these are captured under the X research theme (one of the research strands funded through the UCD X Institute under the national Programme for Research in Third-Level Institutions (PRTLI) cycle 4) while others have an international dimension, as collaborative projects with international partners focused on Ireland, such as the X project (Ireland and Canada), the X project in the USA, or focused on other parts of the world, such as the X project in the eastern Mediterranean and the X project (Country).

Sample extract A4

Staff consider that they have contributed to School plans with XX% of respondents to the staff survey indicating that they have had an opportunity to input to the School's planning process. However, the challenge is to engage the XX% of staff who do not feel that they currently have an input to the School's planning process and to ensure that all staff engages in a meaningful way particularly given their many other commitments. There is also a growing concern among staff that the University is pursuing educational policies – e.g. University–wide roll out of on-line Masters programmes that focus entirely of generation of revenue at the expense of academic standards and ultimately the reputation of UCD and its staff. (See Appendix X *Staff Survey Results*).

Sample extract A5

There are a number of opportunities available to the School to continue to build on our successes and to weather current difficult economic circumstances. Most notably, the School can build on our successes in recruiting graduate students (EU domestic and overseas) and in developing national and international research and policy networks, thus providing fertile opportunities for additional research funding opportunities – a process already under way.

Circumstances are challenging. There are weaknesses and threats that are internal to the School (notably in reduced size, morale, scale and destination of research outputs), university-based challenges (promotional limitations, library resources, uneven administrative supports), and, most seriously, external challenges (the dire budgetary situation, declining standards among a cohort of undergraduate students, and new competitors for the best graduate students).

While these circumstances are challenging, they also offer an important opportunity for the School to make use of this peer review process to take stock, to assess its options and strategies and to plot

a successful path forward to deliver on our shared goals. The input of the review group would be invaluable in identifying and plotting these opportunities.

ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT

Sample extract A6

The management of the School would benefit from a clearer articulation and understanding by all colleagues of the yearly cycle of activities and key times within it. The institution of a more regular rotation of positions of responsibilities in the School is also required. Currently there is a tendency to leave staff in positions where they have known expertise. More regular rotation would ensure new thinking, sharing of knowledge and provide greater opportunities for career development.

Sample extract A7

The School has its own research themes, which map to the University's and Institute's research priorities. They are: *X*; *Y and Z.* These are areas of research in which the School excels and which complement the teaching portfolio. They cross the three main disciplines of the School and encourage cross-School and interdisciplinary research. The School's research profile corresponds very well to the newly identified overarching research theme *X* to underpin the College's fundraising and recruitment efforts. The School's goals and activities are compatible with the other College priorities to which the staff contribute actively.

These priorities include:

- Supporting staff morale, retention, strategic recruitment
- Enhancing student learning/experience
- Maintaining positive research output and impact trajectory
- Deepening internationalisation
- Societal engagement, contribution to national recovery

Sample extract A8

The School developed a workload model between 2008 and 2010, through a committee process that took substantial time and effort. The model was translated into a table by the Head of School and implemented for all permanent academic staff in 2010-11 and 2011-12. The model has proven useful for indicating general trends in overall workload, output and engagement in the areas of teaching, research and service and the balance between the categories for each individual staff member. However, the workload model continues to be criticised for various shortcomings, including the clarity of its purpose, the level of detail, the methodological issue of measurement and accuracy, the value as an instrument for comparison, and the base line against which the points should be allocated. Concerns have also been expressed in relation to the potential use of the model by the University central administration which would not have the insight into the School context and circumstances. Finally, the results of the model implementation, even if only roughly

indicative of the levels and variations in activity, cannot be easily translated into the reallocation of duties, due to the full engagement of all staff and the fact that there is very little room to address the imbalances. This is done to the fullest extent possible, particularly through minor concessions or benefits to highly active staff.

To address some apparent implementation faults, based on discussions within the School's Executive Committee, after the first year some adjustments were made in point allocations and the expression of balance between the 3 categories from 400+400+200 points to 40%-40%-20% (to avoid the fixation on 1000 as a goal or referent level). The Committee agreed that further development was needed to account for many of the School's and the individual staff member's engagements, but any further improvements would need to await staff availability and interest to pursue the changes through the proper process. The comparison of workload models across the Schools in the College was announced and will be considered a useful exercise. In comparison to other institutions, in the UK in particular, the School's model could still be considered rudimentary and simple. There are pros and cons to more detail and precision as well as a more qualitative (indicative) approach.

Based on staff's information of the workloads in other institutions obtained through their disciplinary networks, the workload in the School is generally comparable to peer institutions in the United States and United Kingdom. The teaching load of, on average, X modules per year is on par with, or slightly above par for an institution which aspires to make a research impact. Teaching assignments are closely monitored and discussed across the School. However, there is not much space for manoeuvre with regard to re-allocation of teaching responsibilities, as most staff are at, or are close to, maximum teaching load. Secondments, and maternity and other types of leave create additional strain on the delivery of modules and programmes.

Sample extract A9

A period of major reform of procedures and practices commenced in (year) and the administrative team have been central to this initiative. This has involved developing a clear division of responsibilities between administrative staff members while promoting essential teamwork. The reforms have allowed the School to develop a division of labour between academic staff and administrative staff which allows each to focus on their crucial functions and maximise their comparative advantages. The School has now moved from a system of administration characterised by a large degree of *ad hoc* arrangements with a substantial amount of administrative effort devoted to remedying problems arising from the absence of clear guidelines, to one guided by explicitly articulated procedures derived from our key strategic objectives.

Specific developments have included:

Teaching and Learning	• Movement to online essay submission systems utilising Blackboard • Development of unambiguous procedures relating to submissions, extenuating circumstances and appeals • Grade Processing Schedule (continuous assessment & end of semester exam deadlines) • Streamlining of tutorial arrangements

Research	• Formalisation of conference support • Initiated a Professional Development Training for Research Students • Establishment of transparent procedures for PhD Transfer Assessment from Stage 1 to Stage 2 • Development and formalisation of Masters dissertation preparation and submission procedures
Administration	• Development of School specific training materials and operating procedures for staff • Increased web presence, particularly in the Research area • Initiated social media presence on Facebook, Twitter & YouTube • Development of clear channels of communication between the School Office and the Head of School • Formalisation of School Committee meetings and structures

. . . Despite the increased efficiencies arising from the reforms outlined above, the administrative staff note the difficulty of not being as proactive as they would like due to the increasing workload arising both from local developments (such as the deteriorating staff-student ratio noted above) and the continued devolution of tasks from central administration. It is clear that the School is under-resourced administratively. The stop-gap process of hiring casual staff is very problematic. It is very costly and time consuming. New recruits have to be trained to use the substantial software systems that the University has developed.

Potential threats to the School's administration include staff leaving due to the lack of promotional opportunities within the School, sick leave, maternity leave and parental leave; all of which are major issues because the staff is operating to full capacity at all times.

Sample extract A10

Analysis of Workloads within the School

The focus on non-Exchequer revenue generation creates a conflict between teaching and research, as staff are required to spend more time teaching. Staff who have developed strong research programmes are reluctant to reduce their research workloads to focus on teaching as they recognise that if they do not maintain their research the positions that they have built within their subject areas will be quickly eroded. Many also believe that a modest expansion of their research programmes has the potential to generate the same net revenue as some of the new taught masters programmes while continuing to enhance the research reputation of the School and not generating additional teaching workloads.

Class sizes have increased over the last 5 years, as the School's programmes have grown in popularity, resulting in increased staff workloads across the School. More students have resulted in higher teaching loads for academics and technical staff involved in supporting teaching, a larger number of assessments and a greater administrative burden particularly within the Programme Office.

A consequence of the increasing workloads is that it has become more difficult to recruit staff to undertake management roles within the School. This situation is further exacerbated by the fact that in comparison with many international universities positions of responsibility within the University are not now remunerated. This situation has significant implications for the School, as important academic management roles are proving difficult to fill, and potential leaders among the academic staff are missing out on opportunities to develop the skills that they will require if they are to progress into leadership roles within the School or the University. Increasing workloads have also made it difficult for the School to develop its Taught Masters programmes without recruiting additional staff to deliver the additional teaching and project supervision required.

STAFF AND FACILITIES

Sample extract A11

The consequence of these changes is that from XXXX to present the School staff-student (FTE) ratio has increased by 70%, from 1:14.5 to 1:25. Comparable figures for staff-student ratios in 28 UK universities (*The Guardian University Guide 2011; Subject*) show that 71% have a ratio of less than 1:15 (the ratio in X University, for example, is 1:12.2), 90% have a ratio of less than 1:20 and none have a ratio that is as high as that in UCD. Staff constraints, while bearable in the short term and in the context of University budgetary constraints, place a significant on-going, additional burden on members of staff, will affect the quality of teaching at both undergraduate and graduate level and are a key factor inhibiting the future development and success of the School.

Sample extract A12

Staff are actively encouraged to avail of university training and workshops, as well as external courses that might be useful. This is done both informally and formally as a result of PMDS process, through which the staff can express what they need in order to enhance their professional capacity. In the latest cycle, the academic staff opted for research and educational tools like information systems, statistical analysis software, podcasting, blogging, and Blackboard; and additional skills such as report and proposal writing, time management and organisation; the administrative and technical staff have been undertaking a variety of workshops on specific topics, such as systems and software (web development, e-procurement), handling student records, communication, motivation and management. The Head of School has also taken advantage of many workshops specifically developed for staff in management positions. The encouragement given to all staff to learn, grow and build new capacities is considered ultimately valuable both for the staff and the School as a whole. In a time where career stimuli are generally absent, the Head of School finds it essential to support alternative avenues for personal and professional growth and satisfaction.

More specifically with respect to teaching, the School actively participates in University-wide initiatives and in fact provides leadership as well. Over the past 10 years the Schools has availed of several funding and training opportunities including the President's Teaching Grant, the Large Class Teaching Project and the Module Enhancement Project as well as the current participation in the

Assessment Re-design Project which involves all staff teaching large 1st year modules. While the participation of staff could be broadened, the School has an excellent leadership position and dissemination nodes among its own members. Staff members teaching portfolios and enhancement activities exemplify the School's interest in, and commitment to, innovations in teaching and learning.

The School provides additional development opportunities for the academic staff. For example, it organises regular seminar series that encourages staff to keep abreast of external research in areas of interest and network with established researchers in the field. Staff also obtain the benefit of external perspectives and experiences through active engagement with Visiting and Adjunct professors. External visitors interact with the student body as well, thus opening alternative learning channels and potential sources for furthering their knowledge and skills. However, not all visiting professors were equally engaged, primarily due to the School's lack of initiative and generally busy schedules. This is an area for future improvement.

In recent years, new staff joining the School have been allocated a start-up research fund of approximately €X to use to network, initiate research projects and apply for funding. The School will continue to provide this to new staff as long as the School budget allows. To date new staff have been gradually introduced to teaching by offering only one module first semester, however, due to resource constraints, this practice has had to be discontinued. Finally, all existing staff contribute to accommodating new staff members and helping them to adjust to their new environment and responsibilities.

Sample extract A13

Staff training and bespoke resource needs in the use of the Web for marketing purposes is widely acknowledged within the School and is an essential activity going forward. It has been suggested that shared services with other Schools that have dedicated Marketing Managers is a possible solution, however Schools with such resources are unlikely to see the value of that for their School. UCD's IT Services support in this training, and more importantly in implementation, is critical but is generic. Needs relating to Educational Technology support are addressed elsewhere in the self-assessment report.

TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

Sample extract A14

The retention and completion rates of *Subject* students are in line with other subjects at UCD and are not a major problem. For example, the failure rate in 1st year *Subject* is 15% on average for the last five years. However, *the School* is facing a number of challenges in connection with undergraduate programmes. In line with national and international trends, there has been a marked falloff in interest in *X* degrees (see Figure X (a)), which has resulted in students with lower points taking places in *Subject*. Minimum entry points have dropped from over **XXX** points in 2000 to **XXX-**

130 points for the *Degree 1* programme and **XXX-125** points for the Degree 2 programme in 2007. This is a very serious problem as the academic standard of the students is now much lower than it was five years ago. UCD statistics (see Figure X(b)) demonstrate that the retention rates for students with lower CAO Leaving Certificate points is lower than for students with higher points. In fact, for students with less than **400** points, more than **56%** of students failed their *first attempt* at their 1st *Discipline* examination. This also suggests that early identification of struggling students and the application of appropriate supports would result in a higher retention and progression rate and allow students to achieve their real potential more rapidly. *The School* has started to address this problem on two fronts: we are looking to improve our marketing strategies to attract better students while at the same time providing more assistance and support to retain the current cohort (more details are given in Section X).

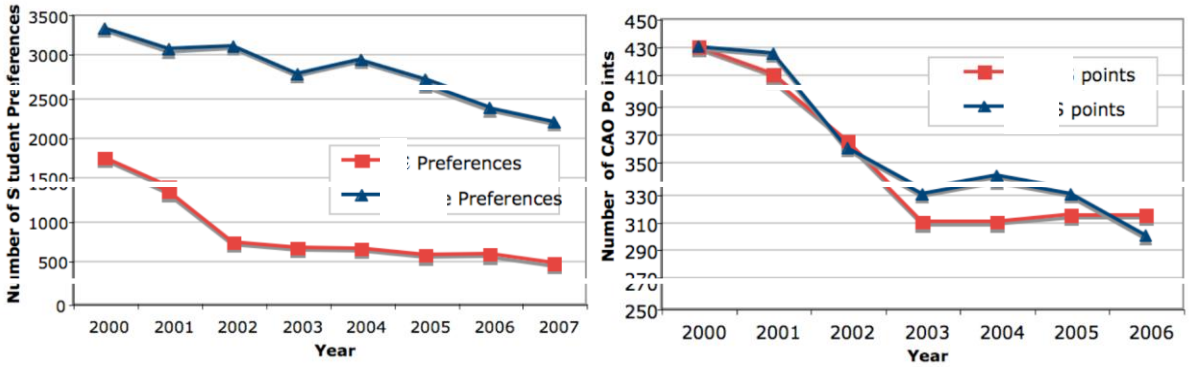


Figure X: (a) Trends in student CAO preferences for Subject*, and (b) Illustrating the decline in the "academic strength" of our entry students since 2000.*

Sample extract A15

There is a wide variety of assessment methods employed in the School, ranging from wikis to open-book continuous assessment to traditional essays or MCQs through to clinical assessment. *SafeAssign* is normally employed for online *Blackboard* submissions. Where correction of examination scripts is by a number of internal examiners, the use of key points or detailed instructions is routine. Where external assessors are employed, there is a need for information and standardisation; this was particularly relevant following UCD's change to a GPA system. Some areas of the School either provide grading training to graders (OSH) or engage with the UCD Centre for Teaching & Learning to work with external assessors on standardisation of assessment and grading.

Sample extract A16

Considerable effort has been made in the School to ensure that teaching, learning, assessment and curriculum development align with UCD's strategic objectives for 2014 (detailed at http://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/plan_FINAL.pdf) and best practice internationally. Teaching teams meet to discuss curriculum development, student assessment and feedback and each summer two days are allocated for staff meetings to discuss these issues and develop appropriate School policies. In addition to curriculum development issues, typical policies developed at these meetings include School policy documents on, for example plagiarism, design and analysis of MCQ exams, supervision of final year undergraduate research projects and grading criteria descriptors for stages 1-4 (**see**

Appendix X and Appendix X). To-date these meetings have focussed primarily on undergraduate teaching and learning, but there is a need to have a similar forum for taught graduate degrees.

Graduates of undergraduate and taught graduate programmes are of high quality as evidenced by the comments of external examiners (**Appendix X**) and the number in employment or pursuing higher degrees. In line with UCD's strategic objective to "*widen participation and support lifelong learning*" there has been an increase in the number of students from non-traditional routes in both undergraduate and taught graduate programmes in the School. Although as a School we have no control over how many of these students enter our undergraduate programmes, effort has been made to ensure good balance in taught graduate programmes and considerable effort goes into supporting these students once in the School.

Sample extract A17

Grading versus Marking

An ongoing issue is that of mapping marks to grades and vice versa. The University's Gradebook system uses a particular mapping from marks to grades, which is highly nonlinear. When a component of a module is marked, with full marks for a correct procedure or numerical answer, and then mapped directly to a grade, an inordinately large proportion of A grades can result, while if all components are directly graded, an A+ grade can become almost unattainable. The resulting disparity in the School's grade distributions is undesirable. Efforts are continuing to identify and implement best practice for assigning grades/marks to module components, and for converting marks to grades where necessary.

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AND REVIEW

Sample extract A18

The current structure reflects a substantial revision to the curriculum following a formal review in 20XX. The issues addressed in the review process were:

- the development of a clear progression from foundational modules to independent research;
- the formulation of clear sub-disciplinary streams in X, X and X;
- the strategic marketing of the degree, which involved considerations of both structure and content.

The details of this review can be found in Appendix X. The most substantial changes that were made revolved around the development of the phase progression, which has been very positively received by students. Following the revisions made in 20XX, the School has maintained strong numbers in the Masters programme, indicating that our strategic marketing is at least initially successful. Our external examiners have responded positively to these structural changes, and have also indicated satisfaction regarding the standards of the degree.

Sample extract A19

New programmes and modules are designed by academic staff within the specific subject area, taking account of the NFQ level descriptors, professional requirements, market and educational research, stakeholder input, desired graduate attributes and programme objectives. While there is a small number of UCD core teaching staff in each subject area, all module coordinators are consequently part of a small and manageable subject team: the (subject) Module Committee. Subject area proposals are brought to the School T&L or PGS Committees, where all School subjects and programmes are represented, for discussion. New modules or significant changes to modules are approved at this level. These committees make recommendations on Programme proposals to the Programme Board, and the Programme Board will not normally accept proposals that have not been previously discussed at School level.

In addition to having programme (and therefore subject) representation, the Programme Board has representation from other cognate Programme Boards as well as Students, Library and Student Advisor input, allowing a variety of perspectives to contribute to the discussion. Items recommended for approval by the Programme Board must be considered at UUPB and UGPB before approval is confirmed.

The School Quality Review T&L SWOT activities highlighted a concern among some staff for a potential weakness in the School/Programme system: that academics from individual subject areas may not have sufficient knowledge of other subject areas to have a critical input at these fora, however, the School feels that there is sufficient overlap in the knowledge underpinning these subject areas to ensure that quality is not compromised, and any lack of robust discussion at School and Board level is because the discussion, research and consultation has taken place at subject level in the Module Committees.

Sample extract A20

Curriculum Review

The School has a Curriculum Review Committee that is a subcommittee of the Programme Board (See Management and Administration section for details of the Programme Board and *Appendix X School Committees*). The Curriculum Review Committee assess proposed changes to the curricula of programmes that are made by Programme Option Coordinators and External Examiners and considers the implications of the changes for individual programmes and collectively for all programmes offered by the School. Recommendations are forwarded to the Programme Board for agreement and implementation.

At intervals of about 5 years the suitability of Programmes and their curriculum content to meet the needs of graduates and employers is reviewed. This was done in 2004 and with the most recent review completed in June 2013 (See Appendix X*).* The review was overseen by a Programme Review Steering Group and included all staff in the School, Programme Option Coordinators, External Examiners, key stakeholders (mostly employers) and alumni. The Review was highly positive about the School's programmes and concluded that the key strength of the School's programmes is their

broad multi-disciplinary nature, which produces well-rounded graduates with a good scientific grounding and a strong knowledge of *discipline*. On a personal level graduates are seen as open minded, critical thinkers with a strong work ethic and good social skills. In contrast to the high value put on the broad multi-disciplinary nature of the programmes, stakeholders perceived the main weakness in our graduates to be a lack of in-depth practical knowledge. There was also a view by some, that graduates were overly insular in their outlook, as a result of the programmes' focus on Ireland rather than on an international context. Poor literacy and communications skills were seen as major weaknesses of some students in all programmes. Recommendations to address these issues are provided in the Section XX.

RESEARCH ACTIVITY

Sample extract A21

The *listed* themes characterise the broad research fronts within the School. As well as these themes the School focuses on six specialist areas, selected on the basis of scale of current/projected funding and perceived opportunity. The specialist areas are: *U, V, W, X, Y and Z*. The first two of these areas are well established, have critical mass and are growing. The second two are smaller and have been identified as growth opportunities. The last two are emerging areas. These six areas will receive priority in decisions with resource limitations, will inform selection of Thematic PhD programmes and will be target focal areas for *grant* proposals.

Sample extract A22

Research output has been at a consistently high rate for the last four years (see Table *X below*). Almost 20% of publications are in peer-reviewed journals. This is consistent with discipline norms for high performance *Subject* schools. A number of selected outputs are listed in Appendix *X*. to highlight important School research outputs in the last 4 years. Key outputs include *subject specific material,* highly cited books, journal and conference publications.

Table X. Unique publications (* = year to February)

Type *	**Year 1**	**Year 2**	**Year 3**	**Year 4**
Books	X	X	X	X
Books Chapters	X	X	X	X
Edited Book	X	X	X	X
Peer Reviewed Journals	X	X	X	X
Other Journals	X	X	X	X
Conference Publications	X	X	X	X
Total	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**

Sample extract A23

According to UCD key performance indicators (KPIs), the percentage of research active staff in the School for 2011 is XX%, rising from XX% in 200X. The overall UCD performance for research active staff is XX%. However, the UCD capture of research activity fails to adequately recognise collaborative activity. For example, only 1 supervisor is recorded for each PhD student, while the dominant practice in the School is a co-supervisor model. Similarly, only 1 principal investigator is recorded for each research grant, failing to recognise the input of co-investigators.

Sample extract A24

The School is benefiting from an enhanced data management capability to manage, and archive data sets in a format that would allow easy access for secondary analysis. We have had a full time data manager and two sequential contract data managers to maintain the in-house data set, and we also contribute our data to the National Data Archive.

Many opportunities exist for building on our current international collaborations and making new ones. To maximize our existing international relationships and build new ones take time and resources and we are constrained by the limited number of people available to explore these, supervise in-house research, conduct teaching and manage day-to-day operations. We need, therefore, to focus and prioritise to get the maximum return for our activities in the international arena. Staff exchanges and sabbaticals facilitate collaboration but are only feasible if spare capacity exists to ensure the core activities of the School are maintained.

Funding is key to success and innovative thinking is required to identify new potential funders. Subject X historically has steered clear of the commercial sector; however several of the players on the School team have good relationships with industry stakeholders and have the potential to explore these with a view to public-private partnerships in research funding and also philanthropy. This approach would bring the discipline to a new level where it can make an immediate and significant impact.

In summary, the diversity of our research activity and the research competencies of our staff is both a strength and a weakness. A strength in that we have great range of activity for funding and for graduate students to engage with, but it is difficult to have strong collaborations within the School when the project areas are unrelated and span topic X to topic Y and everything in between. The geographical spread of our team of researchers on the campus doesn't lend itself to close working relationships and optimum cross fertilisation. The challenge is to prioritise activities to ensure we get the greatest return for our endeavours.

Sample extract A25

In terms of the School's overall research strategy, there are a number of issues that would further improve the School's research output and enhance its profile. These include the somewhat unbalanced record of publications and output within the School, and increasing the number of quality publications from PhD students, both before and after completion. In relation to this latter

point, staff have been encouraged to publish with doctoral students and some have done so, but more could be done in this respect.

While the School has a robust research output, we are aware that if we are to make a contribution to maintaining UCD's place in the ranking of World Universities, there is a need to pay greater attention to publishing in those journals that contribute more to world ranking positions. However, we also recognise that the way these rankings are produced varies across time, needs and interests, and that the School has to be careful to maintain and develop the integrity of its own teaching and research programmes over the long-term.

QUALITY AND ENHANCEMENT

Sample extract A26

One of *the School's* key strengths is that since '03 *the School* has appointed its own HEA-funded student adviser to support our students. In this period all staff unanimously agree that the appointment of this post has have brought many academic-related issues to their attention. Surveys carried out by the University, of students who left *Subject* courses, primarily at the end of 1st year, suggested that some students had unrealistic expectations of *the Subject*, found it difficult to grasp the basic academic concepts of the subject and/or failed to adjust to the third-level learning environment. Our student advisor provides exceptional support for undergraduate students in *Subject* courses who have difficulties adjusting to a university environment, by providing advice and information in relation to academic, social, personal and practical issues and, where necessary, by referring them for more specialised advice to members of the academic or administrative staff or to the professional support services. This additional resource has made a significant contribution to student life in the School. Appendix *X* provides an outline of the principal duties associated with this role.

Sample extract A27

The staff student committee provides an excellent forum for undergraduate and postgraduate students to air any concerns. Where possible, issues raised are resolved swiftly. For example, provision of wireless internet access in the Third Year lab last year was a direct result of a request made at the Staff Student Committee. Changes were made to this year's Stage 3 timetable to address issues highlighted by last year's students. Importantly, where issues cannot be resolved, staff can explain why resolution is not possible. Often, once students understand that some things are outside the School's control, and/or that there are reasons why things work the way they do, they are happy to accept the situation. This was the case for example when Stage 2 students requested that more demonstrators be assigned to practical classes.

Sample extract A28

The School follows the policies and procedures established by the College and the University. Some of them serve the purpose of quality assurance, including the procedures for examinations, tenure and the promotion processes and criteria, among others. Where a gap exists, the School complements those with its own procedures and criteria. For example the School makes additional requirements of PhD students by requiring a paper and presentation each semester, by instituting a more rigorous procedure for transfer from Stage 1 to Stage 2 of the PhD programme, and by providing additional guidance for thesis work.

Sample extract A29

Quality of the Student Experience

In contrast to students on some undergraduate degrees, students on the School's undergraduate programmes have a clear vision when they come in of what they will be able do when they finish, mainly because the programmes are professional or strongly associated with particular professions and/or have excellent graduate employment and career opportunities. Our graduate programmes are designed to address specific graduate professional needs and marketing materials clearly outline programme objectives and content. This is likely to be a factor in low attrition and high retention and good student engagement with a strong sense of identity with their programmes. Where student attrition occurs, it tends to be from graduate programmes and for non-programme-related reasons (work-related, family/social), evidenced by reasons given for withdrawal / leave of absence requests.

The School is aware that students do not readily identify with the School, and we acknowledge that, from student and external contributor perspectives, the subject/programme brand is much stronger than the School brand. This was evidenced by our lack of success in setting up a cross-programme undergraduate School student consultation forum in recent years. It is possibly reinforced with the ownership/management of each programme/subject area being spread over a number of campus locations. However, it is probably more important that students strongly identify with their particular programme, and we know that they do. From a School-brand perspective, the recent (Month Year) development of the dedicated Programme Office, to provide a single-location one-stop-shop for student programme information and support, should strengthen the School brand from the student perspective over time.

Sample extract A30

The School has expressed a concern on the potential for bias in student feedback system, associated with the introduction of online module feedback, where average feedback response rates are typically below XX% across the University. UCD acknowledges that response rates are generally low, but that graduate students and part-time student rates are particularly low. In the School the most recent completion rates range from XX% to XX% among Post Graduate modules. With a large number of modules taken by each student, there is a risk of student survey fatigue if asked for online feedback in all modules (X per semester). Selection of certain modules for feedback in different

years may serve to improve quality and quantity of feedback. Repeated reminders to students during the module may assist also.

Sample extract A31

Action on Student Feedback

X of the X programme teams hold staff-student meetings and X have staff-student committees. Module coordinators use the UCD online tool to collect student feedback; a majority of module coordinators also continue to use hardcopy questionnaires to access feedback.

Student feedback and module issues are discussed at Module Committees in subject/programme areas. In order to close the loop on student feedback, in most modules communication of action arising from student feedback is given to students attending the next course/next year, in the form of spoken communication at the start of a module. In modules run by Subject X changes implemented as a result of student feedback are put into the module descriptors for the next year. Recent examples of action taken includes creation of a careers evening for Subject X after student request for career guidance; change in learning skills module in Subject X with increase in scientific content and change in assessment, reflecting student feedback.

Sample extract A32

External Stakeholder Input

The input of external examiners to setting and maintaining academic standards can be clearly identified in relation to all the School's taught programmes and research degrees. In addition, several of the School's programmes undergo regular, scheduled review or evaluation, against specific assessment criteria, by accrediting professional organisations. Furthermore the opinion of alumni and employers are sought and considered. X programme coordinators (XX%) involve external stakeholders in their programme review processes. The engagement of subject experts as occasional lecturers is a further example of external input to the programmes.

Sample extract A33

Alumni relations and graduate surveys

X (XX%) of programmes undertake graduate surveys (X annually, and X less than every two years), and X sets of results are available, however X were carried out three years or more ago. Appendix X provides an example of graduate feedback. The School is aware that we need to further develop our data collection system for graduate statistics. An example of a less formal mechanism to gather graduate views is the annual Subject X alumni breakfast scheduled. Networking and alumni activities such as event and job vacancy notification ensures that a large cohort of graduates keep in touch with Subject X in relation to their employment status. It also permits recruitment of tutors and relevant expert lecturers from among the graduate cohort.

SUPPORT SERVICES

Sample extract A34

Calendars and Timetabling

The School has had numerous issues regarding online calendars and class schedules as the main schedule on the internal UCD website is not updated at key times (e.g. two weeks before registration) which causes difficulties for groups such as early registering students. The schedule is managed by the Programme Offices and Room Allocations, which do not appear to have the ability to update online information themselves (this is managed through IT Services). Difficulties with the availability, synchronisation and accuracy of this data has caused significant problems for the School over the past three years. This is particularly the case because the School is running a cross-programme degree, the *Degree* which has created major timetabling issues. Overall a number of areas have been identified that would lead to significant improvement in the service provided:

- Provision of an accessible online calendar of dates and weeks listing odd and even weeks by date and including the upcoming academic year.
- Synchronisation of the timetabling schedules that are available to staff and student and update them on an ongoing basis.
- Provision of a cross-university timetabling system which includes joint degrees that run across Colleges.
- Provision of supports for MA class timetabling which is currently very-time consuming to complete locally and will become more difficult to schedule with increasing numbers of joint MA programmes.
- Removal of the Even/Odd week system for the academic year by which the first week of Semester 2 is always an even week, when it should be Week 1 again.

Sample extract A35

There are a number of opportunities and challenges that need to be addressed:

- The support services provided by the University to the School are, for the most part, very useful; however, there is a growing trend towards devolvement of administration from central service and support units to the School. It would be a concern if other units followed the trend as school staff are not the experts in these areas, and the increased workload to the School has a significant impact.

- The International Office provides excellent support in the *Study Abroad* and exchange area, however, the University commitment to recruiting fee-paying international students, particularly from China, is not underpinned by dedicated administrative support to manage contracts, visits, applications or students. This then reverts to the School with only a part-time position in place to facilitate this important revenue stream.

- The on-going discontent with systems that do not articulate well, support units that provide irregular or even contradictory advice or expectations that staff members take on increasing administrative responsibilities is widespread, and whilst relationships with individuals in each of these units can be excellent, these underlying issues detract from the School's core business.

Sample extract A36

There is continued devolution of tasks from Central Administration mainly through the use of on-line information/reporting systems. This may help rationalise the activities of units within the University's central administration, but it has a negative impact on School resources as it entails an increase in workload without any corresponding increase in staffing, and on-going training is required by administrative and academic staff to use these systems.

COLLABORATIVE EDUCATIONAL PROVISION

Sample extract A37

The School has a collaborative arrangement with institution **X** in **[name of country]** to deliver a full-time UCD Programme –**BA XX**. This collaboration has been operating for **X** years and the Memorandum of Agreement is attached as Appendix **X**. There are currently **X** students registered on each year of the programme.

The UCD Link Co-ordinator maintains regular contact with the partner and students, via formal and informal meetings, which assists in the early resolution of issues.

A student class representative system is in place, as well as student-staff liaison meetings.

An annual monitoring report is prepared, outlining key operational aspects and/or changes to the partnership and/or programme delivery. This report is considered by the School Executive, and a copy is sent to the UCD Quality Office.

External Examiners are invited to comment on the comparability of standards; the quality of the student learning experience; and the effectiveness of assessment arrangements.

EXTERNAL RELATIONS

Sample extract A38

An extensive annual events calendar is prepared each year to promote undergraduate programmes, postgraduate programmes and research activities. This set of events comprises of *[discipline]* Information Evenings, a Transition Year Programme, a Summer School programme, a Non-Standard Entry Progression Workshop, a practical day for students and schools at the School's Research Facility, an active Schools Liaison programme as well as attendance at local, regional and national

Careers Fairs meetings. Examples of these events include the Higher Options Careers Fair held annually in the Royal Dublin Society, XX and Graduate Fairs.

Sample extract A39

Erasmus and Other Student Exchange Schemes

The School hosts about XX JYA students each year. Since modularisation, these students are managed and facilitated through a central office outside the School. The *School* also maintains reciprocal ERASMUS exchange links with several *subject* departments at universities in Norway (Bergen), Sweden (Lund and Stockholm), Belgium (ULB and Liége), Germany (Köln) and France (Institut d'Etudes Poltiques and University of Paris). Every year around a dozen *School* students spend their third year of studies on an ERASMUS exchange in Continental Europe while the *School* welcomes many incoming Erasmus students. In addition to the *School*-managed links, our students can take advantage of a host of other exchange arrangements with universities across the world managed by other schools and by the International Office. Though insufficient language skills among many of our students are a persistent obstacle, the *School* plans to steadily grow the number of both incoming and outgoing exchange students over the coming years.

Sample extract A40

Outreach Activities at Secondary Level

. . . a recent initiative communicated at College level, aims to build a comprehensive single-week Transition Year programme, in which [*discipline]* would represent a major component having a single day event. A pilot programme is scheduled for late April and will involve 50 students. Overall, the School efforts could be greatly expanded by the hiring of a dedicated outreach officer with a defined budget, a model which is highly successful in a number of UK and US institutions, which represents a significant threat in terms of attracting high quality students away from UCD.

Sample extract A41

Research Collaborators, Academic Visitors, Publishers, Review Panels for Grant Agencies

All research active School members maintain external collaborations, mostly within the EU but also further afield including ties with groups in China, New Zealand, USA, Canada and Japan. The success of these external research alliances can be assessed by joint research output, and more than half of the School's peer reviewed output is co-authored with international academic collaborators with some evidence of good industry alliances as well (Appendix X.XX).

In addition, the School maintains an active seminar programme (Appendix X.XX) with about 25-30 visitors per year. Invitations are made by the seminar committee or individual academic staff and the School office liaise directly with academic visitors and have set up formal administrative procedures for hosting guests.

Interactions with funding agencies and publishing houses are not formalised, and while some PIs are actively engaged (as guest editors, or on editorial/advisory boards – see Appendix X.XX for example), others have more informal links (*e.g.* from interactions at conferences).

The general engagement of staff in these external research relations is unbalanced (see *e.g*. the seminar chart in section X.X), and this exerts pressure on the more active ones. Likewise, participation of PIs at seminars is sometimes remarkably low.

Sample extract A42

Industrial Collaboration

Relationships with national and international *[discipline]* industry have been developed by School staff over many years. The relationships involve collaborative research (including direct funding of such research); consultancy, spin-outs and management of intellectual property; industrial placements for undergraduate and graduate students; contributions to teaching; and promotion of the discipline (for example through provision of speakers at events or sponsorship of prizes for student competitions). The work placement component of the new XX programmes has been a significant success, with extremely positive feedback from students and industry hosts alike, and plans for staff placement in industry are also well advanced.

As part of this quality review process a survey was issued to XX employers of the School's graduates, many of whom also host students on work placements. The responses were very positive, demonstrating from their perspective the quality of our degree programmes and the quality of our graduates.

Sample extract A43

External Relations: Opportunities and Challenges

. . . members of the School engage with a wide variety of stakeholders, nationally and internationally. While much of what happens is creative and opportunistic, more needs to be done for activities such as these to be more strategic. Secondly, more needs to be done to reinforce the very positive public profile of the School. Often this is either a resource issue or a lack of support from central administration to communicate ideas and to circulate, internally and externally, the achievements of the School. Research outcomes in the *[discipline]* are obviously very different to those in the *[discipline]* for example. International students need more support when here, and at post-graduate level when they apply to study here in the School they need to have the opportunity to compete for scholarships. Small travel grants could allow staff to go abroad to recruit students and keep international universities informed and up to date on the School's suite of MAs. Such trips need to be budgeted for. Workload models need more fleshing out to account in some way of most of the activities outlined here in the *[SAR External Relations]* chapter.

Sample extract A44

Commentary

Finally, an important component of the School's external relations is with its alumni, many of whom occupy senior positions in Ireland and abroad. XX, XX, XX are examples of key graduates in the *subject* sector, and in *subject* most of the leaders of the sector nationally are graduates of the School. The contribution of such graduates greatly enhances School activities, from the provision of speakers at student events through to advising the School leadership and lobbying at the highest levels. Efforts are ongoing to compile a list of the School's alumni to maintain and develop contact and connection with them, but progress is hampered by lack of dedicated resources. The School will also continue its engagement with the UCD *Discipline* Graduates Association, which is currently seeking to expand its influence and range of activities.

(B) Support Unit Quality Review - Examples

INTRODUCTION AND DETAILS OF THE UNIT

Sample extract B1

The Report was produced following an in-depth assessment of the activities of the Unit, taking into account the perspectives of both internal staff and the wider University community. Following a request for volunteers, a **Quality Working Group** and a **Self-Assessment Co-ordinating Committee** were established from within *the Unit*, to assemble and assess the information required, using the following processes:

- User Satisfaction Survey
- Focus Groups
- SWOT Analysis

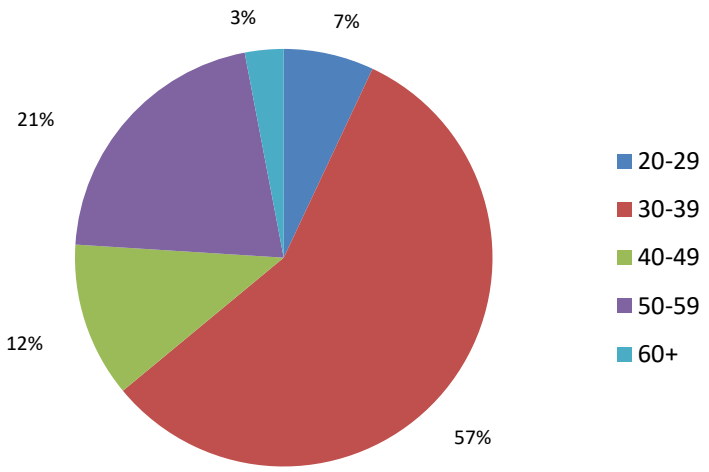
Preparation of the *Self-assessment* Report was found to provide a helpful opportunity and framework for structured reflection on the services currently provided by the Unit, identifying areas where improvements can be made.

The operation of the Unit requires widespread interaction by staff with the University Community at personal, operational and corporate levels. The full implication of this may not always be appreciated by individual members of the Unit as their principal focus is often on task completion. However, it is recognised that the public perception of the University is influenced by *user* experience of *the Unit*.

Sample extract B2

The team presents a relatively young profile, with 64% of staff currently under the age of 39. However, another significant section of staff (24%) are between 50-65 years. This may present some challenges in the future with regard to staff turnover, loss of organisational knowledge and required replacements due to retirements, etc. Strong succession planning and the ability to replace staff will be important to address this issue. Generally, there are limited staff retention issues in the current climate.

Figure X Staff by Age



Sample extract B3

Succession Planning and Staff Turnover

As per University policy, all senior roles must be advertised externally and all the senior post holders in the Unit have been recruited externally with the appropriate level of experience and skills required for their roles in the organisation. There is also a structured training programme for junior level staff involving on the job training and where necessary relevant external educational training has also been provided. Three staff members at junior grades have rotated duties in the last year and this rotation involved the staff members moving to three different units within the Unit.

Some of the offices have yet to introduce formalised succession plans such as cross-function training and some non- critical procedures have yet to be documented. However, adequate provision has been made for staff cover should it be required. Where back-up and/or documented procedures do not exist most of the offices are in the process of addressing these shortfalls.

FUNCTIONS, ACTIVITIES AND PROCESSES

Sample extract B4

A key strength of the Unit is its strong technical knowledge and operational competence. *Unit X* intends to explore ways of codifying, sharing and retaining this knowledge through a number of projects.

Sample extract B5

There is a strong culture of task completion within the X Team; however the process of formally closing out requests needs to improve, so that prompt feedback can be provided. It was noted in the user survey that this is an area where feedback is expected. The implementation of this is being considered.

In relation to the above, a recent pilot trial of altering the close-out stage by the X Manager has assisted in improving the turn-around time and the recording of the close-out of X tasks. This also has the added benefit of recording more details about the task, identification of trends and repeat requests. On the basis of this pilot trial, it is intended to investigate if there are opportunities to implement this approach in other areas.

Sample extract B6

Regular staff meetings keep the members of staff informed of changes in procedures, and of decisions taken in other parts of the University that may affect their work. Staff know the unit's goals relevant to their activity. External communications are ongoing but need to be improved, in particular with college staff and students, whose feedback on this area is not good (Reference Appendix *X*). Moves are already underway to improve online communication towards this end. A newsletter (Reference Appendix *X*) is also published on a regular basis.

Sample extract B7

A clear opportunity exists for the Unit to build on professional partnerships in a systematic way and to focus on enhanced collaboration internally within the team and across the University.

PLANNING, ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT

Sample extract B8

An urgent challenge for the Unit is the reported pattern of a decline in standards of staff and student behaviour towards staff of *the Unit*. There is a need to explore this area in partnership with the leadership of the University, in order to promote the development of a more positive collaborative culture, including the need for agreed procedures to ensure that incidents are managed properly post-event to avoid recurrence.

Sample extract B9

Decision-making *in the Unit* can be broken down into a number of distinct groupings:

1. Decisions that impact University strategy/policy generally are subject to the requisite SMT approval. Many of these decisions can be complex with inter-linkages with other policies and

knock-on impacts, which have to be carefully considered. As a result, decision-making in some of these areas can sometimes be perceived to be slow. A key feature here relates to *the Unit* being part of a larger process (for which it only has partial responsibility). The Unit acknowledges that delays in decision-making at this level (mainly outside of *the Unit*) can lead to considerable frustrations.

2. Decisions at cross-directorate level generally arise and are managed through specific projects and through the weekly *manager*-level meeting.

3. Day-to-day *manager*-specific decisions are made by specific managers and their teams within each *management unit*. Due to the presence of these structures, decisions within the control of the Unit are generally made in a prompt and impactful manner. However, again due to the nature of the work of the Unit, some internal decisions carry the potential for significant knock-on impacts across the University. These decisions can take a significant amount of time to fully analyse and resolve. *The Unit* places a value on carefully considering the potential implications of these types of decisions before committing the University to a particular course of action.

Sample extract B10

Hiring, training and development of staff is difficult to plan in a situation where all staff are temporary or part-time. To date, ad hoc courses, seminars have been held but this has not been managed in a strategic way. Development needs are discussed as part of performance reviews where these take place.

Sample extract B11

The Unit strives to continuously improve its operations and takes on board recommendations from external experts, as well as implementing changes arising from internal reviews and discussions.

As many of the sub-units are subject to formal audits and reviews, these provide an opportunity for both formal and informal external review. Suggested improvements or weaknesses noted in reports, management letters and reviews are implemented by the relevant sub-unit, with the sub-unit manager having primary responsibility for doing so. Examples include:

- Audits of sub-unit X led to changes in the procedures for producing X reports to ensure compliance with HEA requirements. Staff members are now working from a checklist generated by the sub-unit manager.

- A recent audit highlighted that fact that certain UCD departments were unaware of the documentation that could be requested as part of a financial audit. The sub-unit has since developed a documentation checklist which is issued to each project manager/Principal Investigator.

- New policies have been introduced following internal review recommendations.

Sample extract B12

Staff Management and Development

Staff members are the Unit's most important resource. Stakeholder feedback and internal SWOT analysis gathered as part of the self-assessment process has demonstrated that Unit staff are highly valued by colleagues across the University; staff are repeatedly cited as being knowledgeable, helpful and professional. However, feedback has also highlighted the perception that there is an over-reliance on individual staff members and that knowledge in an area can be concentrated in one or two key members of staff. Some units have developed approaches to ensure knowledge and expertise is shared. This, and approaches to succession management, are an area for development as part of the Unit planning process.

MANAGEMENT OF RESOURCES

Sample extract B13

A strategic decision was made that the Unit would become a source of information and *discipline* expertise to fulfil its overall role within the University. The establishment of specialised support and management functions such as the X and Y Units are recognition of the need for improved strategic management of resources in order to achieve cost effectiveness.

Sample extract B14

The Unit acknowledges that not all development is achieved through training programmes and there is a value placed on fostering internal expertise and knowledge while developing and sharing this knowledge among the team. Cross-*management unit* projects represent a key mechanism utilised to facilitate this. Feedback from the staff SWOT conducted as part of Quality Review preparations has shown that while cross-*management unit* projects exist, it is considered that this tool could be used more strategically across *the Unit* for all grades of staff in order to improve communication, promote learning and development and to strengthen relationships within the Unit.

Sample extract B15

The following communication channels within the Unit have proved particularly effective in keeping unit staff informed:

- Annual *Unit* Staff Planning Day – Brings all staff together to reflect on the previous year's progress and to plan for the year ahead (annually)

- Quarterly *Unit* staff meetings – Brings all staff together to provide regular cross-team updates (four times a year)

- "Brown Bag Lunch Series"/special briefings – Shares timely information or expertise on particular *Unit* topics/ projects (as needed)

- Individual *management unit* meetings – Brings together all *management unit* staff to share information on work being conducted within the *management unit*, to provide timely cross-*management unit* / University updates (monthly)

- *Management unit* update – Regular emailed update within the *management unit* to provide key update points

Sample extract B16

It should be noted that staff in the unit are under significant pressure due to a rapid increase in the number of reviews/development projects arising from the University governance and management committee structures, resulting in a slower rate of return on key projects and core business. Responsibilities devolved from other units, while entirely appropriate to the skill set and remit of the sub-unit, have placed undue pressure on existing resources, an issue which is under active review and will be addressed as part of the budget and staff planning exercise for Year/Year based on verifiable evidence (new projects undertaken, staff costs associated, delays to core business activity). A key challenge for the sub-unit is the inability to completely define a programme of work at the outset of each year given the nature of sub-unit work, the dynamic responses required to institutional, sectoral and legislative initiatives as they emerge, and the resulting re-prioritisation of other activity.