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Learner Support Unit



Peer Review Group Report

April 2010

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1.0 Background

1.1 Quality at MIC

MIC has always been committed to ensuring the very highest standards of excellence in its teaching, learning and research activities.

Established in 2005, the MIC Quality Office endeavours to promote and facilitate continual quality improvement across all the college's academic and administrative units. The work of the office is overseen by the MIC Quality Committee.

The Quality Office has responsibility for the establishment and implementation of procedures directed at maintaining and improving quality. To achieve this, the Quality Office:

- Supports the development of college policy and procedures in relation to quality assurance and improvement in line with best international practice
- Develops, maintains and evaluates the college's academic and administrative review processes while promoting a sense of ownership by each individual department
- Provides the necessary help and support to all departments in implementing the quality review process

The main aim of the quality assurance process is quality improvement. In common with other institutions, the procedures employed by MIC have three main stages: self-assessment, peer review and quality improvement.

The MIC approach to quality is informed by *A Framework for Quality in Irish Universities*¹, the joint Irish Universities Association (IUA) and Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) publication on quality in Irish universities.

1.2 Quality Committee

The Quality Review process at MIC is overseen by a representative, college-wide committee called the Quality Committee (QC). The QC functions as a committee of the College's Executive.

1.3 The Quality Review Process

The Quality Review Process at MIC is as follows:

Self Assessment

A Self-Assessment Report (SAR) is drawn up under appropriate headings by the unit under review. The SAR remains confidential to the unit, the peer reviewers and the Quality Office throughout the quality review process.

¹ Irish Universities Association & Irish Universities Quality Board (2007), *A Framework for Quality in Irish Universities: Concerted Action for Institutional Improvement*, Dublin: IUA & IUQB.

Peer Review

The SAR is sent to the Peer Review Group (PRG). The members of the PRG read the SAR and spend a number of days on a site visit to the unit.

The PRG typically consists of two internal peer reviewers - MIC representatives who are not closely associated with the unit under review, and two external peer reviewers - one national expert and one international expert. The review group completes a Peer Review Report (PRR) on its findings which comprises both commendations and recommendations. These are communicated verbally to the unit at the end of the site visit. No new items may be added once the PRG has verbally communicated the PRR to the unit. Immediately after the visit the PRR is sent to the Quality Office which forwards it to the unit to check for factual errors. Once this is complete the PRR is finalised.

Quality Improvement

The unit reviews the PRR and document their responses to each of the commendations and recommendations made.

For Academic Departments the relevant Faculty Dean reviews the PRR with the Units' responses and adds his/her responses to each of the commendations and recommendations made. The PRR, with the responses of both the Unit and the Faculty Dean, is then reviewed by the Vice President Academic Affairs who adds his/her responses to each of the commendations and recommendations made.

For Administrative / Support Units the appropriate Vice President (VP) reviews the PRR with the Units' responses and adds his/her responses to each of the commendations and recommendations made.

A Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) is drawn up by the unit based on the recommendations and planned improvements outlined in the SAR, the recommendations and commendations given in the PRR and the responses of the unit and management.

Submission / Publication of PRR & QIP

The PRR with responses is initially presented to the Quality Committee to be reviewed and endorsed. The PRR with responses is then presented to An Bord Acadúil for noting.

The PRR with responses is presented to the College Management Committee (Coiste Bainistíochta an Choláiste / CBC) and then to An Bord Rialaithe (Governing Body) and permission is sought from An Bord Rialaithe to make the report publicly available. Once permission is granted the PRR is made publicly available via the MIC Quality Web Site.

2.0 MIC Learner Support Unit.

2.1 Overview

The [Learner Support Unit](#) (LSU) was established in 1997 with the primary aim of providing academic support for students taking a degree at MIC. LSU core services within MIC include one-to-one tutoring, lecturing and involvement in access initiatives. Initially, the LSU focused on the needs of mature students by providing support in the transition to third-level study and thus improving the quality of their learning. It emerged that many of these needs were generic to the whole student cohort and, consequently, LSU services were mainstreamed. The LSU also examined the issue of access and looked at ways of increasing participation rates among a range of socio-economic groups currently underrepresented in tertiary education.

The LSU significantly advances a number of aspects of the MIC mission statement, most notably promoting excellence in learning and fostering the intellectual, spiritual, personal and professional development of students. The unit also plays a role in respecting diversity and promoting social justice.

2.2 Aims and Objectives

The LSU mission statement is

"Enhance your learning – achieve your potential".

The LSU aims to achieve this by:

1. Creating independent learners
2. Facilitating students to graduate with appropriate degrees
3. Raising the academic standards of students at MIC
4. Developing awareness across MIC of what is involved in being a successful student

2.3 Users / Stakeholders

The LSU has identified the following groups as the key stakeholders to be taken into account in this quality review:

1. Current MIC students
2. Future non-traditional MIC students
3. MIC staff (including LSU staff)

Current MIC students interact with the LSU through lecturing, teaching and tutoring. Future non-traditional MIC students interact with the LSU through the access initiatives of the Foundation Certificate for Mature Learners, the Pre-University Programme and the Moving On project. MIC staff interact with the LSU through lecturing, teaching and tutoring and through our service to the community.

3.0 Membership of the LSU Peer Review Group

Prof. Claire Lyons (Chair)	Head of Department of Learning, Society and Religious Education & Director of Development Education Mary Immaculate College
Ms. Maeve Sullivan	Placement Office Manager Mary Immaculate College
Prof. Gina Wisker	Professor of Higher Education & Contemporary Literature & Head of Centre for Learning & Teaching University of Brighton
Dr. Ciarán Mac An Bhaird	Lecturer/Support Centre Manager Department of Mathematics NUI Maynooth

4.0 Membership of LSU Quality Team

James Binchy	Adult Learner Support Counsellor/Acting Co-ordinator, LSU
Brian Clancy	Project Support Worker, LSU
Orla Slattery	Project Worker, LSU
Caroline Healy	Project Support Worker, Moving On

5.0 Preliminary Comments of the Peer Review Group (PRG)

The Peer Review Group were given the opportunity over three days to talk to the LSU Quality Team both formally and informally. Meetings with stakeholders were scheduled as group sessions. The Peer Review Group also met with members of the LSU Quality Team on an individual basis as well as with Ms. Marguerite Hanly of the College's Finance Office and Dr. Anne O'Keeffe, Senior Lecturer – Department of English Language and Literature, and Co-ordinator of the LSU, currently on secondment. The Peer Review Group was given the opportunity to visit the current facilities. The Peer Review Group discussed possible plans for development of these facilities with the Acting Co-ordinator and staff of the LSU. These provided extremely useful additional information to support the SAR.

Everyone who engaged with the Peer Review Group (PRG) commended the LSU for their commitment and the excellence of the service they provide. The staff, students and senior management acknowledged the significant contribution the LSU makes to the College in the following ways:

- LSU support of students' academic development is a significant factor in the retention of students who might otherwise exit the College.
- The existence of the LSU is important in attracting students to the College, both for traditional and non-traditional students.
- Engagement with the LSU enables students to improve their learning processes and products. The LSU therefore has a critical role to play in improving the quality of student learning and the academic standards of the College.
- The LSU contributes to student learning and academic standards, not only through their one-to-one tutoring service, but also through the co-ordination and delivery of core College programmes and modules at pre-university, undergraduate and postgraduate levels.
- The LSU are actively engaged in worthwhile and relevant academic research which enhances their service, has the potential to contribute to innovative practice in teaching and learning and which enhances the research profile of the institution.

The impression gained by the PRG is that the LSU is a high-quality service delivered against a background of insecurity of staffing and funding, in an inappropriate and poor environment and without a clear strategic direction. This lack of strategic direction is problematic as it leads to the LSU responding to initiatives and opportunities in an unplanned and reactive manner. The PRG recognises that the LSU has developed historically from an insecure funding base and developed in an organic, rather than a strategic fashion. The PRG commends the individual and institutional vision which

allowed for the foundation and continued development of the LSU. The recommendations in this report are intended to be constructive and should not be construed as criticism of any individual or group. The LSU are to be commended in maintaining high standards in their current environment. However, we believe this expectation is neither reasonable nor sustainable. If the work of the LSU is to continue to its current high standards, if the unit is to develop in a sustainable way and if staff welfare is to be maintained, the unit needs a clear, agreed strategy with specific and measurable short-term and medium-term goals. It also needs a clear management structure with clearly delineated roles, responsibilities and reporting structures. Part of the LSU vision and strategy needs to include clarity around the LSU's position and the position of their staff within the College. With this in mind, the PRG considers that the LSU performs a core academic function within Mary Immaculate College and should be granted the recognition that such a function deserves. The PRG recommends that LSU staff are granted academic status. At a minimum, the staff should be allowed access to academic support schemes such as conference funds and seed-funding.

In many ways the unit's position is an inevitable result of a time-limited, targeted-funded initiative which is successfully achieving its goals, making a considerable difference to the quality of learning in the College and is now seeking an appropriate, sustainable, embedded core position within College structures and College functions.

6.0 The Report of the Peer Review Group

The following recommendations are all contingent on the primary recommendations relating to security and stability of LSU staffing and funding, the provision of appropriate accommodation and facilities and the development of a streamlined and functional management and reporting structure. Any recommendations relating to the extension of user services is dependent on improvements in facilities in the short-term and on increased staffing in the medium to long-term. The PRG recommends that the LSU consolidates their strengths in line with a clearly articulated vision and strategy for the Unit.

6.1 User Services

Commendations

6.1.1	The PRG commends the LSU's commitment to students at all levels, as evidenced by the testimony of students and staff and the LSU's active and enthusiastic engagement with the quality review process.
6.1.2	The PRG commends the LSU's commitment to Mary Immaculate College as an institution and their collegiality in identifying and responding to the needs of an increasingly diverse student base.
6.1.3	The PRG commends the LSU's innovation and flexibility.
6.1.4	The PRG commends the range and quality of user services provided by the LSU and, in particular, notes the success of the Foundation Certificate as an initiative that supports access, retention and progression. The LSU's role in provision of the Foundation Modules and one-to-one tutoring contributes significantly to the quality of College degree programmes.
6.1.5	The PRG commends the quality of materials produced by the LSU.

Recommendations

6.1.6	The LSU needs to re-evaluate its priorities in order to consolidate its most successful and essential services and areas of expertise. The PRG considers these to be: tutoring, teaching, lecturing, research and the provision of advice to academic staff. The PRG considers that the critical functions of these services and that expertise are: Enabling students to manage their own learning and enhance their academic skills. Enhancing the quality of students' academic output and skill development. Facilitating the progression and retention of students, particularly non-traditional students. Engaging in research which informs the function of the LSU and contributes new knowledge to the academic field of learner support and development.
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6.1.7	Further to 6.1.6, the PRG recommends the maintenance of the emphasis on the Foundation Certificate for Mature Learners as the flagship programme of the LSU
6.1.8	Further to 6.1.6, the PRG recommends that the research output of LSU staff be supported, disseminated at conferences and published. This output should be an appropriate combination of LSU-focused and individual staff interest research.
6.1.9	The LSU recognises that they could address both a wider variety of student needs and a wider diversity of students. Given the obvious constraints associated with any possible increase in the number of students requesting one-to-one services, the PRG recommends that the LSU investigates complementary, alternative ways to address common student learning needs (e.g., referencing and plagiarism) in large groups, small groups, blended learning and through the appropriate distribution of learning materials, e.g., factsheets, e-resources.
6.1.10	The PRG recommends that the LSU engages in a systematic approach to networking. Internally, this should include liaison with appropriate decision-making bodies, the Education and Arts Faculties, academic departments, administration and services offices and students. Externally, this should include similar national and international providers as well as professional networks and associations.
6.1.11	The PRG agrees with the LSU's recommendation that the drop-in hours are extended. The PRG recommends that an evening drop-in service is considered, as this would increase the accessibility of the LSU's excellent service.
6.1.12	The PRG recommends that the LSU reviews its committee membership and service to the community and that the strategic benefit of these activities to the core functions of the Unit is examined.

6.2 Environment & Facilities

Commendations

6.2.1	The LSU are making best use of a cramped space and the PRG highly commends their professionalism in this regard. When the PRG had the opportunity to visit the tutoring space it noted a significant level of engagement and positive interaction between students and tutors.
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Recommendations

6.2.2	The PRG recommends that an appropriate tutoring and small group teaching facility is sourced for the LSU as a matter of urgency as the current facility is not fit for purpose. Most specifically, the room is too small and cramped. The privacy of students is compromised. The room is difficult to find and not adequately signposted. There is no waiting area. The room is cold and inadequately sound-proofed. There is a loud buzzing sound from a fuseboard unit in the tutoring room and the lights also make a distracting noise.
6.2.3	The PRG recommends that prominent, informative signage to the new LSU facility be put in place. The LSU should also develop a series of posters informing students of the nature and location of the service.
6.2.4	A new facility for the LSU should have a prominent location with an appropriate reception/waiting area. This is essential for increasing efficiency of access to the service and for the professional image of the Unit.
6.2.5	IT facilities in the LSU should be updated in keeping with replacement policy across campus.
6.2.6	There should be a formal mechanism / procedures for the LSU to purchase necessary equipment, e.g., scanner.
6.2.7	The PRG recommends that a photocopier be purchased for the sole use of the LSU.

6.3 Organisation and Management

Commendations

6.3.1	The PRG commends the College for the establishment of the LSU. It also commends all those involved in its evolution in challenging and changing financial contexts.
6.3.2	The PRG commends the flexibility of the LSU staff who have responded to constantly changing student needs, student profiles and changing roles within the Unit.
6.3.3	The PRG commends the openness of the existing management team to the quality review process. The PRG noted that the LSU did not identify the Management of MIC as stakeholders and advised that they should regard Management of the College as stakeholder.

Recommendations

6.3.4	The PRG recommends that LSU staff be granted academic status, commensurate with their current teaching, research and service roles. They should also be granted security of tenure.
6.3.5	The roles, responsibilities and reporting structures within the LSU should be reviewed.
6.3.6	The PRG recommends that the LSU has a Manager who has a day-to-day active involvement in the delivery of the services provided by the Unit. The Manager would be responsible for ensuring the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the LSU strategy and workplan as well as overseeing the work of the team members.
6.3.7	The PRG recommends that a Steering Committee for the LSU be established as a sub-committee of An Bord Acadúil. This sub-committee should comprise the Dean of Arts (Chair), the Dean of Education or his/her nominee, the Manager of the LSU and a representative of Administration & Services staff, nominated by the Vice-President Academic Affairs. This committee should have clear terms of reference.
6.3.8	The PRG recommends that the LSU, in co-operation with current management, identifies and prioritises the core functions of the Unit in accordance with a strategic plan. The LSU should write a strategic plan which is subject to regular and ongoing review by the LSU Manager and LSU Steering Committee. The strategy should also be formally reviewed every three years
6.3.9	The LSU should produce an annual report to be presented and circulated to appropriate College decision-making bodies.
6.3.10	The Manager and Chair of the LSU should submit a budget to the Finance Office on an annual basis.
6.3.11	The LSU needs to establish formal and systematic record-keeping and documentation systems as well as a regular system of evaluation.