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Thematic quality review as a supplement to departmental quality reviews: a case study within the Irish university system

Abstract

The Irish universities' quality assurance and improvement system is well established and successful since its introduction in the late 1990ies. It takes the form departmental reviews of both academic departments (Schools, Faculties and Research Centres) as well as administrative and support units. The case study reports on the introduction of thematic reviews in Dublin City University with the intention of bridging the gaps that arise from a departmental approach to quality related matters. The theme of the first review of its kind in the Irish university sector was First year and Beginner Student Experience (to include transfer and international students). Characteristic features of thematic reviews, associated difficulties, and ways of coping with such difficulties are shown using the key areas of complexity, leadership, timing and originality of thematic reviews. A short summary of the results of the review and an overview of some of the main distinguishing features of thematic vs. departmental reviews conclude the case study.

¹ I would like to acknowledge the huge contribution made by all of those involved in the review, specifically my colleagues and review champions Dr Claire Bohan and Dr Sarah Ingle, as well as my quality colleague Adrian Thomas from the University of Limerick.

Background and Context

The focus of quality assurance in Higher Education can either be on accreditation processes and is then strongly tied in with academic programmes, or it can encompass support and administration as well as academic issues and in this case concentrates on departments. In this paper I am going to report on a third approach that focuses on quality assurance along the line of a theme which arises from other reviews and allows a close look at areas within a university where responsibilities overlap.

The Irish quality assurance regime follows the departmental approach. According to the *Universities Act*, Section 35 (2), the Irish universities are legally obligated to conduct evaluations “of each department and, where appropriate, faculty of the university and any service provided by the university”. Following from this statutory obligation the Irish universities’ quality assurance system is organised in the form of cyclical departmental quality reviews covering both academic entities like schools, faculties² and research centres, as well as administrative and support units ranging from Information Systems and Support, to the Finance Office, from Human Resources to the President’s Office.

The system of departmental reviews has been in place for about 10 years and has, in general terms, been quite successful as the report from the EUA-led review of quality assurance in Irish universities in 2005 shows. It states that the Irish system

... would appear to strike the right tone and combination of public interest, accountability, and university autonomy. It encourages a greater focus on quality and improvement than some systems worldwide, while at the same time being less intrusive than some other systems in Europe.
(EUA Review of Quality Assurance in Irish Universities – Sectoral Report, HEA/IUQB, 2005, p. 14, sec. 43³)

Motivation for the Introduction of Thematic Reviews in DCU

In the same report the reviewers find that “due to the structures of the universities and the department-based approach of the QA process, a number of strategic issues were not covered by regular review procedures, unless [they were] the responsibility

² Various also named *departments* and *colleges* in some of the universities. The nomenclature chosen here reflects the use of language in Dublin City University.

³ Henceforth “Sectoral Report”.

of a specific service department. (...) It may be useful for the university to evaluate such cross-cutting issues from time to time as part of its own strategic development.” (Sectoral Report, p. 21, sec. 86). Consequently, the EUA report makes the recommendation that “Universities should also consider reviewing university-wide issues, not linked to any one unit, but essential for the ongoing strategic development of the institution” (Sectoral Report, p. 27, sec. 132).

Most of the Irish universities have completed their first cycle of reviews and have embarked on the second cycle. The transition from the first to the second and following cycles of reviews has offered the opportunity to reassess and reappraise quality reviews both on a nation-wide basis and at the level of the individual institution. Nationally, the fact that the quality system is maturing was acknowledged by the preparation and publication of a revised edition of the *Framework for Quality in Irish Universities* jointly published by the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) in October 2007, a document which takes into consideration global and European developments in Third (and Fourth) Level Education. The *Framework* also incorporates recommendations made as a result of the above mentioned EUA review of the Irish Universities’ quality assurance systems.

In Dublin City University (DCU), like in the other Irish universities, all departments have undergone a review. DCU is now in the process of making the transition from the first to the second cycle of reviews. This transition is accompanied by a shift of focus from establishing the mechanisms necessary to successfully conduct peer reviews to setting up mechanisms that concentrate on the successful implementation of changes recommended in the reviews. The transition can be described in terms of three interrelated phases.

The first phase followed the Institutional Quality Review of Dublin City University. In their Institutional Report the EUA reviewers saw an overarching university-wide analysis of the results of the internal quality review process as “important for the work of the Quality Promotion Committee, the Academic Council and the Governing Authority.” (EUA Review of Quality Assurance in Irish Universities – University Report, HEA/IUQB, 2005, p. 23⁴).

⁴ Henceforth “Institutional Report”

Following from this, DCU set about gaining an overview of themes which reoccurred in the various departmental reviews. They were researched and recorded in so called *Common Themes Reports*, which were drawn together from all existing Peer Group Reports, separately for academic schools (in 2005), for administrative and support units (in 2006) and for research centres (in 2008). These reports were presented to, and discussed by, all the decision making groupings in the university; they are available to the entire DCU community on the intranet. The research conducted for the Common Themes Reports confirmed, not very surprisingly, that academic Schools across the campus encountered similar problems. Top of the list are the three key areas of *funding and resources, internal and external communication and organisational structures*.

While the reoccurrence of these three themes throughout the university was to be expected, the Common Themes brought to light a number of issues that would otherwise not as readily have been noticeable. Among such issues are, for example, the wide variety of ways of dealing with, and the range of different solutions for, similar challenges. For example, the personal tutor system which was introduced on a university-wide scale is handled quite differently from School to School. Another example concerns the importance of the definition and recognition of all aspects of the academic workload. When the flow of funding was steered towards research, activities in this area (e.g. research output to fit the metrics in use, time spent on funding applications, and promoting research cooperation) were seen to be valued, while on the teaching and learning side actions to rationalise and create more flexibility in terms of delivery and autonomy of learning came into the limelight with knock-on effects on the definition of academic work. A further finding was characterised by a palpable void: this is the absence of attention on the part of the peer reviewers in respect to what is variously called *community relations* or *civic engagement* or equivalents which form part of the self-assessment template for academic units (beside *teaching and learning, research and scholarship* and *organisation and management*). This absence finds its counterpart in an apparent confusion around civic engagement on the side of the Schools who subsumed issues as different as marketing, student recruitment and student access under this section of their Self-Assessment Reports. One further issue that stood out in the Common Themes was *student experience* with all its facets, including in particular the undergraduate, postgraduate and non-traditional student experience. The latter, by the way, is also explicitly mentioned as a possible candidate for thematic reviews in the Sectoral Report (p. 21, Sec. 85).

While the above mentioned examples highlighted the potential for thematic reviews, the feeling was that it was exactly what the departmental reviews, on their own or in combination, did *not* see and therefore did *not* mention in the reports which constituted the strongest reason for conducting thematic reviews. For example, the recommendation to “develop collaboration with support services” was only made in one singular case which, in the light of the outcomes of the Thematic Review, indicates that unit-based reviews do not have the capacity to reveal an all-encompassing view.

The second phase consisted in the initiation of an annual *Student Forum on Quality* (Student ForQ) in which students from across the campus are given the opportunity to discuss and evaluate their experience in a facilitated workshop format. Each Student Forum on Quality results in a report which, like the Common Themes Reports, is seen and discussed by all central decision makers within the university. Like the Common Themes Reports the report on the Student ForQs is available to the entire university community on the intranet.

The 2007 Forum explored who or what students interact with in the university, and which of these interactions are of the greatest importance to them. The three first points that came up were, in this order, the Registry, other students, and lecturers, while, for example *Student Affairs* (the unit mainly responsible for student support and development) was more or less hidden in the mid-field of agents or agencies students deal with. This does not mean, of course, that *Student Affairs* is inactive; rather it means that its activities are either not attributed to the department or are taken for granted. One of the overall results of the 2007 Student Forum on Quality was that

Students’ contact with non-academic units, staff and companies heavily influences the student experience (e.g. registration, security, accommodation, bar, restaurants, bank, clubs and societies).

This confirms the impression that both academic and non-academic units form an integral part of the student experience, in some cases agencies which are not even part of the university in any legal sense.

The Introduction of Thematic Reviews

The combination of results obtained from the EUA review of quality assurance in Irish universities, and of the Common Themes reports, as well as the Student ForQs led to the decision to introduce, in a third phase, *Thematic Quality Reviews* in DCU to complement the established departmental reviews. A thematic approach in itself is not an entirely new departure, but so far it has been applied mainly in inter-institutional, often nation-wide surveys – as opposed to reviews, both in Ireland and the UK.⁵ In the case of the DCU review it was decided to retain the basic principles and procedures used in unit-based reviews and to follow the same succession of steps, which are:

- a detailed self-assessment process with a Self-assessment Report (SAR)
- a peer group visit with a mixture of internal and external membership resulting in a Peer Group Report (PGR) with a number of recommendations for action
- a follow-on process initiated by the completion of a Quality Improvement Plan (QuIP).

Both the PGR and the QuIP are published on the Quality Promotion Unit website.

The first Thematic Review was to be conducted on First year and Beginner⁶ Student Experience for a variety of reasons including the rapidly changing sectoral, national and international context. Within this context “issues of retention ... have resulted in DCU and the university sector generally, becoming increasingly aware of and concerned with the nature and quality of first year and beginner student experience.” (PGR, p.2)

The PGR recognises that the “scale of activity encompassed with the First Year and Beginner Student Experience is very substantial, including as it does every point of interaction that first time students have with the university in advance of and during their first year period of registration” but that the experience of students amounts to more than the sum of the various points of contact and procedures encountered as it depends on way in which these “are combined or integrated at DCU, and their efficacy and adaptability” (p.2).

⁵ See, for example, Park (2008). In Ireland a nation-wide review of the organisation of PhD programmes is planned for 2008-09.

⁶ “Beginners” were included to cover students who transfer from other institutions and international students who are beginners in terms starting out in DCU but who are typically not in their first year of study.

Meeting the Challenges: Observations and Outcomes

The main challenges in conducting a thematic review are the complexity of the undertaking, the fact that there were no precedents for such a review, that the leadership for a thematic review is not as clear cut as for departmental reviews, that university-wide representation had to be in place, that follow-on processes are not as pre-defined and that the timing of thematic reviews is not as pre-determined as in traditional reviews.

The **complexity** of the task was immense. Therefore, a concise definition of the task at hand was of the essence. The peer review group, mirroring the definition in the SAR came up with the following definition:

The theme, First Year and Beginner Student Experience, encompasses the totality of first time undergraduate student experience at DCU. It includes every facet of university life – academic and non-academic, intellectual and social, individual and collective – as experienced by undergraduate students during their first period of registration with the university.

It will be appreciated that the definition is clear, concise and inclusive. This inclusiveness, however, serves to emphasise even more the complexity of the theme, and therefore the review process.

It was one aim of the review to gain involvement of as many as possible while keeping both the self-assessment and the peer group assessment as short and neat as possible. The leaders of the review, termed ‘champions’ for want of a better word, were very efficient in putting together a team from across the university which covered all important aspects of the 1st year and beginner students experience, and in developing a methodology for capturing the issues at stake that gave all involved an opportunity to make their views known without taking too much of their time as the results of a survey of those involved in the review shows.

Departmental self-assessments are based on pre-existing **templates** which have been adapted to the purposes of each individual university from the Irish Universities Association’s and Quality Board’s *Framework* document. For a thematic review no such template exists, since each thematic review is by definition different in character from other thematic reviews. Therefore, a suitable template needed to be prepared and discussed before the review commenced. In this case, a draft template was prepared by the Quality Promotion Unit, using existing parameters established in

student centred discussions and student produced materials (Eurotop Student Conference) and research on the quality of education in Europe and worldwide as presented and discussed at conferences, for example the conference entitled “Quality of Education: In the Eye of the Beholder?” in Maastricht in November of 2006. The draft template made use of previous experience in the area, such as the 2002 Universities UK report on Student Services. The suggested template was further discussed between the review leaders and the Quality Promotion Unit and refined to include all aspects that were considered to be of importance for the review. In this context, it was thought that the combination of administrative and support efforts on the one hand and academic environment and support on the other hand was particularly important. The Self-Assessment Report, based on the template which evolved from the cooperation between the QPU and the champions eventually contained sections on Background and Context, Student Profile and Opinion, Physical Environment, Administrative Services, Student Support, Student Facilities, and Academic Environment, concluded by a Summary and Recommendations.

Leadership for the self-assessment and the peer review process was initially provided by the Director of Student Affairs⁷ in DCU. It became obvious early in the preparatory stages of the review that the administrative and support side of the house would have to be balanced by the academic side. The role of the co-chair of the coordination committee for the review was taken by a lecturer in the DCU Business School. Both champions are also members of the university’s Quality Promotion Committee.

The **Coordination Committee** consisted of 32 persons, representing administrative, welfare and support units (63%), academic staff from all faculties (31%) and the President and Deputy-President of the Students’ Union in the university (6%).

The leadership issue also arises in relation to the **follow-on processes** of the review. An overarching theme, by necessity, results in overarching recommendations by the peer review group. In order to avoid confusion about assigning responsibilities for the enactment of the recommendations, the peer group was encouraged to assign action items to specific departments and staff within the university as in the following example which was addressed to the Administration, the Estates Office and the Catering division:

⁷ The department has since been renamed *Student Support and Development (SS&D)*.

Identify additional area(s) where students can consume their own food and drink and consider provision of access (supervised, if required) to microwave facilities and hot water.

This still leaves the task of assigning responsibilities within the three addressees of the recommendation and the coordination of the ensuing activities.

The review came at a good **time**, therefore motivation was high. Issues relating to student retention, student life issues (such as the fact that many students hold down part time jobs throughout the semester), and the matter of college choice by students were widely discussed throughout the university in the run-up to and during the review. The Self-Assessment Report states (38):

The process of producing this report involved almost all Units, Departments, Offices, Schools and Faculties across the University. This made it a complex and challenging task, but the end result has provided a rewarding and extremely timely outcome.

As a general rule it can be said that the institutional review processes can supplement the cycle of departmental reviews which tends to be planned far in advance by the flexibility of thematic reviews which can be initiated at relatively short notice. However, care needs to be taken that the thematic review is not imposed but offered with a view to encouraging the discussion and implementation of changes in areas in which change is perceived to be necessary and beneficial.

Results of Review

Participation was very wide spread and active by all departments dealing with beginner students⁸, which is probably a sign that the timing of the review was right. One of the main differences between a departmental and a thematic review is that all of those involved in the review are involved as active contributors to the processes under review rather than as stakeholders or mere observers. As such, their involvement is more direct, immediate and concentrated on the issue at stake. From this point of view, the quality review – by bringing together representatives of all those who ultimately make up the first year and beginner student experience – is in itself part of the quality improvement process in the university.

⁸ The only exception to this are, ironically, the students themselves. While the Student Union was actively involved in the process throughout, 'ordinary' students were difficult to win over for participation in focus groups and interviews with the peer review group.

A survey of the members of the coordination committee which was conducted after the completion of the peer review process shows encouraging results. The large majority of participants think the time and energy they gave to the review was well spent.

The review took place in April 2008, the Peer Group Report was finished in June and the Quality Improvement Plan in October of the same year.

One of the review findings states:

It is clear that the process of this review has allowed the university to better articulate what is already being done to support the first year experience and that this has already generated a level of momentum that staff are keen to capitalise on.

The Peer Group acknowledges “the huge amount of activity that is going into supporting first year students and helping them progress on their programmes”. But there is room for improvement, as the Self-Assessment process had shown. The PGR makes about 30 recommendations. In many cases these are based on findings in the SAR which were validated by the Peer Group. One of the principal findings is the following:

There is a clear need for greater co-ordination and clarity in relation to first year and beginner student support. (...) A fully integrated approach to academic and non-academic support provision requires the endorsement and pro-active engagement of senior management within the university ...

Many of the recommendations in the PGR serve to detail necessary actions in order to reach such a “fully integrated approach”, examples of which are recommendations such as the following two:

Articulate a clear ladder of referral to ensure that students can access relevant support services (academic and non-academic) and/or can be appropriately referred by members of staff whom they approach for assistance. (Recommendation 4)

Clarify the role of the personal tutor or academic advisor, adopting a universal definition of the role, applying a selection process to identify suitable staff for this purpose, providing appropriate training to those staff and providing recognition for the role within workload distribution and promotions criteria, and appoint a university officer to oversee the operation of the personal tutor/academic advisor system when revised. (Recommendation 27)

Even though it is early days after the review some successful outcomes can be confirmed already.

Conclusion

A lot of changes are underway, some of them completed. The most important of these is probably the establishment of a cross-university Student Experience Committee which had its origin in the coordination committee for the Thematic Review and which is chaired by the Vice-President for Learning Innovation.

The table below summarises some of the main differences between departmental and thematic reviews and may serve to highlight in which way the two types of review can complement each other.

	departmental	thematic
Timeframe	cyclical	flexible
Focus	disciplinary	interdisciplinary
Leadership	predetermined	elective
Improvement	result orientated	process orientated
Approach	top-down	bottom-up
Time Orientation	past/future related	present related
Roles	participants and stakeholders	participants
Template	existing	tailor-made
Follow-on process	predetermined	negotiated

Questions for discussion

- 1) Is there enough reward for the considerable effort expended in preparing and conducting thematic quality reviews?
- 2) What institutional and other conditions are necessary in order to make thematic reviews worthwhile?
- 3) What potential dangers are inherent in thematic quality reviews?

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