

Academic Affairs and Governance Office

Review of Academic Decision-Making:

Preliminary response of the Academic Affairs and Governance Office

Action requested: Approve

Background rationale

As might be expected in a University setting, UCC's academic decision-making policies and processes are complex and defined by their equifinality. In part, this complexity has emerged spontaneously as the University developed and expanded over time. Priority 6 of the Academic Strategy (2018-2022) acknowledges this issue and aims via action 28, to ensure appropriate assurance and governance, clarify decision-making authority, and streamline policy processes. In furtherance of these aims, a review team comprising of senior national and international experts was appointed by the Quality Enhancement Committee, their remit was to assess academic decision-making and the conduct of academic business at University, College, and School levels within UCC. The findings of the review are presented in the attached report.

Resource Implications

Potential resource implications are outlined in the preliminary response prepared by the Academic Affairs and Governance Office.

Brief description / summary of the item

The report is structured around four key headings and the findings and recommendations contained in the report are based on a documentary analysis, a site visit, as well as dialogue with staff and students.

This production of this report gives the University community the opportunity to respond to the findings contained within, with a view to how we might operationalise the suggestions, but also to ensure the unique cultural and organisational norms of the University are accurately captured in the recommendations. In an effort to structure feedback to this report in a coherent manner, the Academic Affairs and Governance Office has prepared a template as a means of organising responses to the findings of the external review panel.

Under the following headings, the AAGO has offered preliminary suggestions on the panel recommendations: 1) *decision making models*, 2) *institutional cultures*, 3) *policy development*, 4) *systems and processes*.

We invite you to review the report and AAGO's preliminary suggestions and consider the recommendations made within. For the purpose of structuring feedback, responses should be provided under the thematic headings listed above and forwarded to Academic Secretary & Assistant Registrar, Paul O'Donovan, academicsecretary@ucc.ie by 31/03/2019.

In addition, members of Academic Council are invited to attend an Academic Decision-Making Workshop, hosted by AAGO, on **Wednesday, 20th March, 1-2 pm** in the **North Wing Council Room**.

Review of Academic Decision-Making

Recommendations

Preliminary response of the Academic Affairs and Governance Office for consideration by Academic Council (AC)

	Recommendations of Peer Review Group	Comment
1	Decision-making models	
1.1	Reconsider the role of Academic Council to ensure it has a more strategic focus	The Office agrees that there is a need to map the decisions taken by AC to the functions specified within the <i>Universities Act 1997</i> . However, we submit that an assessment of the current academic governance structures against the backdrop of previous reports into academic restructuring and governance reform is also required to ensure a comprehensive appraisal is conducted. The possibility of delegating routine academic business to a sub-committee could be considered. In this context, the role and functions of Academic Board would also need to be reviewed.
1.2	The types of decision considered at university level should be to establish principles-based frameworks which allow flexible implementation at College or School level.	It is acknowledged that principles-based frameworks might be useful and that the detail of academic decision-making could be delegated to College/School level. In addition, there is a need to ensure University-wide alignment with the <i>Strategic Plan 2017-2022</i> and the <i>Academic Strategy 2018-2022</i> . The Office suggests that a mapping exercise of the current governance relationship between the University level and College/School levels is needed in advance of devolvement to ensure that existing structures are robust and that effective and efficient decision-making is taking place in line with the University's strategic priorities.
1.3	Clear structures should be put in place for Colleges or Schools to account to Academic Council for the exercise of delegated authority.	The Office notes the recommendation of the review panel and in this context, recalls the similar suggestion of the Institutional Review Group (2013) that the University give close attention to securing greater consistency in the way regulations are observed by Colleges. As above, the Office believes a mapping exercise of the current governance arrangements is necessary before further delegation can be considered. Effective communication between University and College/School level is vital and the Office submits an appraisal of current communication channels should form part of this exercise.

1.4	Reduce by around a half the number of committees, using a principles-based approach.	Reducing the number of committees by half seems an arbitrary determination and lacks any reckonable basis in the report. Committees are an important mode of engagement for AC and also for staff who are not Council members. Committees play a role in ensuring wide and thorough consultation on emerging and recurring issues. Nevertheless, the Office believes that the organisation and operation of Committees could be streamlined. We believe that a review of academic decision-making models at peer institutions could be a valuable exercise in terms of identifying good practice and ensuring that the capacity of AC Committees is maximised.
1.5	Rationalise consultation process to become more inclusive and less rigid.	The Office believes that the consultation process could be rationalised. The Office plans to develop consultation guidelines to assist decision-makers in conducting flexible and inclusive consultation processes. Guidelines will include the good practice examples cited by the review panel. The consultation process will be embedded by publishing draft policies on the website, thereby providing staff and students a time-limited opportunity for review and comment.
2	Institutional culture	We note that many of the following recommendations are addressed to the University as a whole.
2.1	Ensure parity of esteem for all members of the university community (students, professional service staff, and academic staff).	As above, consultation guidelines will emphasise the importance of parity of esteem for all members of the university community. The Office is currently engaged in a student-focused project in partnership with AC Committee Chairs, which will inform the design of the Academic Policy Portal. The Office could reflect and build on this initiative to ensure that the input of all University members and engaged external advisors/experts is integrated into its activities. In addition, we note that UMTS has committed to examining parity between academic and professional services staff.
2.2	Invest in induction and training of staff (including academic leadership) and students involved in decision-making.	The Office supports the provision of training for staff and students involved in the academic decision-making process and would welcome the introduction of a joint initiative with the Department of Human Resources in this regard. However, the University should take into account the Office's resource constraints for the implementation of new policies and projects.
2.3	Academic leaders should be prepared and equipped to bridge the gap between the university-level and the college or school level and to implement the principle-based	This is a recommendation to the University and is supported by the Academic Affairs and Governance Office.

	frameworks to meet local need, and should be held accountable for same.	
2.4	Ensure that staff in representative and management roles are accountable for attending, participating and facilitating two-way communication.	The Office notes the recommendation and suggests that an exploration of Committee membership, attendance and participation could identify supportive measures to enable members to fulfil their function. We will work with Colleges, Schools and Departments to effect change in this area. Additionally, we will engage in prospective planning with AC Committee chairs to deliver an annual work plan. Additional resources may be required to implement this recommendation.
3	Policy development and implementation	
3.1	Each policy should be sponsored by a senior academic leader	While the Office accedes that policy sponsorship is a vital feature of an effective system of academic governance, we disagree with the recommendation that each policy should be sponsored by a senior academic leader. The Office contends that every academic policy should be assigned an owner who is an expert in the area to which the policy relates. This would enable the policy owner to ensure effective implementation, promulgation and review of the policy.
3.2	Each policy should have an implementation plan, including a communications strategy which would depend on the scope and impact of the policy	The Office agrees with this proposal and work is underway to develop communication and implementation resources. Furthermore, we submit that cost and resource implications should be addressed at the outset of policy development.
4	Information systems	
4.1	Portal for policies/information	Development of an Academic Policy Portal is a priority under the <i>Academic Strategy 2018-2022</i> and work on its design has already commenced. Toolkits for UCC staff engaged in policy development and implementation will be available on the portal in a 'policy resources' section.
4.2	Access to management information, including student records	The Office agrees that UMTO should, as a priority, review existing data access controls, and develop a data management hierarchy to ensure academic decisions are effectively implemented. This requirement should be incorporated into any enterprise data strategy under development. We welcome the new student administration system and commit to exploring ways of being more data driven in our decision-making.