

# PEER REVIEW GROUP REPORT

## PRESIDENT'S OFFICE, ST. PATRICK'S COLLEGE

Visit - 27/28 February 2006

### 1 - INTRODUCTION

Under the Universities Act 1997, all universities in Ireland have a statutory obligation to conduct quality review on teaching, research and related activities of all academic and administrative units on a cyclical basis. In St. Patrick's College, quality promotion reviews have three main stages: self-assessment, peer review and follow-up. The President's Office was due to undergo its quality review process on 27 & 28 February 2006 and we were invited by St. Patrick's College Quality Promotion Unit to undertake a peer review of the "Office"- to be the Peer Review Group (PRG).

### 2 - MEMBERS OF THE PRG

Dr. Mark Morgan, Head of Education Department, St. Patrick's College; Mr. Andy Pollak, Director, Centre for Cross Border Studies, Armagh; and Ms. Sheyla Ryan, Senior Executive Officer, President's Office, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. At its initial meeting, the PRG appointed its Chair (A. Pollak) and its Rapporteur (S. Ryan). It also accepted the schedule details as drawn up by the Quality Promotion Unit (in consultation with the President's Office).

### 3 - COMMITMENT TO QUALITY

St. Patrick's College is "committed to fostering excellence in all its activities including ... administration" (extract from its Mission Statement) and this commitment is also embedded in its "*Ar Aghaidh*" Draft Strategic Plan 2005-2010 (p.17).

### 4 - SETTING TO WORK

The Quality Promotion Unit provided us in advance with a copy of the President's Office Self-Assessment Report (SAR), guidelines for the PRG, the College's Strategic Plan 2005-2010 and also drafted a schedule for our visit on the agreed dates. The primary aim of the PRG's visit is clarification and verification of the SAR and to meet this objective we spoke with key stakeholders over the period of the 2-day visit. These key stakeholders included the Chair of the Governing Body, Management Committee members, Asst Registrar, Bursar, Heads of various Academic Departments, other academic staff, administrative staff and students - as well as the President and the two members of staff in his Office. All meetings were very cordial and informative.

### 5 - PRESIDENT'S OFFICE STAFF

Current staffing: Dr. Pauric Travers (President); Ms Theresa O'Farrell (Senior Administrator - Higher Executive Officer [HEO]); and Ms Roisín Purcell (Freedom of Information - Executive

Officer [EO]). It should be noted here that there are currently two vacancies in the Office – one EO (arising from promotion of EO to HEO), and a half-time Clerical Officer [CO] (arising from the transfer of a halftime contract CO, previously shared with the Finance Department, to a fulltime permanent CO post in Finance).

## **6 - THE PRESIDENT'S OFFICES**

The staff offices are located in the central administration area of the College adjacent to each other and other administrative colleagues. The offices are also within easy access of the boardroom where meetings of Governing Body, Management Committee and other key groups take place. Space is adequate for current needs, but additional space would be required if the staff complement were to increase in number. It was noted that some basic office equipment (e.g., scanner, etc.) was not provided in the Office which means the SA has to leave and lock her office to seek such services elsewhere. It was also felt that the arrangement whereby the SA *de facto* acted as receptionist to the President's Office was not the best use of her time. The SA is regularly interrupted by telephone calls and visitors to the Office, many of which could be handled (and redirected to others) by the (vacant) CO. Privacy is also compromised by not having the SA's office separate from the front-line reception area for the President.

## **7 - JOB SPECIFICATIONS**

We requested, and received, job specifications for the three current staff in the Office. It was interesting to note that the President did not have a job specification as such, but a listing of his functions as defined in the College's Instrument of Government. This is something which may or may not need to be more defined prior to the ending of the term of office of the current President. Some members of staff we interviewed felt it was too "loose" while others felt it was better that it should remain so that the functions of a future president were not restricted by being too rigidly determined. The SA's and the FoI EO's job descriptions were much more clearly defined. There were no job descriptions available for the two vacant posts (EO & CO).

## **8 - THE ROLE OF THE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE**

The President, as CEO of the College, has statutory leadership, executive and administrative functions for all aspects of the College's operations. The President's Office has a concomitant role in all aspects of College life, as well as the normal PA support for the President himself. The services provided by the Office include the provision of administrative support for designated committees including Governing Body, strategic planning, management of PR and communication function (internal and external - including annual reports), event management, freedom of information, data protection, alumni, archives, fellowships and scholarships. This is not an exhaustive list – nevertheless, it can be seen that its role is wide and varied. The Office also works closely with other senior management/administrators in the College, as well as all the usual external connections: DES, HEA, other colleges, etc.

## **9 - PERSONNEL FUNCTION**

The President's Office currently operates the Personnel function as the position of HR Manager has been vacant since April 2005. While this is being done on a strictly temporary basis, it has caused a considerable increase in the pressure and workload of the Office (this is one of the few areas where Office staff admit they are "stretched"). The absence of a dedicated HR Manager also caused quite a lot of comment from all of the staff whom we met over the course of our visit. This was not directed in any sense at the President's Office but at the fact that such a pivotal post has been vacant for so long.

## **10 - STUDENT WELFARE**

Another area which falls to the President's Office, by default, comes under the general heading of Student Welfare. This would include areas such as Chaplaincy, counselling, student residences, critical incidents in relation to students. This function is ill-defined at present and clarity is needed as to where it actually lies. In the organigram provided with the SAR, it appears under "Other College Functions" and, in the absence of a function head in this area, reverts to the President's Office.

## **11 - VOLUME OF WORK**

The volume of work in the Office was measured by examining the range of activities which are listed above. Under each of the headings listed, which are onerous in themselves, the minutiae of the day-to-day running of the President's Office goes on. A large amount of correspondence is processed and the volume of email enquiries is high. There are a number of personal callers to the Office with queries which may be dealt with immediately or noted for a later response. A considerable amount of the President's and the SA's time appears to be consumed with immediate demands of this nature. There is no slack time and therefore no time for staff development or for areas identified by their SAR as being in need of development, e.g., alumni, archives. This would also tie in with lack of proper staffing as identified in section 5 above and the accumulation of additional responsibilities identified in sections 9 and 10 above. A H&S concern was expressed by some of the staff we met about some staff members in the Office overworking.

## **12 - SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT**

As part of this Quality Assurance process, the Office carried out a very comprehensive SAR. Questionnaires were devised by the Quality Promotion Unit in consultation with the Office and sent to a selection of key users to determine the level of satisfaction with the overall service. The format of the questionnaire varied, depending on whether the group was internal or external, and we were provided with samples of the questionnaires issued. Nine questions were asked, seven of which involved rating services under different headings (e.g., timeliness/efficiency, accessibility, and quality) on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest. The remaining two questions were open-ended in that they asked for comments. We commented that the returns were rather low in some areas (e.g., Governing Body, staff and Students' Union) and were given satisfactory explanations for this. While the size of the sample was small, it can be stated that the responses received were almost invariably in the high (4) and highest (5) columns (with the great majority being in the 5), indicating a high level of satisfaction with the services provided. Following analysis of the questionnaires, the staff of the Office met to discuss the feedback and identified some significant

issues which they felt needed to be noted and acted upon, all of which are included in one form or another in our recommendations below. It should be said here that the PRG independently established each of the action issues during their visit.

### **12.1 SWOT Analysis**

The Office carried out a SWOT analysis which was informed by their own views, rather than resulting from the questionnaires. Again, our own findings echoed the results of this analysis and are listed below in our comments, findings and recommendations.

## **13 - PRG COMMENTS**

We responded initially to the unit's Mission as set out in its SAR, which is "To provide a quality service by being professional, friendly, responsive and dynamic". Following our meetings with the various groups, we decided to focus our report under the following three headings: Accessibility, Efficiency and Friendliness. Our decision to do this was based on the fact that these three terms/words were applied to the President's Office by all of the people we met over the two days of the PRG visit. Running through all our meetings also was the very high personal regard in which the President's Office and its staff are held.

## **14 - OVERALL FINDING**

While our overall finding was that this is a very harmonious, extremely well functioning and efficient unit - fully attuned to the informal, friendly ethos of St Patrick's College - it is also very clear to us that it is over-stretched with some important areas of work being neglected due to time/staff shortages. The Office functions very well as a cohesive team, with obvious mutual respect and positive interpersonal relations. Its members are seen as helpful, accessible and very good at their jobs by college staff and students alike. The Office staff demonstrate huge goodwill which may be in danger of being taken for granted by additional work demands continuing to be placed on them.

## **15 - ACCESSIBILITY**

Our conclusions here are based on the kind of responses which we received from others linking with the Office on a day-to-day basis.

### **15.1 - Strengths:**

- There is an "Open Door" policy for all levels of staff and students.
- They do not operate strictly 9-5.
- They demonstrate a flexibility to do whatever it takes to do whatever needs to be done.
- There is a track record of always being there or making arrangements when they're not.

### **15.2 - Weaknesses:**

- The "Open Door" policy can work against them in that it can lead people to assume the Office is there as a first resort rather than a last resort ("Almost everything seems to cross the President's desk, including matters that should go first to a line manager").
- Almost too good - the more that is asked of them, the more they do.
- There could be an element of being taken for granted - always there for everybody.
- Direct access to the SA, by virtue of the layout of the Office.

## **16 - EFFICIENCY**

Our judgements here are founded on the type of answers received from others in daily contact with the Office and our observations during the visit.

### **16.1 - Strengths:**

- The calibre of the staff - highly competent and dynamic - led by a President who is multi-talented and a superb communicator.
- The staff demonstrate huge energy and enthusiasm for their work.
- The staff are professional, efficient, diligent and tireless.
- Integrity of the staff.

### **16.2 - Weaknesses**

- Shortage of staff as a result of which the Office is being stretched (“The Registrar has an assistant, the President doesn’t” - senior manager)
- Staff have to multitask, occasionally to an extreme degree (“the SA’s time is too valuable to have to stuff envelopes”...”if she had more time she could take greater responsibility for communications and PR”) - this also has implications for work/life balance (concern expressed about health & safety).
- Existing staff have to carry out lower-order tasks - senior staff need to be freed up for more strategic work. This is increasingly the case given the college’s rapid growth in student numbers over the past decade.
- The calibre of staff - reliance on personalities currently in position - is this sustainable? (“We’re very narrow at the top of the pyramid” - senior manager)
- Lack of support structure or formal forum for SA.
- HR Function being located in the Office - we are aware that this will be remedied in the short-term, but we could not leave it unsaid.

## **17 - FRIENDLINESS**

We experienced this for ourselves as part of the PRG interaction with the Office staff over the period of the visit. Our opinion is supported by the emphatically positive comments made by users of the service which we met and by the questionnaires.

### **17.1 - Strengths:**

- Harmonious and happy within the Office, despite the consistent pressure.
- Relationships within the Office.
- Relationships with others outside the Office while maintaining discretion and confidentiality.
- Great personal regard in which President is held.
- Great personal regard in which both administrators are held.
- Good healthy relationship between students and President (calling him “Pauric” quite naturally).

### **17.2 - Weaknesses:**

- Reliance on personalities at present

## 18 - RECOMMENDATIONS

The PRG's recommendations are suggested in the context of the Strategic Plan and the Career Structures as proposed by the Labour Court:

### 18.1 - Strategic

- Put process in motion re clarity of job definitions/specifications/clarity of roles (initially in the form of a good organisational chart). The President should be the final rather than the first recourse - he needs time and space to deal with the big strategic issues. There is maybe a function for the Governing Body to ensure continuity and sustainability.
- Need to examine work schedules which staff currently feel comfortable with in the light of overall college requirements, particularly as the college grows.
- Need for structure to provide backup in the event of unscheduled absences.
- Need for structure which will maintain the institutional memory into future presidencies.
- Need to transfer some responsibilities
- Communications / PR & Marketing - an important role that may needs a separate post
- Student services (counselling, Chaplaincy & mature students) - a complex area which needs to be more systematically organised
- Consideration might be given in the context of a future review of senior management functions to the possibility of a new post to take responsibility for the above two areas.
- HR function appears to be a key issue - attention to ensure that it functions effectively and combines credibility and independence of role with the authority of the President when necessary. There was wide agreement that the personality and credibility of this senior person would be vital.

### 18.2 - Operational

- The need for additional clerical/administrative staff to ensure issues are dealt with in a timely fashion - to use an expression from their SAR, "frustration at fire-fighting and having to respond to the urgent to the neglect of the important".
- Particular need for extra capacity in the areas of Alumni and Archives.
- Extra staff are also needed to ensure that there is a structure in place for continuity and institutional memory in the event of the SA leaving and also at the end of the term of office of the current President.
- Reconfiguring of Office space to ensure that the SA has privacy and is not the first point of contact for all phone or personal callers, and should not have to act as "receptionist"
- Re-establish senior inter-unit administrative group - thus providing a support network for the SA and improving communication at middle management level.
- Need for Handbook for Staff - this would obviate the need for constant checking with President's Office.
- Use the strengths of the existing EO - offer a more defined role within the Office as FoI function is not filling her time (e.g. an Alumni role).
- Have discussions with comparable institutions as a continuation of quality assurance.
- Need for more focused staff development while acknowledging that this cannot be done until there are more staff.

## 19 - CONCLUSION

The PRG concludes that the President's Office does indeed meet its mission - it is professional, it provides a quality service, it is friendly, responsive and dynamic and this will be further enhanced if the College can implement some of the recommendations above. The Office staff themselves recognise that one of the values of the peer review process is that it gives them the opportunity to reflect on how their very efficient and diligent work is meeting the actual and changing needs of the college.

## **20 - ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We want to especially thank the staff of the President's Office - Dr Pauric Travers, Ms Theresa O'Farrell and Ms Roisin Purcell - for entering into the quality process with openness and commitment. This made it easier for us to carry out our analysis and to accomplish our objective, viz., "clarification and verification of the SAR".

We also wish to thank Dr. Daire Keogh and Ms Sharon King of the Quality Assurance Unit for treating us so well. The visit was managed effectively and efficiently. The meetings went according to schedule and everybody we met was very aware of the Quality process and willing to fully engage with the exercise.

*Andy Pollak*  
*Sheyla Ryan*  
*Mark Morgan*

*27 March 2006*