



**RCSI**

**University of  
Medicine and  
Health  
Sciences**

## **Peer Review Group Report**

**Quality Enhancement Office  
(QEO)**

**September 2021**



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# DOCUMENT CONTROL SHEET

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# 1 CONTEXT FOR THE REVIEW

## 1.1 Introduction

This report covers the Peer Review Group's (PRG's) review of the Quality Enhancement Office (QEO), at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI). It included a virtual site visit by a five-person review team from 27 - 30, September 2021. Owing to public health guidance in effect at the time of the review, possibilities for corporeal meeting were limited and at best uncertain; consequently, a virtual site visit was conducted via MS Teams. While not ideal, the normal expected schedule of meetings was followed, and all progressed without difficulty.

The PRG is appreciative of the support and assistance received from RCSI throughout the process, and for the constructive detailed engagement of the staff and students of RCSI, and of external bodies, and who made themselves available to meet and discuss matters with the PRG.

The PRG wish to commend the QEO for its detailed and self-critical evaluation in the form of the Self-Assessment Report (SAR). The report provided an excellent context to the review and supported the PRG in arriving at its conclusions. The SAR was comprehensive, self-critical, and reflective and the QEO had clearly used the quality review process to critically evaluate its own standing and performance and as a learning exercise designed to provide directions for self-improvement.

A rich sample of documentation was made available to the PRG through a Moodle portal illustrating the work done by the QEO, benchmark exercises with similar units elsewhere within the Irish university sector, the previous SAR and the quality improvements plans (QIPs) emanating from it, the rigour of quality reviews it has facilitated for other functional units within RCSI, and the relationship between RCSI and various external agencies, amongst others.

QEO has a pivotal role to play in the realisation of such goals. The openness of QEO to critical self-evaluation coupled with external peer-review is indicative of its constructive intent. Throughout our visit, albeit virtual, the PRG have listened to staff and students, internal to RCSI and external. What we have heard loud and clear, is a strong endorsement of the excellent work of QEO, the high regard in which the Unit is held, and the supportive role played by QEO in leading quality improvement across RCSI. QEO is to be commended for this inclusive approach.

### Commendations

- The leadership provided by Prof David Croke as Director of the Quality Enhancement Office. Under his leadership the Office enjoys an excellent reputation both within RCSI, and within the higher education sector more generally.
- The QEO is a highly regarded and valued entity within RCSI. The experiences of functional units and student bodies reflect the openness, and supportive nature of the Unit, describing QEO as having 'trusted partner' status, being an 'honest broker' and an 'enabler'. This reflects the high level of confidence in QEO and its work across RCSI and beyond.

## 1.2 Purpose of the Review

The quality review process is characterised by a critical self-assessment exercise through which the unit under review reflects on its mission and objectives, and analyses critically the activities it engages in to achieve these objectives. As part of the review, unit performance in delivering on its assigned functions, services to the wider university community, administration, and progress made since the last quality review are reflected upon. The fundamental objectives of the review process are to:

- The effectiveness of the RCSI internal QA/QI review processes administered by the QEO (in the broader context of the Irish legislative framework and the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education).
- The effectiveness of the processes established by the QEO to monitor the development of collaborative and transnational provision of higher education by RCSI.
- The effectiveness of the governance structures in place within RCSI to ensure appropriate oversight of QA/QI policies and processes.
- The appropriateness of the QEO mission, strategic and operational plans within the overall context of the mission and the strategic plan of RCSI.

## 1.3 Review Methodology

The QEO is a key functional Unit within RCSI and as such, is subject to inclusion in the cycle of periodic reviews of administrative and support units. Because the QEO normally facilitates such reviews, and to avoid any perception of bias in the process, protections were put in place to ensure an independent oversight of the process. This was provided by Ms Patricia Kinane, Project Manager, Office of the CEO, RCSI and Dr Norma Ryan, an external member of the RCSI Quality Committee (QC). The PRG would like to thank them for their support and timely response to any requests during the process.

The internal review process comprises several elements including:

- a) Establishment of a Self-assessment Committee, which, given the small size of the Unit included all four members of staff.
- b) Generation of a Self-assessment Report (SAR) and supporting documentation.
- c) Site visit by the PRG that includes external experts both national and international, an internal expert from another unit, and an external learner. A Rapporteur is assigned to work with and support the PRG.
- d) Production of a PRG report that is made public.
- e) Development of a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) for implementation of the review report's recommendations (also made public).
- f) Mid-cycle review of progress on the implementation of the QIP.

The RCSI internal quality review process is clearly documented with accompanying templates on the RCSI website (<https://www.rcsi.com/quality-enhancement-office/internal-quality-reviews>). This review of the QEO followed the prescribed steps.

**Commendation:**

- The comprehensive and critically reflective self-assessment report and accompanying documentation to support the review, and the open and engaged participation of RCSI staff, students and other external stakeholders during the visit was commendable.

## **1.4 The Review Process**

The key stages in the internal review process are:

1. Establishment of a Self-assessment Committee.
2. Preparation of a Self-assessment Report (SAR) and supporting documentation.
3. Site visit by a peer review group that includes external experts both national and international.
4. Preparation of a peer review group report that is made public.
5. Development of a QIP for implementation of the review report's recommendations (that is made public).
6. Follow-up to appraise progress against the QIP.

### **1.4.1 Membership of the Peer Review Group**

- Dr Ken Carroll, PRG Chairperson, Academic Registrar and Head of Student Services, Technological University Dublin – Tallaght
- Ms Aisling McKenna, Director, Quality Promotion Office, Dublin City University
- Ms Kersti Viitkar, Vice Rector for Academic Affairs, Tartu Health Care College, Estonia
- Professor Niamh Moran, School of Pharmacy, RCSI
- Ms Eimear Curtin, Student, NUI Galway
- Mr Mark Collins, Rapporteur

## **Recommendation**

- The PRG endorses the QEO expressed view that it will seek to increase the proportion of nationals from other EU member states in Peer Review Groups from 2022 onwards and that it will ensure that the formal nomination and approval procedures are followed consistently for all PRG members.

## **1.5 Terms of Reference for the Peer Review Group**

The terms of reference of the PRG are to:

- Evaluate critically the SAR and the supporting documentation
- Verify how well the aims and objectives of the Unit are being fulfilled, having regard to the available resources, and comment on the appropriateness of the Unit's mission, objectives and strategic plan
- Comment on how well the Unit fits with the strategic plans for the University as a whole
- Evaluate the Unit's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges as outlined in the SAR
- Discuss any perceived strengths and weaknesses not identified in the SAR
- Assess the suitability of the working environment(s)
- Comment on any recommendations proposed by the Unit in its SAR
- Make appropriate recommendations for improvement, with due consideration of resource implications

The PRG visited RCSI from September 27th to 30th and held meetings with a broad range of stakeholders:

- Head of QEO
- QEO staff
- Heads of School and Heads of Professional Support Units
- Meeting with members of RCSI Senior Management Team
- Students' Unions (undergraduate and postgraduate) representatives
- Colleagues from RCSI overseas sites
- Representatives from QA/QI governance and reporting structures in RCSI
- Colleagues from schools/departments that have undergone internal quality review in the past three years

- External stakeholders from regulatory and oversight bodies Quality Qualifications Ireland (QQI) National University of Ireland (NUI) and other relevant bodies
- Meeting with key service users for the provision of survey services
- Key services users for the provision of psychometric services
- Representatives of the postgraduate faculties\* (postgraduate medical training faculty).

*\* Certain postgraduate faculties invited to have representation at this meeting were not in attendance. This relates to an issue highlighted in the QEO SAR regarding the view of those faculties that they are independent of RCSI although co-located within RCSI and offering programmes accredited by RCSI. This is further addressed in the PRG response to a QEO recommendation (#20 – Section 9).*

## **1.6 Overview of the Self-Assessment process**

This was the QEO's second quality review. The PRG was provided with the SAR document and other supporting documentation via the RCSI Moodle system. The SAR overall was descriptive and provided a significant body of information on project and operational planning including the range of service performance and project governance mechanisms in place.

The SAR provided strong evidence of a critical self-assessment process undertaken by QEO. This was clearly used to evaluate honestly its own standing and performance within RCSI and as a learning exercise designed to provide direction for self-improvement.

The lessons learned from the 2015 review and the resulting QIPs, have resulted in an enhanced cohesiveness and sense of purpose linked to an improved service to the wider academic and professional service units in RCSI. Arising from its self-assessment exercise and the lessons derived from it, the QEO included several recommendations for improvement (x7), specific requests for guidance (x6), and proposals to enhance the composition of PRGs (x2). These are addressed directly in the summary recommendations (section 9).

During the site visit, the PRG took the opportunity to explore thoroughly the current operations, strengths and opportunities for QEO through its meetings with Senior Management, staff, students, representatives from overseas campuses, and external agencies. The number of meetings with stakeholders over three days was high. While this was dictated in part by the virtual nature of the meetings managed through Microsoft Teams, the online experience did make for quite an intensive process for PRG members.

Notwithstanding the advantages of virtual meetings (reduced travel, connecting across the globe), many of us look forward to a return to corporeal meetings and the added benefit that comes from being physically in the room (reading the body language, side-bar discussions/clarifications, camaraderie).

### **Recommendation**

- Consider a revision of the schedule of meetings to merge some meetings and allow space for an additional meeting with the unit under review towards the end of the visit; this would allow for some exploration of findings not considered in the initial meeting with the unit staff or clarifications on items raised in other meetings.

## 2 PROGRESS MADE SINCE THE LAST REVIEW

The QEO SAR provided a concise summation of enhancements achieved over the five-year period since the last review and supplementary documentation in the form of a QIP<sup>1</sup> developed around the 2015 quality review recommendations; update reports (2019 and 2021) on progress made in delivering on that plan were also provided.

The 2015 quality review of QEO provided 20 recommendations; to date, 13 or 65% are described as achieved and 7 or 35% are resolved<sup>2</sup>. Amongst the key developments and enhancements made by QEO in response to the 2015 PRG recommendations, examples of which included:

- Inclusion of benchmarking as a component of the self-assessment process.
- Inclusion of an external student/learner representative in PRGs.
- Introduction of a 'Mid-Cycle QIP Implementation Review' during the approximately seven-year interval between successive reviews.
- QEO produced a formal best practice guide in 'closing the feedback loop' with students which was widely disseminated throughout RCSI in 2019; as a Student Engagement and Partnership (StEP) initiative, QEO also developed a Moodle page entitled '*You said, we listened*' to convey to students actions taken in response to survey feedback.
- QC meeting business is now a standing agenda item for Medicine and Health Sciences Board (MHSB) and of Surgery and Postgraduate Faculties Board (SPFB), with minutes and supporting documents submitted for discussion.

Amongst the seven QIP Update 2021 items classified as 'resolved', one, in the view of the PRG, requires further attention:

- PRGR 4.6(1): That the QEO liaise with its counterparts in RCSI Bahrain, PMC and PU-RCSI to scope out the benefits of having an annual cross-Institutional QEO Forum to facilitate strategic planning, sharing of knowledge and best practices and potential research collaborative opportunities – potentially to coincide with the annual International Education Forum.
  - The given outcome states that '*the extent of regular communication between QEO and its corresponding functions on overseas sites obviates the need for an annual meeting*'.
  - The PRG recommends that the concept of a forum for sharing of experience and best practice be re-considered. Its purpose would be to proactively support the ongoing development of best practice within each respective office, and to encourage shared cooperative approaches to policy development and quality enhancement.

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<sup>1</sup> QEO Quality Improvement Plan – available to view at <https://www.rcsi.com/quality-enhancement-office/internal-quality-reviews>

<sup>2</sup> Resolved' status indicates that 'no action has been taken' in response to a recommendation.

Overall, it was quite evident to the PRG that the quality review process has and continues to be used by QEO as a significant learning opportunity intended to add value to its overall approach.

**Recommendation:**

- Consider the creation of a regular forum for RCSI and its international campuses to share experiences, best practice, and to encourage shared cooperative approaches to policy development and quality enhancement.

### 3 INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT OF THE UNIT

#### 3.1 Context

The RCSI was established by Royal Charter in 1784 to set and support professional standards for surgical training and practice in Ireland. RCSI has evolved considerably in the intervening years and is now both a university and a postgraduate training body in surgery and related specialities. This dual role brings many advantages to the institution, not least of which is the ability to offer education and training at all career levels (i.e. undergraduate, postgraduate and professional) in medicine, surgery and related disciplines.

RCSI is an independent, not-for-profit health sciences university with charitable status in the Republic of Ireland. The institution operates a primarily self-funding model, with State funding accounting for less than 20% of total income. The model is based on the education of a substantial cohort of international students alongside Irish/EU students.

RCSI is the largest medical school in Ireland and awards medical degrees in Ireland, Bahrain, and Malaysia. RCSI also provides undergraduate degree programmes in Pharmacy and Physiotherapy in Ireland, undergraduate Nursing degree programmes in Bahrain, and masters (taught and by research) and doctoral programmes variously in Ireland, Bahrain, China, Dubai, and Malaysia.

RCSI became a Recognised College of the NUI in 1978. Following an institutional review commissioned jointly by the Higher Education Authority and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, RCSI independent degree awarding powers were activated by ministerial order in 2010 pursuant to the terms of The Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (Charters Amendment) Act 2003. The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 established RCSI as a Designated Awarding Body. In 2019 RCSI received authorization to use the description 'University' and to style itself accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Amendment Act 2019.

The RCSI Quality Enhancement Office (QEO) was established in October 2010 following the activation of independent degree-awarding powers as part of a suite of measures for the leadership and governance of Quality Assurance and Quality Improvement (QA/QI) within RCSI as described in the RCSI Quality Assurance Framework document (2021). The QEO is the executive function of the RCSI QC and its sub-committees. The QEO role is to support the implementation of the RCSI QA/QI strategy by coordinating all relevant activities and by collecting the data needed to allow the QC to quality assure all aspects of programme delivery. The Director of Quality Enhancement reports to the Chair of the QC, the Chief Executive Officer of RCSI.

In line with best international practice, QEO is mission-oriented and focused on sustaining the quality of operations across RCSI.

#### **Commendation:**

- QEO's strong positive contribution to, and its spirit of partnership in promoting and leading quality review processes as a value-adding exercise is commendable. This is evidenced in the use made by academic units of the quality review processes as an important precursor to external accreditation events.

### **3.2 Unit staff**

The QEO/Unit comprises of:

- x1 Director
- x1 Director of Psychometrics
- x1 Quality Reviews Manager
- x1 QA/QI Analyst

### **3.3 Physical facilities**

Public health restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic prevented an in-person site visit. As described in the SAR, the QEO occupies an appropriate office space within RCSI. Some commensurate additional space may be required should there be an expansion in the complement of QEO staff numbers.

## **4 PLANNING, ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT**

### **4.1 Overview**

The QEO promotes an institutional-wide understanding of quality culture, quality assurance and quality enhancement as required by a third-level institution in Ireland. The QEO in RCSI is a highly regarded and valued entity, and has earned a high level of confidence in its work across RCSI and beyond. The experiences of functional academic units, professional training bodies and student bodies reflect the openness, and supportive nature of the Unit, describing QEO as an 'honest broker' and an 'enabler'.

The QEO has a well-defined structure, managed by a small but dedicated team. The team works as a cohesive group with complementary skills. They are located in a small suite of interconnecting offices. The structure of the office supports good communication between the team and helps to resolve issues promptly.

The team has an excellent sense of their roles and responsibilities within RCSI, and are well regarded by all service users, from student groups to senior management. The work of the QEO relies heavily on key individuals within the team, and their personal skillsets. The QEO has a broad remit but nonetheless appear to manage their workload appropriately and to deliver on their tasks. While this works well, it also represents a vulnerability, as there is a risk associated with service delivery due to the unique, non-overlapping skills of each team member.

The team does not operate from an individual QEO Strategic plan, relying instead on annual 'away days' to plan for the coming year. While this works as an operational planning method, it lacks a long-term element. A bespoke QEO strategic plan, aligned with the grand RCSI strategy, is highly recommended.

PGR Recommendation:

- It is the recommended view of the PRG that QEO have a strategic plan to prioritise its activity and be aligned to the University strategic plan. Annual away days are an effective mechanism to share staff views and to focus on current and short-term objectives and progress. A strategic plan will provide a longer-term horizon and would be consistent with best practice elsewhere.

### **4.2 Management Structure**

The management structure of this small team, under the direction of Prof David Croke, is, of necessity, relatively flat, as each person in the four-person team, is in charge of a well-specified domain. There is a clarity of purpose within the team and each member acknowledges, and values, the skills of all members.

The QEO serves as the umbrella structure for the regulation of quality practices within RCSI. It reports directly to the CEO and the QC (which has a representative from both MHSB and SPFB). In addition, the Director of Quality Enhancement makes a formal annual presentation to Academic Council (AC), to MHSB and to SPFB. This formal positioning of QEO within the complex structure of RCSI ensures that they are recognised as an independent arbiter of the review process.

The Awards & Qualifications Committee (A&QC) is responsible for the validation of education programmes leading to RCSI awards, and the regular monitoring of programme delivery and performance. There is a line of communication between QEO and A&QC, shaped by the fact that Prof Croke is an executive member of the A&QC committee. However, the fragility of this arrangement is exposed by the lack of authority of the QEO to insist on more frequent programmatic reviews. The remit for these reviews currently lies with A&QC, but only four reviews have been completed since 2013.

Consideration should be given to where ownership and responsibility for the completion of annual programme monitoring and periodic programmatic review resides. It is strongly suggested that such reports should be monitored by an appropriate senior body such as the A&QC, QC, and/or Academic Council.

PRG Recommendation:

- It is the view of the PRG that the role of QEO in these processes should be a supporting one, assisting the A&QC in the formulation of processes and oversight of their implementation. Responsibility for the validation of education programmes leading to RCSI awards, and monitoring of programme delivery and performance should remain with A&QC.

### **4.3 Staff planning**

The staff in the QEO have each acquired specialized skills to enable the smooth running of their elements of the work of their Unit. Moreover, they have and are clearly open to learning and extending their services as required by each new challenge they face. To plan effectively for the future, it is important this team is supported and valued. The risk of significant loss of knowledge and capability is great for such a small Unit. It is also important that administrative staff can advance their careers within the Unit or RCSI. The PRG considers this to be a primary operational risk for the QEO, made even more crucial at a time when the long-standing Director of the QEO is due to retire from the unit. More substantial findings in relation to resourcing and future planning of resourcing is contained in Section 6 of this report.

### **4.4 Budgeting**

The QEO receives a fixed annual budget allocation to cover the expenses incurred in running internal QA Reviews. The fixed nature of the budget allocation imposes limitations on the capacity to plan reviews for specific years. Moreover, proposals to align review cycles with accreditation cycles for some of the stakeholders will require more flexibility in terms of costs per year.

An annual Business Planning process exists in RCSI but only Schools within the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences are involved in this process.

Recommendations:

- The QA/QI cycle of reviews must, of necessity be a planned multi-annual process with an appropriate multi-annual budget given the time required for a unit to undertake a review.
- Alignment of internal review processes with external accreditation events is another consideration; it is noted that QEO takes account of this requirements when planning the review cycle with a view to minimising the burden on functional units when conducting reviews and/or avoid unnecessary duplication of effort.

### **4.5 Communication**

The structure of the office supports good communication amongst the team and helps to resolve issues promptly. Communication with stakeholders is generally perceived to be excellent, enhanced by the openness of all staff members to informal conversations and openness to regular meetings with both small and large groups of stakeholders. One repeatedly stated issue regarding communication was, however, a failure to specify

the ownership of elements of the QEO processes, and the resulting responsibility to close a feedback loop. Specifically, this was mentioned by some of the academic staff who received copies of the student survey results and commented that they hoped that someone was acting upon the concerns raised. It is important that there is clarity over who precisely owns this responsibility for each student survey, in order to ensure that the process has value.

In a similar vein, there appeared to be some confusion over the ownership of the QIP tasks following QEO reviews. Some stakeholders felt unable to progress until all elements of the QIP were approved by business owners / SMT. The resultant delay in receiving approval for a QIP document leads to a perceived lack of urgency in resolving identified issues and has had a knock-on effect on staff motivation in the units that have been reviewed. It is therefore important to clarify this issue by communicating with reviewed units to specify whose responsibility it is to close the review circle. To ensure that this element of the review process is prioritized, it is also recommended that mid-cycle progress reports are managed at a senior level by being reported to the QC and SMT.

#### Recommendations:

- In formulating QIPs, a unit might be encouraged to separate quality review recommendations into those that are clearly within the unit remit to resolve and those requiring higher-level approval; this would allow early progress on 'local' enhancement initiatives and provide quick wins. Mid-cycle QIP reports must also feature to enable progress monitoring and adjustment where circumstances may have changed since the review.
- A review of procedures is recommended to support progress reporting on the QIP plans mid-cycle progress. Revisions to procedures may include noting and sign-off of mid-cycle progress on implementation of QIPs by the QC, and subsequently RCSI SMT. The process review should consider the provision of the mid-cycle progress report, as a courtesy, to the internal member of the PRG, where possible.

## 5 FUNCTIONS, ACTIVITIES AND PROCESSES

### 5.1 Development and implementation of QA/QI policies and procedures

#### 5.1.1 The RCSI Quality Framework

The RCSI Quality Framework was initially developed by the QEO in 2019 and is intended as a singular point of reference for quality in RCSI. The Framework has been informed by various international and national standards and criteria-based quality guidelines for higher education. These include:

- Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (2015)
- QQI Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines (2016)
- QQI Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Designated Awarding Bodies (2016)
- QQI Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Research Degree Programmes (2017)
- QQI Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Blended Learning Programmes (2017)
- National University of Ireland (NUI) Policy for Quality Assurance and Enhancement (2017)
- NUI Quality Assurance for Collaborative and Transnational Provision of Academic Programmes Leading to NUI Qualifications (2013)
- NUI Regulations, Procedures and Guidelines for the Approval of New Programmes and Changes to Existing Programmes in the Recognised Colleges (2020)

It is appropriate that academic quality assurance should be grounded in strong academic values. But one must also be cognisant of the necessary administrative expertise and processes required for effective implementation. An effective quality culture requires an approach that is not overly prescriptive or unnecessarily bureaucratic; rather, it must be built upon a high level of trust between the guardians of quality and the units subject to quality oversight.

The definition of quality adopted within the RCSI Quality Framework is informed by the work of Schindler et al. (2015)<sup>3</sup> which conceptualises how quality is understood within higher education as purposeful, transformative, exceptional, and accountable. From meetings with stakeholders, it is evident that the approach to quality assurance promoted by QEO is characterised by systems intended to support the achievement of strategic objectives, enable monitoring and critical evaluation for the purpose of identifying opportunities for improvement.

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<sup>3</sup> Schindler, L., Puls-Elvidge, S., Welzant, H., & Crawford, L. (2015). Definitions of quality in higher education: A synthesis of the literature. *Higher Learning Research Communications*, 5(3), 3-13. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18870/hlrc.v5i3.244>

Throughout the PRG meetings with stakeholders, QEO was referred to as the ‘honest broker’, ‘trusted partner’, and ‘enabler’ of quality approach, reflecting the very high regard given to QEO and its work.

Commendation:

- QEO advocates strongly for quality assurance/quality improvement internally within RCSI, and externally with RCSI branch campuses. Its uncompromising dedication to quality in all that it does is commendable. This contributes strongly to the development of a quality culture within RCSI generally.

## **5.1.2 Governance and Oversight of Quality Assurance at RCSI**

The RCSI QC is responsible for the creation of policy and for the implementation of quality processes and QA/QI activities across academic and administrative areas of all RCSI campuses. The QC is chaired by the RCSI Chief Executive Officer, Prof. Cathal Kelly, and comprises twelve members, including 2 external members. QC reports to both the Medical Health Sciences Board (MHSB) and the Surgery and Postgraduate Faculties Board (SPFB). The QC has two sub-committees reporting to it, the Academic Integrity Working Group (AIWG) and the Institutional Review Working Group (IRWG). The AIWG is a formal structure to allow RCSI to monitor and respond to initiatives launched by the National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN) and by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) in the area of Academic Integrity. The IRWG is responsible for the management of Institutional Reviews conducted by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) under the terms of the Universities Act 1997, the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 and the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Amendment Act 2019.

The PRG consider that the QC play a crucial role in the oversight and support for the work of the QEO, particularly in its oversight of the internal quality review cycle, and contribution to the ongoing enhancement of procedures. The fact that the CEO of RCSI services as QC Chair underpins the commitment to quality, and the policies which underpin that commitment by the institution. The committee is well positioned to identify and take a view on recurring or emergent themes relating to quality which are surfaced as a result of the internal review process. The PRG believe that the identification of these themes, to be discussed by QC, can contribute to a broad enhancement agenda within the institution.

Recommendation:

- The introduction of a synoptic “review of reviews” by QEO to identify transversal themes as focal points for enhancement. Such reviews may elucidate and give visibility to lessons learned, barriers to progress, systematic issues, best practice, what was achieved, what was not achieved, why, and if not, does it constitute a problem. Such summary reports will assist QC and senior management in keeping abreast of developments at ground level and may be disseminated more widely to give visibility to review outcomes.

## **5.2 Quality Assurance Procedures**

### **5.2.1 Internal Quality Assurance Reviews**

The QEO facilitate and support three to four internal quality reviews annually, with all units classified as ‘in scope’ reviewed on a cyclical basis every six to eight years. Procedures for internal quality reviews are well established and are comparable to review processes conducted in other Irish designated awarding body

institutions. Procedures are supported by detailed documentation, guidelines, and standardised templates. This documentation is updated regularly because of feedback from the units reviewed and is aligned to identified sectoral good practice.

The SAR provided evidence of the ongoing development of procedures for quality review. These include the introduction of a number of new components to the self-assessment process, and the development of a model of remotely hosted PRG visits to manage the continuation of the quality review cycle during the campus closures during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In relation to engagement with PRGs as part of the internal review process, the SAR notes revisions to the composition of PRGs, the introduction of technical writing expertise to support the work of the peer reviewers. With regard to PRG members, the QEO made two proposed recommendations within their SAR, which both are supported by PRG.

Given the centrality afforded to quality within the RCSI strategic plan, the PRG would expect that all units should embrace the positive gains that do arise from the quality review process. Within the cycle of reviews, the positive experiences reported by all units arising from their engagement with QEO strongly support this view. Feedback from the PRG meeting with senior management also supported the idea that all units come within the scope of the quality review process.

The QEO has been commended for its constructive support of quality reviews by many units to date; this support and guidance is available to all units and represents an open door. Furthermore, within RCSI, there is some disparity in terms of the size of units. While larger units can more easily accommodate the demands of a quality review, consideration ought to be given to a model that consolidates quality reviews of smaller units to better enable and facilitate their engagement without it being overly burdensome. Such a model should be developed in consultation with the QC and others as appropriate. Small unit size is not a reason for not engaging in a quality review.

Recommendations:

- The QEO increase the proportion of nationals from other EU member states in PRGs from 2022 onwards.
- The QEO ensure that the formal nomination and approval procedure is followed consistently for all PRG members.
- The inclusion of the Finance Office within the internal QA review cycle in a similar manner to all other major professional service units of RCSI. The parameters of this review will be cognisant of the input from the Finance Committee of RCSI to ensure the process captures their identified priorities and concerns.
- Consideration to be given to the feasibility of combining small operationally aligned units for the purposes of quality review, where operationally or strategically appropriate.
- Consideration to be given to thematic reviews (or thematic elements within a review) that can provide more focus on a specific element facilitating a more in-depth consideration of it.

## **5.2.2 Programmatic Review at RCSI**

PRG considers that annual programme monitoring and periodic programmatic review are a cornerstone of many university quality systems. It is evident from stakeholder feedback to the PRG that this is happening in some

areas but not consistently. A common difficulty is the perceived duplication of effort when seeking to satisfy internal QA and external regulatory or accreditation body requirements. The PRG supports the view of the QEO that it is necessary that a formal process of annual programme monitoring is put in place and operationalized as soon as possible. It is noted that QEO has produced a position paper on this issue, '*Programmatic Reviews & Programme Monitoring – Current Status and Possible Future Directions*' proposing steps to be taken. As RCSI faces an institutional review in 2022/23, one can expect that this item will become an area for scrutiny.

Recommendations:

- The development of a Framework to support the introduction of annual programme monitoring and periodic programme review for RCSI programmes.
- In designing a framework to support annual programme monitoring and periodic programmatic review, consideration ought to be given to:
  - The alignment of the internal cycle of programmatic reviews and external review requirements
  - Cognizance of QQI agreed principles in relation to professional body accreditations
  - Where ownership and responsibility for the completion of annual reports resides and some requirement for reports to be recorded to an appropriate senior body such as the A&QC, QC, and/or Academic Council
- It is also suggested that there might be periodic thematic analysis of annual programme reports to expose recurring trends or issues to add further value to enhancement initiatives.

The role of QEO in these processes should be a supporting one, assisting the A&QC in the formulation of processes and oversight of their implementation. Responsibility for the validation of education programmes leading to RCSI awards and monitoring of programme delivery and performance should remain with A&QC.

### **5.3 Coordination and Reporting of Survey Activity within RCSI**

QEO conduct a rich variety of surveys, currently circa 300 per annum. The value of the data generated, and the flexibility afforded to survey users by QEO in the selection and design of the instruments, and the presentation of results is widely appreciated. While the in-house development work is both excellent and commendable, it does carry a risk of being overly reliant on a small number of individuals. This is both a QEO risk and an institutional risk. To reduce this risk, it is recommended that consideration be given to the adoption of commercial reporting tools to support service users (including students) having ready access to self-service reports, data visualisation and/or dashboard tools. Such an approach, coupled with further coordination with other data collection activities (e.g. Insights & Planning Office (IPO), SARA, Better RCSI etc.) will help ensure that RCSI can leverage their data analysis to the fullest extent possible.

The QEO has institutional responsibility for the data collection, analyses and distribution of reports on the student feedback survey on behalf of RCSI. The QEO uses a standardised questionnaire based on a core and options model. Undergraduate surveys are distributed to students via email after the last assessment in the semester and are open for three weeks. Surveys are anonymous and no identifiable data such as email address or IP address is collected.

The effort of QEO to empower the student voice through timely student surveys, feedback and appropriate response actions is commendable. Student feedback to the PRG attest to the strong and positive connection enjoyed by the Students' Unions with QEO. The PRG noted innovations in deploying survey tools, including the 'Student Pulse Poll', to capture feedback on a more frequent basis in response to the rapid changes in student experience due to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-21. The PRG endorse a proposal made by the QEO in their SAR to create a brand image around the End of Semester Survey to afford it a greater profile and influence as an instrument of change. The PRG also suggests the inclusion of a set of question(s) on equality, diversity, and inclusion in the survey.

The QEO SAR included a request for PRG feedback on the potential value of a repository for quality improvement activities in response to student feedback be held within the remit of the QEO. The PRG agree that a templated repository for quality improvement activities in response to student feedback would be a valuable addition not only for centralised reporting but also to certify that Schools are giving action to the student voice. '*You said, we listened*' is a good step in this direction.

This Moodle site might also be a possible location for distribution and publication of dashboard-style reporting on End of Semester surveys, if adapted. While there is clear organisational value for the formalisation of this measure, the PRG cautions that given existing responsibilities of the current QEO, there is a little capacity to co-ordinate the collation of activities and initiatives undertaken in response to student feedback on behalf of the university.

More broadly, a similar synthesis of review recommendations, QIPs and progress made would offer a forum where improvements are celebrated and given public visibility within RCSI and beyond. The PRG notes that in their meetings, members of staff from RCSI Bahrain referred to a software tool used to create an active repository recording and monitoring quality activity, recommendations arising, and improvement planning and implementation. This is an example of best practice that might find acceptance in other campus locations.

#### Recommendations:

- It is recommended that consideration be given to the adoption of commercial reporting tools to support service users (including students) having ready access to self-service reports, data visualisation and/or dashboard tools.
- The PRG endorse the QEO proposal to create a brand image around the End of Semester Survey to afford it a greater profile and influence as an instrument of change. The PRG also suggest the inclusion of a set question(s) on EDI in the survey.
- The PRG agree that a templated repository for quality improvement activities in response to student feedback would be a valuable addition not only for centralised reporting but also to certify that Schools are giving action to the student voice. '*You said, we listened*' is a good step in this direction. This Moodle site might also be a possible location for distribution and publication of dashboard-style reporting on End of Semester surveys, if adapted.
- More broadly, a similar synthesis of review recommendations, QIPs and progress made would offer a forum where improvements are celebrated and given public visibility within RCSI and beyond. Reference was made to a software system for the management of quality reviews and associated QIPs in use in RCSI Bahrain. If as described, consideration ought to be given to extending it to other RCSI locations.
- The work of the QEO in the design and administration of surveys was universally described as excellent. If improvement were to be made, it is recommended that future reporting consider the potential for:
  - a) Additional longitudinal analysis of issues to identify trends and/or recurrent themes.

- b) Improving the visibility and interactivity (e.g. creation of self-service dashboards) of datasets for staff, students and others who may be interested.
  - c) Consideration of how survey data can be linked to other datasets available across RCSI to deliver enriched insights to academic and professional support audiences.
  - d) Providing more transparency on where reports go to, who sees them, and actions emanating from consideration of the reports.
- It is recommended that future surveys include a question on awareness of the outcomes and actions arising from the previous year's survey. This is to encourage a proactive approach to closing the feedback loop and maintaining sight of items raised through the surveys.

#### **5.4 Psychometrics and Quality Assurance of Assessments**

QEO's contribution to the QA of assessments is highly valued, and during the interviews, both internal and external partners repeatedly highlighted the professionalism of QEO staff. Feedback from service users also show a high level of satisfaction - in relation to the level of support provided in assessment and psychometric activities; all survey items received responses that were 100% agree or strongly agree (5 of 5 items).

The SAR described several examples of excellent cooperation with both internal and external partners. In 2018, at the invitation of the Board of the Faculty of Nursing and Midwifery, Prof Arnett and Prof Croke conducted a psychometric and quality assurance assessment of the Overseas Nursing Aptitude Test (ATON). In order to promote the validity, reliability and defensibility of the examination, a number of recommendations were made, on the basis of which the Faculty staff developed a work plan for the implementation of the QEO recommendations.

The QEO provides extensive support to other sections of the RCSI:

- Aggregating and analysing multi-year trainee feedback for the Faculty of Radiology
- Advising on the design and analysis of the Fellowship examinations for the Faculty of Radiology
- Advising on the design and analysis of intake selection data for the Surgical Training Programme
- Advising the Irish Institute of Pharmacy (IloP) on the design and analysis of the National Practice Review process for all patient-facing pharmacists in Ireland
- Providing mentorship for the Global Surgical Training Challenge in conjunction with Surgical Affairs
- Providing psychometric consultancy for the European Board of Ophthalmology
- Advising on the design, administration, and analysis of a new European postgraduate assessment in Medical Microbiology
- Advising on the design, analysis and examiner-feedback for the Membership and Fellowship examinations of the intercollegiate Royal colleges.

QEO has also made a significant contribution to the work of the IQA Committee:

- Prof Croke has served as RCSI representative (2010-2012), Vice-Chair (2012-2014) and Chair (2015-2019) of the Internal Quality Assurance Committee of the Intercollegiate Committee for Basic Surgical Examinations (ICBSE), responsible for the Membership (MRCS) examinations of the four royal colleges of surgeons of the UK and Ireland delivered in Ireland, the UK and in overseas centres.
- Prof Arnett is an RCSI representative (2012-date) on the ICBSE Internal Quality Assurance Committee and provides psychometric consultancy to various intercollegiate committees and subcommittees regarding the quality assurance and development of the various assessments.

Prof Arnett and Prof Croke have contributed to numerous external consultations:

- Profs Arnett and Croke served as external consultants on the redevelopment and optimisation of the Egyptian Fellowship Examinations in Surgery (General Surgery; Trauma and Orthopaedics; Ophthalmology; Otolaryngology), High Commission for Medical Specialties, Egypt (2010-2013).
- Profs Arnett and Croke have both been members of the Examinations Committee of the College of Anaesthesiologists of Ireland (Arnett: 2019-date; Croke: 2011-2018).
- Profs Arnett and Croke have both been involved in the design and delivery of in-house workshops on curriculum development, assessment blueprinting, MCQ item-writing, OSCE design and delivery, examination standard-setting and quality assurance in assessment for RCSI, the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland and the College of Anaesthesiologists of Ireland (2008-date).

Commendations:

- The psychometric services provided by QEO significantly enhance the standing of the QEO in RCSI and beyond. The highly engaged, constructive, and adaptable approaches are taken by the staff involved is very commendable.
- The role and services provided by the QEO contribute strongly to the enhancement of RCSI's reputation, creating tangible impacts on national and international stages. The team provides high-level assessment support and analysis to (1) RCSI's undergraduate and postgraduate academic programmes, (2) postgraduate training bodies associated with RCSI, and (3) inter-collegially to the surgical royal colleges and beyond.

## **5.5 Involvement in Institutional Research**

Responsibility for data collection and analysis to support institutional decision-making, often understood as institutional research activities, are managed across a number of units within RCSI, including the Insights and Planning Office, SARA, as well as the QEO.

Based on the discussions had by the PRG with different stakeholders, the value of data and analysis to support decision-making is crucial for decision-making and planning. The PRG consider that a holistic perspective of evidence of student progress and success, as well as institutional reputation is often required to most effectively evaluate how the university is performing in its core business of supporting student engagement and success, things RCSI does very well but should not be complacent about. In discussions with the PRG, a number of stakeholder groups noted the potential value of customisable end-user reports and dashboards that would facilitate enhanced access to data, and more efficient delivery of analysis to support planning.

In response to a QEO recommendation that RCSI would re-evaluate its overall approach to institutional research and data-gathering to ensure that a sufficiently broad spectrum of data is gathered annually to facilitate the evaluation and benchmarking of the University's performance against national and international comparators, it is the view of the PRG that it is crucial that QEO and the other units tasked with data collection and analysis within the University understand how each support data-driven decision-making regarding student experience. This should be supported by clarity on the mechanisms of data collection and analysis, and what data is collected where. Consideration should be given to establishing fora to support or the ongoing collaboration between these units. These discussions should also consider external surveys e.g. StudentSurvey.ie, and the value that can be extracted from them for national and international benchmarking.

Recommendation:

- That RCSI consider its overall approach to the co-ordination of data-gathering and analysis to support the internal evaluation and external benchmarking of the University's performance against national and international comparators.

## 6 MANAGEMENT OF RESOURCES

The PRG heard only consistent high praise for the openness, professionalism, and quality of guidance and service provided by the QEO. The QEO is a small but highly productive Unit. Under the leadership provided by Prof David Croke as Director of the Quality Enhancement Office, the Office enjoys an excellent reputation both within RCSI, and within the higher education sector more generally.

The PRG found the QEO staff are highly capable individuals, each with a clearly defined but complementary role within the Unit. The Unit is characterised by a high degree of mutual trust, open communication, clear understanding of roles and responsibilities, and an unwavering focus on its service to RCSI. It also necessarily has strong engagement with external regulatory and statutory agencies, contributing to national and international quality initiatives, and supporting effective collaborations with other academic institutions.

The QEO staff are highly engaged and bring a depth of knowledge and expertise to bear on their supporting role for quality enhancement across RCSI. Based on the SAR, the QEO SWOT analysis contained therein, and meetings with staff, the PRG found that since its inception in 2010, the volume of work and responsibility assumed by QEO has grown significantly. Arguably, the QEO has reached the limit of its current capacity. Currently, all members of the QEO team have their expertise and time utilised to the maximum and the scope of QEO to take on further work is limited.

Given the small size of QEO, each member carries a significant share of the burden with little scope for others to carry additional workload should a member be unexpectedly absent for any reasonable period. In such circumstances, the risk exists for critical tasks to go unattended. This constitutes a risk for QEO and institutional risk for RCSI as ever more reliance is placed upon the services of QEO.

A concern, and a recommendation raised within the QEO SAR, relates to the current RCSI policy on administrative staff career advancement. The HR policy in question effectively precludes the promotion of administrative staff and makes the re-grading of administrative posts very difficult. As such, it limits the opportunity for administrative staff to advance their careers within the Unit and possibly RCSI. This situation does not pertain to academic roles within RCSI. A continuation of this situation may have a demotivating impact on staff and/or encourage departures from the QEO with the attendant risk of significant loss of knowledge and capability for the QEO Unit. Consideration might be given to benchmarking of the QEO roles with equivalent roles in other HEIs and the creation of professional career development frameworks for administrative staff.

The QA/QI cycle of reviews is a central element in the work of the QEO. It must, of necessity be a planned multi-annual process given the time required for a unit to undertake a review. Alignment of internal review processes with external accreditation events is another consideration; by aligning these often comparable reviews, it might reduce the burden on functional units when conducting reviews and/or avoid unnecessary duplication of effort. Having access to a rolling budget will also support the continuity of the cycle process.

Day-to-day activities within QEO are discussed and shared through regular staff meetings; medium-term consideration of actions is managed via annual away days to take time to reflect and consider strategic issues. While annual away days are an effective mechanism to share staff views and to focus on current and short to medium-term objectives and progress, a strategic plan will provide a longer-term horizon and would be consistent with best practice elsewhere. It is the recommended view of the PRG that QEO should develop a strategic plan to govern its longer-term activity and direction, and be aligned to the university strategic plan.

Commendation:

- In its various meetings with stakeholders, the PRG heard only high praise for the openness, professionalism, and quality of guidance and service provided by the QEO. The willingness to provide informal and formal access and encouragement is commendable.

## Recommendations:

- The QEO should clearly define the requirements for an additional person and demonstrate how they will complement the current staff roles. One possible area for consideration is the development of a templated repository of quality improvement actions and self-service dashboard-style systems for use by others to capture reporting on End of Semester surveys and other data resources that can support good information-led decision making.
- The QEO capacity for additional work is at or near saturation. Commensurate with the growing obligations of the QEO, the QEO should clearly define the requirements for an additional person and demonstrate how they will complement the current staff roles.
- QEO complete a benchmarking of the QEO roles with equivalent roles in other HEIs. Further, the QEO should advocate for a revision of HR policy that limits promotional opportunity for administrative staff and the creation of professional career development frameworks for administrative staff.
- QEO should develop a strategic plan to govern its activity and be aligned to the university strategic plan. Such a plan will provide a longer-term horizon and would be consistent with best practice elsewhere.

## 7 SERVICE USERS AND FEEDBACK

### 7.1 Student Engagement

The respective officers of the undergraduate and postgraduate Students' Unions in RCSI perform their significant roles alongside their academic responsibilities. Their level of input and collaboration in RCSI life is even more commendable for this. That they enjoy an open relationship with the QEO is a testament to the student-first atmosphere of the QEO, and their dedication to co-create the future of RCSI with the student body. The role of the QEO with regards to continuity for the annually changing SU officers is important and is a piece of work perhaps not always explicitly noticed. It is important that the QEO endeavour to continue this rapport with the Students' Unions and the wider student body on all campuses.

Commendation:

- The QEO enjoys and actively fosters a commendable level of engagement and collaboration with the RCSI Students' Unions; the familiarity of the Students' Union officers with the QEO and its personnel, and their utmost respect for the work of the QEO, is admirable.

Recommendations:

- To enhance training and direction for Students' Union reps on how best to maintain a strong effective student voice, it recommended that the QEO delivers a degree of training to the Students' Unions officers at the outset of their terms on the role of the QEO and how the unions might engage with the Office (e.g., a handbook). This should include information and training on how to access and use reports and data to build data informed position papers.
- To further commit to engagement with the national N-StEP programme to ensure best practice in student representation across all quality assurance and enhancement activities. (N-StEP provides training opportunities that might build continuity, e.g. training for class representatives in earlier years of programme.)

### 7.2 Transnational Provision

RCSI is arguably the most intensively internationalised university in Ireland with a significant presence through international campuses in Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, and, more recently in China. The PRG met with overseas representatives from Bahrain, Dubai, Penang, and Perdana - Kuala Lumpur. Penang Medical College, Bahrain and Dubai operations were subject to QEO-led quality reviews in 2014, 2017 and 2019 respectively. The PRG appreciates and thanks the attending representatives of those colleges at a stakeholder meeting for their valuable comments and insight.

The level of engagement between RCSI-QEO and the overseas colleges is variable ranging from those who see themselves as fully-fledged RCSI campuses dependent upon QEO and RCSI for QA/QI processes (e.g. Dubai and Bahrain) to those having a 'weak relationship' (i.e. more autonomous, e.g. RUMC – Penang Medical College). To an extent, this reflects local conditions regarding oversight of university activities by the local regulatory agencies and specific requirements of the local medical accreditation authorities (medical degree awards must also satisfy the Irish Medical Council requirements).

RCSI Bahrain, RCSI Dubai and Perdana University in Kuala Lumpur all work closely with RCSI and the QEO and have been subject to quality reviews led by the QEO. Each campus adapts RCSI quality processes to comply with their local requirements. Bahrain attends the RCSI-Dublin QC meetings, follow the same quality review process,

take advantage of QEO end of year student surveys, and use them as useful comparators of performance and experience. Similarly, RCSI Dubai considers itself a fully-fledged branch of RCSI, depending entirely on the QEO for its quality processes. The quality reporting arrangements with Dubai are described by QEO as having the best fit with their ideal model. Student cohorts in RCSI-Dubai are part of the same cohort at RCSI. All the relevant RCSI Dubai programmes of education and training are accredited by the NUI and their local regulator.

In contrast, RUMC (RCSI and UCD Malaysia campus) is a private medical university based in Penang, Malaysia and operates largely independent of RCSI and UCD. It offers medical degree training that is fully accredited from NUI and recognised by the Irish Medical Council (IMC) and the Malaysian Medical Council (MMC). The RUMC quality procedures are adapted from the RCSI and UCD processes and the quality of education provided is benchmarked against that in RCSI. They provide a biannual report to RCSI.

While there is generally good close cooperation between QEO and the RCSI overseas quality offices, opportunities for mutual sharing of best practice, cooperative development of policy and procedure and promotion of quality initiatives are less obvious. The QEO might contemplate the formation of an international forum to meet regularly with a view to:

- Encouraging and stimulating a deeper sharing of experiences;
- Supporting a communal approach to quality process development and implementation within an agreed framework; and
- Facilitate mutual sharing of best practice.

Recommendations:

- Greater consistency of approach in the oversight of quality to be sought across branch campuses. A framework to be sought and agreed that ensures consistency of approach in quality process development and implementation and the creation of opportunity for sharing of best practice.
- Consider the creation of a regular forum for RCSI and its international campuses to share experiences, best practice, and to encourage shared cooperative approaches to policy development and quality enhancement.

### **7.3 External Agencies**

The PRG is appreciative of the time given by representatives from QQI, NUI and the sectoral representative body Irish Universities Association (IUA) to meeting with the review panel and for sharing their thoughts and experience in dealing with the QEO. QEO enjoys a strong rapport with QQI and NUI through its formal engagement with these organisations and its support for their work. Similarly, although RCSI is not a member of IUA, an excellent rapport exists between the two on matters of mutual interest. The agencies provided strong evidence of effective and constructive relationships with key external agencies on a variety of fronts.

#### **QEO Relationship with NUI**

RCSI is a Recognised College of the NUI, while retaining its position under the QQI as a Designated Awarding Body (DAB) in its own right. While QQI therefore has ultimate statutory responsibility for the approval of RCSI QA policies and procedures, NUI retains responsibility for ensuring the quality and standard of academic provision to students by RCSI, for as long as RCSI remains a Recognised College and its degree awards are awards of the NUI. The Director of Quality Enhancement is a member of the NUI-RCSI Working Group Executive. Outside of formal meetings, the Director of Quality Enhancement has regular and cordial informal contact with NUI

colleagues. The QEO was described as a highly professional Unit, completely aligned with NUI, and a lead in many respects in the sector.

While the NUI have more direct engagement with Student Academic and Regulatory Affairs (SARA) as it deals with programme validations and external examiners, it was noted that there is a lack of clarity on where responsibility lies in RCSI for programme review. The PRG noted an ongoing procedural issue in relation to the external examination process, and the sharing of reports between NUI and RCSI. External examiners play a critical role in the quality processes of all universities ensuring fairness, transparency, and confirming the standard of student work done are at least comparable nationally and internationally. The reports are also a source of advice and guidance based on the external examiners' years of experience of teaching a similar programme; as such, their timely delivery is very important. Dissatisfaction with the current arrangements on the availability of external examiner reports was acknowledged in separate meetings with both the QEO and NUI representatives. Efforts to resolve the current impasse must be made.

Recommendation:

- RCSI continues to keep the situation vis-à-vis the timely delivery of external examiners' reports by the NUI under review and continues to engage with the NUI and other internal stakeholders to progress the resolution of this current unsatisfactory situation.

### **QEO Relationship with Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)**

The Quality and Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 2012 established Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) as the statutory body responsible for qualifications and quality assurance in higher education and in further education and training in Ireland. With regard to quality assurance in higher education, QQI bears statutory responsibility for the approval of the QA policies and procedures of higher education providers, and for periodic review of the effectiveness of these procedures. QQI enjoy both formal (Annual Quality Reports and CINNTE – the institutional review next due in 2022/23) and informal interactions with the QEO and describe them *'as a go-to institution due to its progressive approach'* and one that is *'always happy to get stuck in, and help out'*. The area of transnational education is one of immediate interest for QQI as they develop an International Education Mark (IEM); RCSI as the most intensively internationalised college will be called upon to provide input into this action. QEO also referred to an intensive engagement with QEO on the development of guiding principles for professional accreditation of programmes, and the RCSI feedback to QQI on their experience under Covid-19 – QQI was able to profit from the RCSI experience. Prof Croke's valuable contribution to the work of the QQI sponsored National Academic Integrity Committee was also noted.

### **Relationship with the Irish Universities Association (IUA)**

With IUA, RCSI, while not a member, the QEO retains a strong informal relationship with the IUA staff and counterparts within IUA-member institutions. The PRG note that the QEO staff consider this relationship to be particularly valuable for sectoral discussion and sharing of practice in relation to quality assurance policies and procedures.

Recommendation:

- In response to a QEO recommendation regarding IUA membership, the PRG suggests that QEO will develop a position paper for consideration by senior management on the perceived benefits for RCSI of being a full member of IUA regarding quality systems and the university more broadly. This should also address a need for RCSI to have proper representation in advocating sectoral initiatives. Although not a normal situation, the level of change demanded in response to the COVID pandemic illustrates the advantage of being connected to a sectoral representative body where shared experience and resources provide for greater responsiveness and agility.

## 7.4 Academic Units and Professional Services

The PGR noted the high praise of the QEO personnel from those members of RCSI faculties and professional services who were consulted as part of this review. Those who had previously undergone internal review also spoke highly of the review experience and of the lessons learned during the process. In the case of the academic faculties, a large majority offer courses which are overseen by external accrediting bodies. The benefit of an internal review prior to a review by the accrediting body was discussed, however, it was also noted that not every course is externally accredited, and that in either case, RCSI has an independent responsibility to maintain oversight on the quality of the degrees they are awarding.

For both academic faculties and professional services, the PRG noted that a review was felt to be a somewhat onerous task which required significant workload for the relevant school or department. This was especially the case when staff, particularly the Head of the relevant unit, had not undergone the review process before, and/or for smaller units with stretched resources. The open-endedness of the reviews was also noted, and it was recommended that consideration might be given to thematic reviews, possibly aligned with a strategic focus for RCSI. In order to help shoulder the workload, the possibility of combining appropriate units together for a review was suggested.

In this and other cases, it was observed that a university-wide overview of the reviews would be beneficial, to see common themes arising and where University-level investment might be worthwhile. There was the general feeling that although faculties and professional services already continually communicate and learn from each other, a review of the reviews and QIPs arising from them might help to formalise this process.

Recommendations:

- It is recommended that the quality review process should include a section on benchmarking with equivalent external peer departments/universities and where appropriate, internal other units. Reviews tend to look at the full breadth of a unit's activity; consideration might also be given to thematic reviews (or thematic elements within a review) that can provide more focus on a specific element facilitating a more in-depth consideration of it.
- Functional units within RCSI vary considerably in size and capacity to shoulder additional work. Consideration ought to be given to the feasibility of combining small operationally aligned units for the purposes of quality review.

## 8 ONGOING QUALITY ENHANCEMENT

The PRG noted the progressive improvements made to QA review processes including introduction of mid-cycle QIP progress review, benchmarking exercises, a focus on EDI, inclusion of learner reps on the PRG, and formalisation of PRG 'homework' in advance of site visits (SAR section 3.3.3.4). Arising from the self-assessment exercise, the QEO makes several recommendations and proposals for further enhancement to which the PRG has provided comment (SAR section 7.3 and section 9 below).

Regarding the quality review site visit, the number of meetings with stakeholders over three days was high. While this was dictated in part by the virtual nature of the meetings managed through Microsoft TEAMS, the online experience did make for quite an intensive process for PRG members. Notwithstanding the advantages of virtual meetings (reduced travel, connecting across the globe), many of us look forward to a return to corporeal meetings and the added benefit that comes from being physically in the room (reading the body language, side-bar discussions/clarifications, camaraderie). It is suggested that some meetings may be merged, and space provided for an additional meeting allowed with the Unit under review towards the end of the visit; this would allow some exploration of findings not considered in the initial meeting with the Unit staff.

A suggestion arising from informal comments from the people attending the online highlighted another downside of online meetings: in the past, people were invited to attend meetings but had not given a huge amount of thought to who the other invitees might be. Then, with face-to-face meetings, the cohort would meet in an ante-room, usually with a member of QEO staff in attendance (and likely from another unit when QEO are the subject of review), and have 15 min - 30 min chat before they met with the PRG. This helped them to focus their thoughts in advance of meeting with the PRG. In online meetings, it is often the case that people have no idea who else is actually attending the meeting with them, and therefore had no idea about the direction of questioning. This leads to a slight hesitancy about who should take the lead when the first questions are posed by the PRG. If future meetings are held online, the invitees should be held in a "breakout room" with a moderator and encouraged to have a chat about the expectations of the PRG group. This might help attendees to be more forthcoming at the outset of the formal meeting.

Overall, there is strong clear evidence that the QEO is working effectively. It has enjoyed excellent leadership under Prof David Croke and is fortunate to have such highly-skilled, dedicated, and progressive staff. The QEO as a Unit serves the whole of RCSI in a very admirable way; this view is strongly supported by the genuine respect shown for QEO at all levels across RCSI, and outside. The high quality of its work contains exemplars we should aspire to.

## 9 SUMMARY OF COMMENDATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Commendations:

1. The leadership provided by Prof David Croke as Director of the Quality Enhancement Office. Under his leadership the Office enjoys an excellent reputation both within RCSI, and within the higher education sector more generally.
2. The QEO is a highly regarded and valued entity within RCSI. The experiences of functional units and student bodies reflect the openness, and supportive nature of the Unit, describing QEO as having 'trusted partner' status, being an 'honest broker' and an 'enabler'. This reflects the high level of confidence in QEO and its work across RCSI and beyond.
3. The comprehensive and critically reflective SAR and accompanying documentation to support the review, and the open and engaged participation of RCSI staff, students and other external stakeholders during the visit was commendable.
4. QEO's strong positive contribution to, and its spirit of partnership in promoting and leading quality review processes as a value-adding exercise is commendable. This is evidenced in the use made by academic units of the quality review processes as an important precursor to external accreditation events.
5. QEO advocates strongly for quality assurance/quality improvement internally within RCSI, and externally with RCSI branch campuses. Its uncompromising dedication to quality in all that it does is commendable. This contributes strongly to the development of a quality culture within RCSI generally.
6. The psychometric services provided by QEO significantly enhance the standing of the QEO in RCSI and beyond. The highly engaged, constructive, and adaptable approaches taken by the staff involved is very commendable.
7. The role and services provided by the QEO contribute strongly to the enhancement of RCSI's reputation, creating tangible impacts on national and international stages. The team provide high-level assessment support and analysis to (1) RCSI's undergraduate and postgraduate academic programmes, (2) postgraduate training bodies associated with RCSI, and (3) inter-collegially to the surgical royal colleges and beyond.
8. In its various meetings with stakeholders, the PRG heard only high praise for the openness, professionalism, and quality of guidance and service provided by the QEO. The willingness to provide informal and formal access and encouragement is commendable.
9. The QEO enjoys and actively fosters a commendable level of engagement and collaboration with the RCSI Students' Unions; the familiarity of the Students' Union Officers with the QEO and its personnel, and their utmost respect for the work of the QEO, is admirable.

### PRG Recommendations

The QEO makes several recommendations in its SAR document that concur with recommendations from the PRG. For clarity and avoidance of repetition, a consolidated set of recommendations is provided here.

## **QEO Functions**

1. The PRG recommends the introduction of a synoptic review of reviews by QEO to identify transversal themes as focal points for enhancement. Such reviews may elucidate and give visibility to lessons learned, barriers to progress, systematic issues, best practice, what was achieved, what was not achieved, why, and if not, does it constitute a problem. Such summary reports will assist senior management in keeping abreast of developments at ground level and may be disseminated more widely to give visibility to review outcomes.

## **Quality review processes**

2. The PRG endorses the QEO expressed view that it will seek to increase the proportion of nationals from other EU member states in Peer Review Groups from 2022 onwards and that it will ensure that the formal nomination and approval procedures are followed consistently for all PRG members.
3. Consider a revision of the schedule of meetings to merge some meetings and allow space for an additional meeting with the unit under review towards the end of the visit; this would allow for some exploration of findings not considered in the initial meeting with the Unit staff or clarifications on items raised in other meetings.
4. It is recommended that the quality review process should include a section on benchmarking with equivalent external peer departments/universities and where appropriate, internal other units. Reviews tend to look at the full breadth of a unit's activity; consideration might also be given to thematic reviews (or thematic elements within a review) that can provide more focus on a specific element facilitating a more in-depth consideration of it.

Functional units within RCSI vary considerably in size and capacity to shoulder additional work. Consideration ought to be given to the feasibility of combining small operationally aligned units for the purposes of quality review.

## **Surveys and psychometric analysis**

5. QEO conduct a rich variety of surveys, currently circa 300 per annum. The value of the data generated, and the flexibility afforded to survey users by QEO in the selection and design of the instruments, and the presentation of results is widely appreciated. While the in-house development work is both excellent and commendable, it does carry a risk of being overly reliant on a small number of individuals. This is both a QEO risk and an institutional risk. To reduce this risk, it is recommended that consideration be given to the adoption of commercial reporting systems to support service users (including students) having ready access to self-service reports, data visualisation and/or dashboard tools. Such an approach, coupled with further coordination with other data collection activities (e.g. IPO, SARA, Better RCSI etc.) will help ensure that RCSI can leverage their data analysis to the fullest extent possible.
6. Data analysis: The work of the QEO in the design and administration of surveys was universally described as excellent. If improvement were to be made, it is recommended that future reporting consider the potential for:
  - a) Additional longitudinal analysis of issues to identify trends and/or recurrent themes.
  - b) Improving the visibility and interactivity (e.g. creation of self-service dashboards) of datasets for staff, students and others who may be interested.

- c) Consideration of how survey data can be linked to other datasets available across RCSI to deliver enriched insights to academic and professional support audiences.
  - d) Providing more transparency on where reports go to, who sees them, and actions emanating from consideration of the reports.
7. It is recommended that future surveys include a question on awareness of the outcomes and actions arising from the previous year's survey. This is to encourage a proactive approach to closing the feedback loop and maintaining sight of items raised through the surveys.

#### **Transnational and Linked provision**

8. The PRG noted the existing disparity of approach to quality oversight between RCSI and its international partners. This ranged from colleges who see themselves as fully-fledged RCSI campuses dependent upon QEO and RCSI for QA/QI processes (e.g. Dubai) to those having a 'weak relationship' (e.g. RUMC).

Greater consistency of approach in the oversight of quality to be sought across branch campuses. A framework to be sought and agreed that ensures consistency of approach in quality process development and implementation and the creation of opportunity for sharing of best practice.

Consider the creation of a regular forum for RCSI and its international campuses to share experiences, best practice, and to encourage shared cooperative approaches to quality enhancement.

#### **Student Voice**

9. To enhance training and direction for Student's Union reps on how best to maintain a strong effective student voice, it recommended that the QEO delivers a degree of training to the Student's Union Officers at the outset of their terms on the role of the QEO and how the Student's Unions might engage with the Office (even a handbook). This should include information and training on how to access and use reports and data to build data-informed position papers.
10. To further commit to engagement with the national N-StEP programme to ensure best practice in student representation across all quality assurance and enhancement activities. (N-StEP provides training opportunities which might build continuity, e.g. training for class representatives in earlier years of programme).

#### **QEO Recommendations and PRG comment**

11. *The QEO recommends that RCSI increase the staff complement of the Office by 1.0 FTE based on internal redeployment within the university.*

The PRG notes the significant expansion of activity of the QEO since its last review in 2015 with no commensurate increase in staff levels. It is the view of the PRG that QEO capacity for additional work is at or near saturation. The QEO should clearly define the requirements for an additional person and demonstrate how they will complement the current staff roles.

One possible area for consideration is the development of a templated repository of quality improvement actions and self-service dashboard-style systems for use by others to capture reporting on End of Semester surveys and other data resources that can support good information-led decision making.

The PRG note that very high levels of responsibility rest with each QEO staff member. Any unexpected departure from the team has a potential to create a significant gap in institutional memory and knowledge that could not be sustained for any duration. In some instances, the gap relates to bespoke capability developed within the QEO that may become irreplaceable and as such constitutes a risk for the Unit and RCSI generally.

The services provided by QEO to guide and direct QA/QI operations, support data collection and analysis, notably psychometric analysis, is of immense value to RCSI and its partners. The emergent awareness of, and mounting demand for such services make its growth unsustainable without additional resources.

12. *The QEO recommends that RCSI reconsider the current policy on administrative staff career advancement as a matter of urgency.*

Endorsed. The HR policy in question effectively precludes the promotion of administrative staff and makes the re-grading of administrative posts very difficult. As such, it limits the opportunity for administrative staff to advance their careers within the Unit and possibly RCSI. This situation does not pertain to academic roles within RCSI. A continuation of this situation may have a demotivating impact on staff and/or encourage departures from the QEO with the attendant risk of significant loss of knowledge and capability for the QEO Unit. Consideration might be given to benchmarking of the QEO roles with equivalent roles in other HEIs and the creation of professional career development frameworks for administrative staff.

13. *The QEO recommends the establishment of a formal mechanism to permit planned expenditure on QA Reviews to be considered by Senior Management and factored into decisions regarding the QEO's annual budget allocation. This could be based upon a rolling three-year schedule of reviews approved by the QC and submitted to the Finance Department and to Senior Management.*

Endorsed. The QA/QI cycle of reviews must, of necessity be a planned multi-annual process given the time required for a unit to undertake a review. Alignment of internal review processes with external accreditation events is another consideration; by aligning these often comparable reviews, it might reduce the burden on functional units when conducting reviews and/or avoid unnecessary duplication of effort. Having access to a rolling budget will also support the continuity of the cycle process.

14. *The QEO recommends that RCSI would reconsider its recent decision not to apply for membership of the Irish Universities Association (IUA) or, at the very least, would enter into a formal collaborative agreement with IUA.*

The PRG suggests that QEO will develop a position paper for consideration by senior management on the perceived benefits for RCSI of being a full member of IUA regarding quality systems and the university more broadly. This should also address a need for RCSI to have proper representation in advocating sectoral initiatives. Although not a normal situation, the level of change demanded in response to the Covid-19 pandemic illustrates the advantage of being connected to a sectoral representative body where shared experience and resources provide for greater responsiveness and agility.

15. *The QEO recommends (a) that the RCSI Finance Department should be subject to Internal QA Review in parallel with all other major professional services units, and (b) that, when future reviews of the Finance Department are being planned, QEO should liaise with the Finance Committee of RCSI Council to ensure that the process captures their concerns also.*

- a) Endorsed. Given the centrality afforded to quality within the RCSI strategic plan, one would expect that all units should embrace the positive gains that do arise from the quality review

process. Within the cycle of reviews, the positive experiences reported by other units arising from their engagement with QEO strongly support this view. Feedback from the PRG meeting with senior management also supported the idea that all units come within the scope of the quality review process.

- b) The QEO has been commended for its constructive support of quality reviews by many units to date; this support and guidance is available to all units and represents an open door.

Furthermore, within RCSI, there is some disparity in terms of the size of units. While larger units can more easily accommodate the demands of a quality review, consideration ought to be given to a model that consolidates quality reviews of smaller units to better enable and facilitate their engagement without it being overly burdensome. Such a model should be developed in consultation with the QC and others as appropriate. Small unit size is not a reason for not engaging in a quality review.

- 16. *The QEO recommends that RCSI continues to keep the situation vis-à-vis the timely delivery of external examiners' reports by the NUI under review and applies all necessary pressure to the NUI to have them improve the current unsatisfactory situation.*

Endorsed: External examiners play a critical role in the quality processes of all universities ensuring fairness, transparency, and confirming the standard of student work done are at least comparable nationally and internationally. The reports are also a source of advice and guidance based on the external examiners years of experience of teaching a similar programme. As such, their timely delivery is very important.

Dissatisfaction with the current arrangements on the availability of external examiner reports was acknowledged in separate meetings with both the QEO and NUI representatives. Efforts to resolve the current impasse must be made.

- 17. *The QEO recommends that RCSI would re-evaluate its overall approach to Institutional Research and data-gathering to ensure that a sufficiently broad spectrum of data is gathered annually to facilitate the evaluation and benchmarking of the University's performance against national and international comparators*

Endorsed: Based on the discussions had by the PRG with different stakeholders, institutional research efforts are more focused on issues of reputation and standing in international rankings. A broader perspective is often required to more fully evaluate how the university is performing in its core business of supporting student engagement and success, things RCSI does very well but should not be complacent about.

It is crucial that QEO and SARA and other units tasked with data collection and analysis understand how each support data-driven decision-making regarding student experience. This should be supported by clarity on the mechanisms of data collection and analysis, and what data is collected where. Consideration should be given to establishing fora to support or the ongoing collaboration between these units. These discussions should also consider external surveys e.g. StudentSurvey.ie, and the value that can be extracted from them for national and international benchmarking.

#### **QEO Request for Guidance and PRG comment**

- 18. Should the QEO complement the Annual QEO Strategic Planning meeting outputs by developing a formal Strategic Plan to parallel the RCSI Strategic Plan?

It is the recommended view of the PRG that QEO have a strategic plan to govern its activity, and be aligned to the university strategic plan. Annual away days are an effective mechanism to share staff views and to focus on current and short-term objectives and progress. A strategic plan will provide a longer-term horizon and would be consistent with best practice elsewhere.

19. *QEO would welcome the views and guidance of the PRG [a] on the issues of ongoing programme monitoring and periodic programmatic review, and [b] on what role (if any) QEO should have in either process.*

Annual programme monitoring and periodic programmatic review are a cornerstone of university quality systems. It is evident from stakeholder feedback to the PRG that this is happening in some areas but not consistently. A common difficulty is the perceived duplication of effort when seeking to satisfy internal QA and external regulatory or accreditation body requirements.

The PRG supports the view of the QEO that it is necessary that a formal process of annual programme monitoring is put in place and operationalized as soon as possible. It is noted that QEO has produced a position paper on this issue, 'Programmatic Reviews and Programme Monitoring – current status and possible future directions' proposing steps to be taken. As RCSI faces an institutional review in 2022/23, it can be expected that this item will become an area for scrutiny.

In designing a framework to support annual programme monitoring and periodic programmatic review, consideration ought to be given to:

- a) The alignment of the internal cycle of programmatic reviews and external review requirements.
- b) Cognizance of QQI agreed principles in relation to professional body accreditations.
- c) Where ownership and responsibility for the completion of annual reports resides and some requirement for reports to be recorded to an appropriate senior body such as the A&QC, QC, and/or Academic Council.
- d) It is suggested that there be periodic thematic analysis of annual programme reports to expose recurring trends or issues to add further value to enhancement initiatives.

The role of QEO in these processes should be a supporting one, assisting the A&QC in the formulation of processes and oversight of their implementation. Responsibility for the validation of education programmes leading to RCSI awards and monitoring of programme delivery and performance should remain with A&QC.

20. *The QEO would appreciate the views and guidance of the PRG on these proposals for modification of the current Cycle of Internal QA Reviews of the Postgraduate/Professional Faculties of RCSI.*

It is the strong view of the PRG that all units must be subject to quality review both as a necessary activity and as an opportunity for self-learning and improvement. It was also the view of senior management in their meeting with the PRG. The reported lived experience of other units that have engaged in the reviews has been very positive. As the award-making body, RCSI has a duty of care to ensure that quality standards are to the fore and are demonstrably maintained regarding the delivery of all its programmes, including those of the postgraduate/professional faculties, just as they do for programme delivery in RCSI overseas campuses.

As an effort to accommodate and encourage those postgraduate/professional faculties that have not yet engaged with the cycle of reviews, the QEO proposed modifications to the Cycle of Reviews that constitute a pragmatic approach.

The small size of some postgraduate/professional faculties is suggested as a barrier to their engagement in the internal quality review cycle. Elsewhere, the PRG has recommended consideration of some alignment of internal review processes with external accreditation events to reduce the burden on smaller functional units and to or avoid unnecessary duplication of effort. In this way, an agreed more bespoke and thematic approach may provide a suitable compromise between balancing the internal requirements of RCSI, the accreditation needs of external agencies, and a balanced workload more commensurate with the capacity of a smaller unit.

21. *The QEO would appreciate the views and guidance of the PRG on the current process and proposed revised process for the development, approval and monitoring of QIPs arising from Internal QA.*

Quality review without enhancement becomes a pointless effort. The time taken to approve QIPs is longer than it ought to be, and some stricter timeline is needed if the momentum from quality review to QIP is to be sustained. Long delays can potentially result in QIPs becoming outdated even before they commence with implementation. The proactive approach of the QEO to address this issue is commendable and the PRG are supportive of the proposed pathway.

In formulating QIPs, a unit might be encouraged to separate quality review recommendations into those that are clearly within the unit remit to resolve and those requiring higher-level approval; this would allow early progress on 'local' enhancement initiatives and provide quick wins. Mid-cycle QIP reports must also feature to enable progress monitoring and adjustment where circumstances may have changed since the review.

A review of procedures is recommended to support progress reporting on the QIP plans mid-cycle progress. Revisions to procedures may include noting and sign-off of mid-cycle progress on implementation of QIPs by QC, and subsequently RCSI SMT. The process review should consider the provision of the mid-cycle progress report, as a courtesy, to the internal member of the PRG, where possible.

22. *While the RCSI Student Pulse survey has a well-defined identity (a distinctive name and logo), the End of Semester surveys are lacking consistent terminology as different names are used to refer to them. Should the QEO develop a consistent name and logo for this important feedback mechanism?*

The effort of QEO to empower the student voice through timely student surveys, feedback and appropriate response actions is commendable. Student feedback to the PRG attests to the strong and positive connection enjoyed by the Students' Unions with QEO. The PRG endorse the QEO proposal to create a brand image around the End of Semester Survey to afford it a greater profile and influence as an instrument of change. The PRG also suggest the inclusion of a set question(s) on EDI in the survey.

23. *Should being a repository for quality improvement activities in response to student feedback be within the remit of the QEO? Should the QEO create a mechanism for Schools to report their 'closing the feedback loop' activities and actions to students, and create a repository of such actions that might be used for centralised reporting to quality enhancement and regulatory authorities?*

The PRG agree that a templated repository for quality improvement activities in response to student feedback would be a valuable addition not only for centralised reporting but also to certify that Schools are giving action to the student voice. 'You said, we listened' is a good step in this direction. This Moodle site might also be a possible location for distribution and publication of dashboard-style reporting on End of Semester surveys, if adapted.

More broadly, a similar synthesis of review recommendations, QIPs and progress made would offer a forum where improvements are celebrated and given public visibility within RCSI and beyond. Reference was made to a software system for management of quality reviews and associated QIPs in use in RCSI Bahrain. If as described, consideration ought to be given to extending it to other RCSI locations.

24. It is recommended that consideration be given to the adoption of commercial reporting tools to support service users (including students) having ready access to self-service reports, data visualisation and/or dashboard tools.

#### **QEO Proposals and PRG View**

25. *The QEO will increase the proportion of nationals from other EU member states in Peer Review Groups from 2022 onwards*

Endorsed.

26. *The QEO will ensure that the formal nomination and approval procedure is followed consistently for all PRG members*

Endorsed.

## 10 APPENDIX 1: SITE VISIT SCHEDULE

### PRG Pre-site Visit Meeting

Date	Time	Meeting Title	In Attendance
Fri 24th Sept	10.00 – 10.45	<b>Welcome and Introduction for PRG; Housekeeping and guidance for virtual review</b>	Dr Norma Ryan Ms. Pat Kinane
	10.45 – 11.00	<i>Break</i>	
	11.00 – 12.30	<b>Private Planning Meeting for PRG</b>	PRG Members

### Scheduled Meetings with Stakeholders

Date	Time	Meeting Title	In Attendance
Mon 27th Sept	09.00 – 09.30	<b>PRG: Review of preparatory work</b>	PRG Members
	09.40 - 10.40	<b>Meeting with Head of QEO</b>	Prof. David Croke
		<i>Meeting Theme: Strategic approach, challenges, and future direction</i>	
	10.40 - 11.05	<i>Break</i>	
	11.05-12.05	<b>Meeting with QEO Staff</b>	Prof. Richard Arnett
		<i>Meeting Theme: Organisation and capacity / Links with other quality committees</i>	Ms Anne Weadick Ms Joanna Zawadzka
	12.15 – 13.05	<b>Meeting with Heads of School and Heads of Professional Support Units</b>	
		<i>Meeting Theme: QEO supports, and resources provided, success enablers/inhibitors, challenges and future outlook for QA/QI in RCSI.</i>	
	13.10 – 13.45	<i>Break</i>	
	13.45 – 14.30	<b>Meeting with members of RCSI Senior Management Team (SMT)</b>	
		<i>Meeting Theme: Role of the QEO and its strategic significance to the University and Surgical Royal College.</i>	
	14.30 – 14.45	<i>Break</i>	
	14.45 – 15.30	<b>Meeting with Students' Union representatives</b>	
		<i>Meeting Theme: Role of the QEO in supporting students and students' unions.</i>	
15.30 – 16.00	<b>PRG Review of afternoon's meetings; draft commendations &amp; recommendations; planning for next</b>	PRG Members	

Date	Time	Meeting Title	In Attendance
Tues 28 <sup>th</sup> Sept	09.00 – 09.30	<b>Review of preparatory work</b>	PRG Members
	09.30 – 10.15	<b>Meeting with colleagues from overseas sites</b>	
		<i>Meeting Theme: Collaboration, governance and management of quality assurance of overseas campuses</i>	
	10.15 – 10.30	<i>Break</i>	
	10.30 – 11.15	<b>Meeting with representatives from QA/QI governance and reporting structures in RCSI</b>	
		<i>Meeting Theme: Effectiveness of the QEO in working with the University to build the culture of quality in RCSI.</i>	
	11.15 – 11.45	<i>Break</i>	
	11.45 – 12.30	<b>Meeting with colleagues from schools/departments that have undergone internal quality review in the past 3 years.</b>	
		<i>Meeting Theme: Experiences and perceptions of the Internal Quality Review process and its impact and effectiveness.</i>	
	12.30 – 13.30	<i>Break for PRG</i>	
	13.30 – 14.15	<b>Meeting with external stakeholders</b>	
		<i>Meeting Theme: The role of the QEO in representing RCSI in terms of its statutory relationship with QQI, NUI and other relevant bodies.</i>	
	14.15 – 14.45	<b>PRG Review of afternoon's meetings; draft commendations &amp; recommendations; planning for next day.</b>	PRG Members

Date	Time	Meeting Title	In Attendance
Wed 29 <sup>th</sup> Sept	09.00 – 09.30	<b>PRG: Review of preparatory work</b>	
	09.30 – 10.15	<b>Meeting with key service users for the provision of survey services</b>	
		<i>Meeting Theme: Effectiveness of survey activity and future direction</i>	
	10.15 – 10.30	<i>Break</i>	
	10.30 – 11.15	<b>Meeting with key services users for the provision on psychometric services</b>	
		<i>Meeting Theme: Effectiveness of psychometric and assessment quality assurance processes.</i>	
	11.15 – 11.45	<i>Break</i>	
	11.45 – 12.30	<b>Meeting with representatives of the Postgraduate Faculties.*</b>	
		<i>Meeting Theme: Role of the QEO in working with postgraduate training faculties.</i>	
	12.30 – 13.30	<b>PRG meeting to draft commendations and recommendations.</b>	PRG Members

\* Certain Postgraduate Faculties invited to have representation at this meeting were not in attendance. This relates to an issue highlighted in the QEO SAR regarding the view of those faculties that they are independent of RCSI although co-located within RCSI and offering programmes accredited by RCSI. This is further addressed in the PRG response to a QEO recommendation (#20 – Section 9).

Date	Time	Meeting Title	In Attendance
Thurs 30 <sup>th</sup> Sept	09.00 – 11.00	<b>PRG meeting to finalise commendations and recommendations.</b>	PRG Members
	11.00 – 11.30	<i>Break</i>	
	11.30 – 12.00	<b>PRG meeting with Dr Norma Ryan for clarification and discussion of main findings</b>	Dr Norma Ryan
	12.00 – 12.30	<b>Meeting with Head of QEO to present main findings</b>	Prof. David Croke Dr Norma Ryan
	12.40 – 13.10	<b>Closing presentation to all Unit staff</b>	Prof. David Croke Prof. Richard Arnett Ms Anne Weadick Ms Joanna Zawadzka Dr Norma Ryan
	13:15	<b>Review Ends</b>	



**RCSI**

Leading the world  
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# Internal Quality Review

## Quality Improvement Plan (QIP)

May 2022, Quality  
Enhancement Office

# Quality Improvement Plan

## [Quality Enhancement Office]

### DOCUMENT CONTROL SHEET

Name of Unit	Quality Enhancement Office					
Project Title	Quality Improvement Plan					
Document Title						
This Document Comprises	DCS	TOC	Text	List of Tables	List of Figures	No. of Appendices

Rev	Status	Author(s)	Reviewed By	Approved By	Office of Origin	Issue Date
1.1	Draft	QEO Team	QEO Team	Aisling Reast	QEO	16/03/22
1.2	Draft	QEO Team	Prof Kelly & Prof McGee	Aisling Reast	QEO	03/08/22

Quality Enhancement Office



Quality Improvement Plan May 2022

Recommendation in order of priority	SAR Reference PRGR reference	Response / Action Planned	Responsibility for Action	Resources Implications	Deadline / timeframe	Measurement / Benchmarking	Outcome / Status
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PRG Recommendations							
(Student Voice)To further commit to engagement with the national N-StEP programme to ensure best practice in student representation across all quality assurance and enhancement activities	10.	The unit commits to annual development of a departmental project(s) to secure student input in quality enhancement.	QEO Team	StEP funding will be sought to resource these projects.	Annual	This action will be measured against achievement of annual StEP funding and presentation of the output of the annual project	
		The unit will continue to engage with the SU/PGSU regarding the development and dissemination of surveys.	QAA	No significant financial resources identified at this time.	Ongoing	The action will be evidenced by records of communications from the QEO to relevant Students' Unions about any major survey activities (Student Pulse, StudentSurvey.ie) which will include the provision of an indicative schedule each academic year.	
		The Unit will, in collaboration with RCSI StEP, engage with NStEP to explore mechanisms to increase our engagement with students (with training in governance/quality) for participation in PRGs and to explore	Head of Unit/ QRM/RCSI StEP	Will be progressed following CINNTE review.	2023-24	Student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement activities will be reported annually to the Quality Committee	

Quality Enhancement Office



Quality Improvement Plan May 2022

Recommendation in order of priority	SAR Reference PRGR reference	Response / Action Planned	Responsibility for Action	Resources Implications	Deadline / timeframe	Measurement / Benchmarking	Outcome / Status
		training of RCSI students to participate in quality enhancement activities.					
(Student Voice) It recommended that the QEO delivers a degree of training to the Student's Union Officers at the outset of their terms on the role of the QEO and how the Student's Unions might engage with the Office (even a handbook)	9.	The unit will develop training for Student's Union Officers.  The unit will develop a handbook (informed by the new training and its evaluation)– QEO will seek StEP funding for this project.	Head of Unit/ QRM/ QAA	Resource intensive and so will be progressed following CINNTE review.	2024	This action will be measured by delivery of training and handbooks within the timelines outlined.	
(Surveys) It is recommended that consideration be given to the adoption of commercial reporting systems to support service users (including students) having ready access to self-service reports, data visualisation and/or dashboard tools.  It is recommended that consideration be given to the adoption of commercial reporting tools to support service users (including students) having ready	5  24	The unit will undertake a scoping project to explore user requirements and potential systems to facilitate further enhancement.	QAA/DoP	Resource intensive and so will be progressed following CINNTE review.	2024	This action will be measured by delivery of a scoping project report within the timelines outlined.	

Quality Enhancement Office



Quality Improvement Plan May 2022

Recommendation in order of priority	SAR Reference PRGR reference	Response / Action Planned	Responsibility for Action	Resources Implications	Deadline / timeframe	Measurement / Benchmarking	Outcome / Status
<p>access to self-service reports, data visualisation and/or dashboard tools.</p> <p>(Reporting) Additional longitudinal analysis of issues to identify trends and/or recurrent themes.</p> <p>Improving the visibility and interactivity (e.g. creation of self-service dashboards) of datasets for staff, students and others who may be interested.</p> <p>Consideration of how survey data can be linked to other datasets available across RCSI to deliver enriched insights to academic and professional support audiences.</p> <p>The QEO recommends that RCSI would re-evaluate its overall approach to Institutional Research and data-gathering to ensure that a sufficiently broad spectrum of data is gathered annually</p>	<p>6a.</p> <p>6b.</p> <p>6c.</p> <p>17</p>	<p>HTML presentation of data will be launched to improve interactivity.</p> <p>QEO have joined an institutional data group which will explore data linkage for the Athena Swan Award renewal project.</p>	<p>QAA/DoP</p> <p>QAA/DoP</p>	<p>None</p> <p>None</p>		<p>This action will be measured by - launch of the new HTML presentation</p> <p>Potential synergies identified in light of the increased awareness of other data streams and their owners will be reported to the IRWG and Quality Committee as appropriate.</p>	

Quality Enhancement Office



Quality Improvement Plan May 2022

Recommendation in order of priority	SAR Reference PRGR reference	Response / Action Planned	Responsibility for Action	Resources Implications	Deadline / timeframe	Measurement / Benchmarking	Outcome / Status
to facilitate the evaluation and benchmarking of the University's performance against national and international comparators.							
(QEO Functions) The PRG recommends the introduction of a synoptic review of reviews by QEO to identify transversal themes as focal points for enhancement. Such reviews may elucidate and give visibility to lessons learned, barriers to progress, systematic issues, best practice, what was achieved, what was not achieved, why, and if not, does it constitute a problem	1.	The unit will undertake a synoptic review as part of the preparation for the CINNTE institutional review.	QEO Team	None	2022	This action will be measured by inclusion of the output of the synoptic review within the CINNTE ISER.	
(Reporting) Providing more transparency on where reports go to, who sees them, and actions emanating from consideration of the reports.  (Surveys) It is recommended that future surveys include a question on awareness of the outcomes and actions	6d.  7	The QEO will engage with QPIC and stakeholders across the University to review, refine, clarify and enhance the reporting process.	Head of Unit/ QAA/DoP and QPIC	Will require finding additional capacity within existing resources.	2023	Completion of QI project with QPIC.	

Quality Enhancement Office



Quality Improvement Plan May 2022

Recommendation in order of priority	SAR Reference PRGR reference	Response / Action Planned	Responsibility for Action	Resources Implications	Deadline / timeframe	Measurement / Benchmarking	Outcome / Status
<p>arising from the previous year's survey.</p> <p>The PRG endorse the QEO proposal to create a brand image around the End of Semester Survey to afford it a greater profile and influence as an instrument of change. The PRG also suggest the inclusion of a set question(s) on EDI in the survey</p>	22	<p>End of Semester Surveys will be incorporated within the Student Pulse Survey branding.</p> <p>An annual EDI survey is undertaken by QEO</p>					
<p>(Transnational provision) Consider the creation of a regular forum for RCSI and its international campuses to share experiences, best practice, and to encourage shared cooperative approaches to quality enhancement.</p> <p>Greater consistency of approach in the oversight of quality to be sought across branch campuses. A</p>	8.	<p>The unit will, explore inclusion of a quality enhancement forum within the International Education Forum with the DPVAC Office and International Quality Colleagues.</p> <p>Opportunities for in person meetings with Quality colleagues from branch campuses will be explored to discuss potential synergies.</p>	Head of Unit/QRM	None	2023	Convening of a Quality Enhancement Forum as part of the IEF.	

Quality Enhancement Office



Quality Improvement Plan May 2022

Recommendation in order of priority	SAR Reference PRGR reference	Response / Action Planned	Responsibility for Action	Resources Implications	Deadline / timeframe	Measurement / Benchmarking	Outcome / Status
framework to be sought and agreed that ensures consistency of approach in quality process development and implementation and the creation of opportunity for sharing of best practice		The proposed quality enhancement forum will have a stated goal to explore opportunities for consistency and synergy with international quality offices.					
(QR Processes) The PRG endorses the QEO expressed view that it will seek to increase the proportion of nationals from other EU member states in Peer Review Groups from 2022 onwards and that it will ensure that the formal nomination and approval procedures are followed consistently for all PRG members.  The QEO will ensure that the formal nomination and approval procedure is followed consistently for all PRG members	2.  26	The Unit will update IQR documentation highlight the benefits from seeking PRG members from other EU Member states. The QEO will also explore opportunities to build its quality assurance external expertise through RCSI's membership in EUA.  Approval of PRG members will be included as a standing item at Quality Committee meetings.	Head of Unit/QRM	None	2022-23  2022	The number of PRG members from EU member states will be measured in the RCSI AQR.  Approval of PRG members will be minuted at QC meetings.	
(QR Processes) Consider a revision of the schedule of meetings to merge some meetings and allow space for	3.	The unit will adjust site visit schedules to allow space for an additional meeting with the unit	QRM	None	2022	This will be demonstrated through an annual review of site visit schedules.	

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an additional meeting with the unit under review towards the end of the visit; this would allow for some exploration of findings not considered in the initial meeting with the Unit staff or clarifications on items raised in other meetings		under review towards the end of the visit. Panel feedback will be continually sought as part of our ongoing quality improvement processes.					
(QR Processes) It is recommended that the quality review process should include a section on benchmarking with equivalent external peer departments/ universities and where appropriate, internal other units.	4.	Benchmarking is part of the IQR process. No action required	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	
(QR Processes) Functional units within RCSI vary considerably in size and capacity to shoulder additional work. Consideration ought to be given to the feasibility of combining small operationally aligned units for the purposes of quality review.	4.	The QEO will develop a bespoke IQR process for smaller units which recognises their operational capacities and their unique functions and governance.	Head of Unit/QRM	Resource intensive and so will be progressed following CINNTE review.	2023-24	Roll out of a bespoke IQR process for smaller units.	

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The PRG supports the view of the QEO that it is necessary that a formal programme monitoring is put in place and operationalized as soon as possible.	19.	The unit will develop a discussion document and will commence a programme of engagement with University stakeholders to explore implementation of this recommendation.	Head of Unit/A&QC/SARA/SMT	Resourcing will depend on model for implementation.	2022-23	Operationalisation of an annual programme monitoring process.	
The QEO recommends that RCSI increase the staff complement of the Office by 1.0 FTE based on internal redeployment within the university	11.	QEO will draft a business case for consideration by SMT	QEO Team	1 FTE	2022	Commencement of a new FTE	
The PRG agree that a templated repository for quality improvement activities in response to student feedback would be a valuable addition not only for centralised reporting but also to certify that Schools are giving action to the student voice.  One possible area for consideration is the development of a templated repository of quality improvement actions and	23.  11.	The QEO will engage with QPIC and stakeholders across the University to review, refine, clarify and enhance the reporting process.  The unit will undertake a scoping project to explore user	Head of Unit/ QAA/DoP and QPIC  QAA/DoP	Resource intensive and so will be progressed following CINNTE review.  The scoping project will identify technical and personnel	2024  2024	Development of a repository of resources/training to support closing feedback loops.  This action will be measured by delivery of a scoping project report	

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self-service dashboard-style systems for use by others to capture reporting on End of Semester surveys and other data resources that can support good information-led decision making.		requirements and potential systems to facilitate further enhancement.		resource implications.		within the timelines outlined.	
The QEO recommends that RCSI continues to keep the situation vis-à-vis the timely delivery of external examiners' reports by the NUI under review and applies all necessary pressure to the NUI to have them improve the current unsatisfactory situation	16.	The QEO will continue to engage with the NUI Working Group to improve processes and turnaround timelines.	Head of Unit	None	2022	Measurement of this action is undertaken by Registry.	
The QEO recommends that RCSI reconsider the current policy on administrative staff career advancement as a matter of urgency.	12.	This recommendation will be brought to the attention of the RCSI SMT.	SMT	TBD	2022	Outside of the remit of the QEO.	
The QEO recommends the establishment of a formal mechanism to permit planned expenditure on QA Reviews to be considered by Senior Management and factored into decisions regarding the QEO's annual budget allocation. This could	13.	QEO will engage with the RCSI finance department to identify a mechanism for implementation of this recommendation.	Head of Unit/finance	None	2022	Revision of the QEO budgeting process as agreed with finance dept.	

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be based upon a rolling three-year schedule of reviews approved by the QC and submitted to the Finance Department and to Senior Management.							
It is the recommended view of the PRG that QEO have a strategic plan to govern its activity, and be aligned to the university strategic plan.	18.	A strategic plan will be developed following the CINNTE Institutional review which will allow the output of that process to inform the strategy.  The QEO Team will contribute to the development of the university strategic plan	QEO Team/SMT	None	2023-24  2022-23	Publication of QEO strategic plan.  Submission to university strategic plan.	
In formulating QIPs, a unit might be encouraged to separate quality review recommendations into those that are clearly within the unit remit to resolve and those requiring higher-level approval; this would allow early progress on 'local' enhancement initiatives and provide quick wins. Mid-cycle QIP reports must also feature to enable progress	21.	The unit will update templates and Guidelines will be updated to reflect these recommendations	QRM	None	2022	Finalisation of updated templates and guidelines.	

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monitoring and adjustment where circumstances may have changed since the review.							
A review of procedures is recommended to support progress reporting on the QIP plans mid-cycle progress Revisions to procedures may include noting and sign-off of mid-cycle progress on implementation of QIPs by QC, and subsequently RCSI SMT. The process review should consider the provision of the mid-cycle progress report, as a courtesy, to the internal member of the PRG, where possible.	21.	The unit will undertake a review of the QIP mid-cycle review process and recommendations for enhancement will be made. The new mid-cycle review process will be implemented.	Head of unit/QRM	Resource intensive and so will be progressed following CINNTE review.	2024	Implementation of a new mid-cycle review process.	
The QEO recommends (a) that the RCSI Finance Department should be subject to Internal QA Review in parallel with all other major professional services units, and (b) that, when future reviews of the Finance Department are being planned, QEO should liaise with the Finance	15.	The RCSI finance department will be included within the schedule of reviews. QEO will engage with the Finance Committee in preparation for the IQR and will consider process modifications which will account for	Head of unit/QRM	None	2023	Completion of the finance dept IQR	

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Committee of RCSI Council to ensure that the process captures their concerns also.		parallel processes such as audit.					
The PRG suggests that QEO will develop a position paper for consideration by senior management on the perceived benefits for RCSI of being a full member of IUA regarding quality systems and the university more broadly.	14.	Following engagement with the IUA it was determined that membership not be progressed at this time. EUA membership has been secured.	QEO Team/SMT	None	2021	None required	
It is the strong view of the PRG that all units must be subject to quality review both as a necessary activity and as an opportunity for self-learning and improvement.	20.	A review of the IQR schedule will be undertaken to identify all units which should be subject to quality reviews. This will also consider the development of bespoke processes for smaller units and thematic reviews. Approval for the revised schedule will be sought from the Quality Committee.	Head of unit/QRM	None	2022	Publication of revised IQR schedule following Quality Committee approval.	