



2019 European Quality Assurance Forum

Supporting societal engagement of higher education

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Call for contributions: Paper submission form

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Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.

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Sinéad O'Neill is the Academic Quality Manager at TU Dublin (Tallaght Campus). She has held various training, supervisory, professional services and management positions in the civil service and public sector. She has been with Tallaght Campus since 2000 where she has had the opportunity to engage with full-time and part-time students, academic and professional services staff, external stake-holders on varied college-wide cross-functional activities and projects in the areas of Industry liaison, part-time programme provision, staff training, information systems, change management, policy & procedure development and latterly, academic quality management, cyclical review, assurance and enhancement and programme development and validation.

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Name: Brian Bowe

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Prof Brian Bowe is the Head of Academic Affairs & Assistant Registrar at TU Dublin (City Campus), leads the CREATE STEM education research group and is the European Aviation Safety Authority (EASA) quality manager for TU Dublin. He has facilitated over 300 education development workshops



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Proposal

Title: Development of a new Student Centred Quality Enhancement Framework for Ireland's first Technological University

Abstract (150 words max):

On 1 January 2019, Ireland's first Technological University (TU Dublin) was established when Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB) and Institute of Technology Tallaght (ITT) merged. Three independent quality assurance frameworks continue to be implemented across the three constituencies of the former independent institutes. However, to meet its statutory obligations and to further enhance excellence in the education provision and experience, TU Dublin is developing a new quality framework that builds upon the existing robust quality structures of the former individual institutes. An Academic Quality Project Team was established to develop the new quality framework and started by defining the principles and philosophical perspectives that will underpin the new quality framework. The quality system will support academic innovation and incorporate best practices to ensure programmes and practices align to the objectives of an engaged societal technological university and the vision and mission of TU Dublin.

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? If yes, give details.

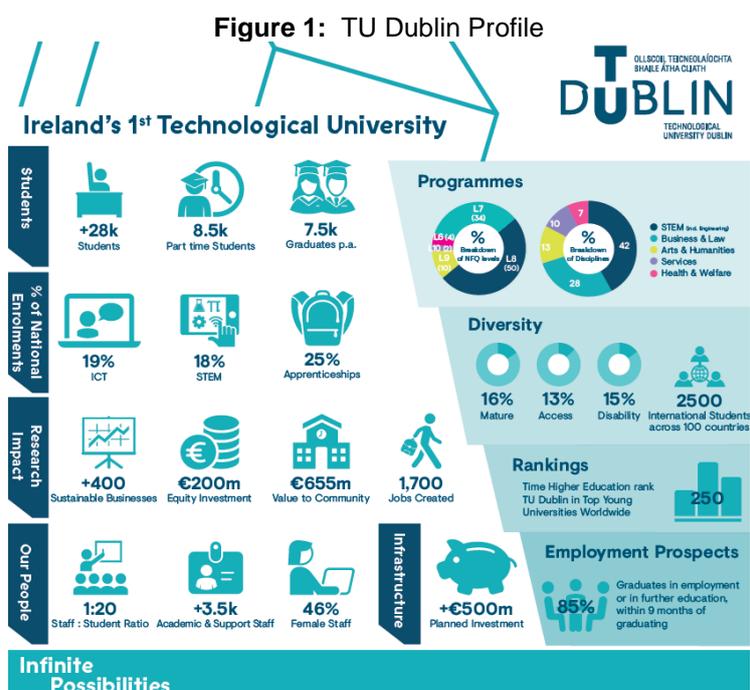
Text of paper (3000 words max):

On 1 January 2019, Ireland's first Technological University (TU Dublin) was established when Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB) and Institute of Technology Tallaght (ITT) merged.

The mission and functions of TU Dublin, as defined by statutory provision (Technological University Act, 2018) focus on education provision that is vocationally and professionally oriented, addresses the social and economic needs of the Dublin region and Ireland, and engages in industry-focused research and entrepreneurship. TU Dublin is also expected to facilitate access and progression particularly through relationships with the further education and training sector. The focus on the provision of undergraduate programmes with a professional, practice-focus, with an emphasis on workplace learning, distinguishes TU Dublin from the established universities in Ireland. TU Dublin will focus on preparing graduates for "complex professional roles in a changing technological world" and will "advance knowledge through research and scholarship and disseminate this knowledge to meet the needs of society and enterprise." The combined student profile of the three institutes covers the complete higher education and training spectrum, from Irish NFQ Level 6 (EQF Level 5) (including Apprenticeship Advanced Certificate courses and Higher Certificate Awards) to Irish NFQ Level 10 (EQF 8) (PhD). TU Dublin now has over 28,000 students registered in both full-time (68%) and part-time (32%), with undergraduate programmes accounting for 78% (ca. 22,000) of the total student population. The University offers approximately 800 academic programmes across over 30 schools. A synthesis of TU Dublin is illustrated in Figure 1.

TU Dublin is capitalising on the extensive experience developed by DIT, ITB and ITT which includes a strong track record in industry and community engagement. Engagement lies at the very heart of the TU Dublin mission. As part of a local, regional and national ecosystem, TU Dublin actively seeks to establish long-term strategic partnerships with companies based on open dialogue and mutually beneficial collaboration. To achieve this, the University adopts a proactive and progressive approach to building sustainable relationship frameworks with all our stakeholders that support the co creation of innovative solutions to real world challenges'

The development of a new TU Dublin Strategic Plan is being informed by the extensive range of partnerships and collaborations that TU Dublin has with community, industry, professional and societal groups. This strategy is also being informed by National and International Policy which sets out the obligations of TU Dublin to Society. This for example includes the implementation of the UN Sustainability Goals.



Societal Expectations of TU Dublin

The Technological Universities Act (2018) defined a number of functions of a Technological University that require and support engagement with society, including:

1. Provide programmes of education and training that reflect the needs of citizens, business, enterprise, the professions and other stakeholders in the region in which the campuses of the technological university are located and facilitate learning by flexible means.
2. Provide for the broad education, intellectual and personal development of students, for the purposes of enabling them, as graduates, to excel in their chosen careers and to contribute responsibly to social, civic and economic life in innovative and adaptable ways.
3. Serve the community and public interest by— developing and promoting strong social and cultural links, and links supporting creativity, between the technological university and the community in the region in which the campuses of the technological university are located.

Another important societal function of all higher education institutes in Ireland is to promote and embed the principles of equality, diversity and inclusion.

Development of the TU Dublin Quality Framework

As a Designated Awarding Body, with the authority in Irish law to make awards¹, the distinctive mission and functions of a Technological Universities² accords TU Dublin the scope to be unique in its approach to programme offerings. This requires a flexible and systemic approach to quality, in order to achieve and maintain excellence in its mission, and to define the unique positioning within the HE sector in Ireland and internationally. The strategy for embedding quality culture to support quality enhancement,

¹ Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, [No. 28]. 81 pp.

² Technological Universities Act 2018, Functions of Technological University (Chapter 2).



i.e., continuous improvement, requires a robust quality framework that builds upon the quality assurance of the merged institutions.

Since the establishment of TU Dublin in January 2019, independent quality assurance frameworks are being implemented across the three constituencies of the former independent institutes. However, to meet its statutory obligations and to further enhance excellence in the education provision and experience, TU Dublin is developing a unitary quality framework that builds upon the existing robust quality structures of the former individual institutes.

An Academic Quality Project Team was established to develop the new quality framework and started by defining the principles and philosophical perspectives that will underpin the new quality framework. The aim of the project is to develop a quality system that will not only encourage and support student-centred practices but will ensure a student-centred learning environment. The quality system will support academic innovation and incorporate best practices to ensure programmes and practices align to the objectives of an engaged societal technological university and the vision and mission of TU Dublin. In particular, the quality system must clearly align to the objectives of reflecting the needs of society and all stakeholders, contributing responsibly to social, civic and economic life, and developing and promoting strong social and cultural links.

The achievement of societal objectives in higher education institutions is a key focus of external quality assurance procedures (Bluml et al., 2018). In addition to the societal objectives of the quality system, it should also:

1. Ensure TU Dublin creates and maintains the best experience for all students;
2. Continually evaluate and enhance the student-centred learning experience by involving internal and external stakeholders, and experts;
3. Maintain and promote the highest standards as possible across all programme provision.

To achieve these objectives, the quality system must all adhere to the standards and guidelines published by the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), Quality & Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Framework and the Irish Technological Higher Education Quality Framework.

Embedding Quality Culture to Support Continuous Improvement

After determining the objectives and the underpinning principles, the Project Team considered the nature of the new quality system and specifically its role to ensure and maintain standards in the University, while also being a driver for continuous improvements and quality enhancement. While recognising the importance of QA, the adopted approach proposes for a shift in emphases from QA to QE.

Quality Assurance has been defined as:

“...the means through which an institution ensures and confirms that the conditions are in place for students to achieve the standards set by it or by another awarding body” (QAA 2003)

While quality assurance systems can vary considerably depending on the context, they can all be placed somewhere on a continuum. On one end of this continuum is a very rigid quality assurance system characterised by ensuring adherence to rules and metrics. This system ensures accountability and conformity through tightly controlled and well-defined audit processes involving root cause analyses and the identification, and carrying out, of corrective actions.

The advantages of a rigid quality assurance system include: equity; accountability; clarity; measurability; objectivity; and transparency. These characteristics are desirable in any publicly funded higher education institution and would be seen as strengths in the new TU Dublin quality system. However, the disadvantages are that, it:

- does not encourage innovation;
- has a normalising effect;



- does not reflect or consider context, uniqueness or circumstances;
- focuses on metrics and not on the processes to meet metrics.

Such a quality assurance system is often viewed by academic staff as a top-down process with no link between the quality of their work and the outcomes of the quality assurance processes (Harvey and Williams, 2010; Anderson, 2006; Barrow, 1999; Cheng, 2011).

On the other end of the continuum is a quality framework characterised by lesser reliance on rigid rules and metrics and in their place descriptive principles and processes, which can be validly interpreted in different ways. Flexibility in aligning to this system is allowed, where, based on sound premises, viable principles and processes can be developed and adopted. The advantages of such a system is in the implicit recognition of context, uniqueness and circumstances, therefore, supports innovation in practice. These positive characteristics are again desirable in a quality system that will foster and encourage a quality culture. However, the disadvantages include:

- Lack of accountability or responsibility;
- Diversity of standards and their interpretation;
- Can allow poor practice and low standards to continue;
- Difficult to identify and address weakness;
- Lack of transparency and hence difficult for stakeholders to understand;
- Comparisons can be difficult.

The challenge for the team is to decide where to position the new TU Dublin quality system between these two extreme ends that will maximise the advantages of both, while negating the disadvantages. Another challenge that the project team faces is to ensure the new system is sufficiently informed by external stakeholders and will seek to continually improve practices and the student learning experience. The goal is to develop a system that is primarily characterised by quality enhancement procedures.

Quality enhancement has been defined as:

“...the process by which higher education providers systematically improve the quality of provision and the ways in which students’ learning is supported...” (QAA, 2018)

Quality enhancement is part of a process of improvement or growth that involves deliberate steps designed to enhance the student learning experience. It includes a supportive process that engages all relevant stakeholders to address any identified issues and make appropriate changes and enhancements (QAA, 2006).

The terms quality assurance and quality enhancement are often used interchangeably and the definitions vary considerably depending on context, culture, time and stakeholders. The focus of a quality assurance system tends to be on the maintenance (or establishment) of standards, while a quality enhancement system focuses on improvement and change. There are arguments that quality assurance and quality enhancement should be separate systems carried out independently and without reference to each other (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995). In such a model, quality assurance tends to be the top-down rigid system focusing on accountability, while quality enhancement is a supportive process carried out primarily by the stakeholders. However, the outcomes of such quality assurance and quality enhancement systems are often seen as not aligning, being opposing or incompatible (Elassy, 2015; Swinglehurst, 2008; Raban, 2007). Hence, quality assurance is often perceived negatively as it is seen as a top-down inflexible process undertaken out of context, while quality enhancement is viewed more favourably as it is seen to support improvements.

It is more common in higher education for academic quality enhancement to be seen as being an augmentation of quality assurance. In this model, quality assurance is on the opposite end of a continuum to quality enhancement and there is a progression from quality assurance processes leading on to quality enhancement processes (Dill, 2000). In this way, quality enhancement is dependent on quality assurance (Elassy, 2015), and the data from the quality assurance is used to inform quality enhancement.

However, it has been argued that the most successful model, within which the quality of the learning experience can be improved more effectively and efficiently, is where quality enhancement processes, such as educational development, are combined or integrated into quality assurance processes to create a more holistic approach to quality enhancement (Dano & Stensaker, 2007; Gosling and D'Andrea, 2001). In this model, quality assurance and quality enhancement are integral parts of the same process and can be designed to ensure and support a student-centred learning environment. It is this model that has been adopted for the new quality system within TU Dublin. This model will be enabled by structured stakeholder engagements such as with community, industry and professional bodies. The student will be an active participant in all such engagements. The QE themes noted on Figure 2 accentuate the essential attributes and values that are currently informing the design of TU Dublin's QA-QE processes³.

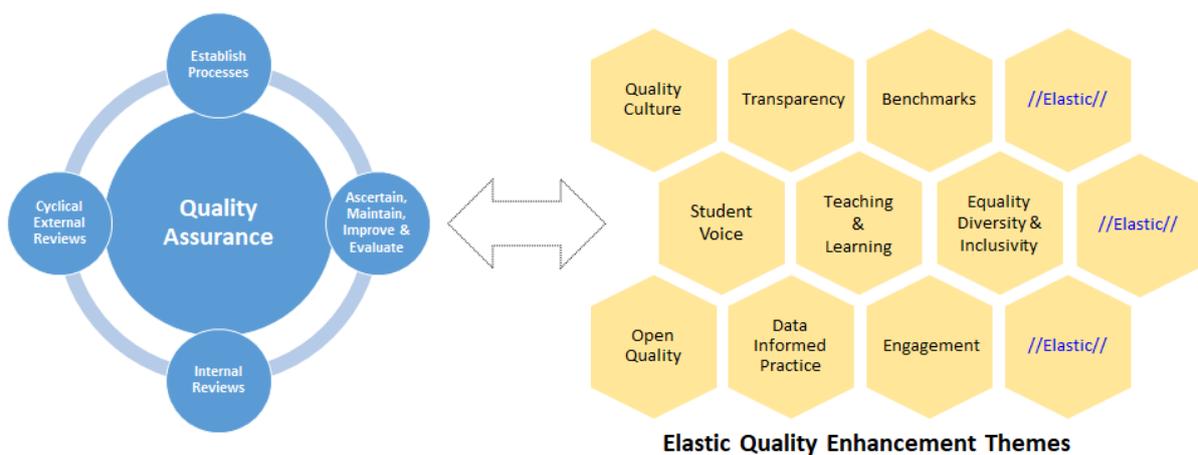


Figure 2 TU Dublin Quality Framework—Covers establishment of internal QA-QE processes and implementation principles, cyclical internal and external review principles founded on peer-review process with pervasive continuous quality enhancement themes, supported by transparency aimed at developing/maintaining public confidence. The indicated elasticity recognises that while the indicated QE themes are currently compelling, with continuous improvement they are bound to be upgraded to standard practices as additional considerations emerge

Approach to Development of the Unitary Quality Framework for TU Dublin

Once the objectives, principles and model were agreed, the Project Team set out to develop the quality system, which will include all academic quality assurance and enhancement policies and procedures (as described in the 'Handbook for Academic Quality Enhancement') and assessment policies and regulations (as described in the 'Marks and Standards' document). The development of the new quality system for TU Dublin is ongoing and is divided into the following steps:

- Review of three current quality systems
- Define objectives, underlying principles and characteristics;
- Determine requirements by mapping to external policies, principles and guidelines, e.g., Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012;
- Draft the Handbook for Academic Quality Enhancement and Marks & Standards documents;
- Consult with all stakeholders;
- Revising the Handbook for Academic Quality Enhancement and Marks & Standards documents

The principles were aligned to the goal of developing a Quality Assurance-Quality Enhancement (QA-QE) system that will continue to support innovation, while integrating best practice in all aspects of

³ TUQF. 2016. Principles of Internal Quality Assurance and Enhancement for Technological Universities in Ireland. Technological Universities Quality Framework (TUQF), 16 pp.



education in TU Dublin. To achieve this aim, the following principles were defined to underpin the development process:

1. The Quality culture within TU Dublin will ensure the quality of the total student experience and require best practice in all aspects of the student learning experience;
2. Quality processes and procedures will be a transparent, evidence-based, and objective and will rigorously interrogate academic standards and identify areas of improvement;
3. While all stakeholders will be involved in the quality system, the student voice and external involvement will be critical elements of quality processes within TU Dublin. Community, industry, professional and societal interests will not only inform our quality system but will be used as integral benchmarks to measure impact;
4. Equality, Diversity and inclusivity are central tenets within TU Dublin and will be reflected in the quality processes and procedures;
5. The approach to Quality will be underpinned by the principle that there is scope for the further enhancement of the student learning experience and hence all processes will aim to continually improve the student learning experience;
6. TU Dublin's quality system will encourage and support innovation, while recognising individuality, uniqueness and context.
7. Independent external review and benchmarking against national and international standards will be an essential element in the TU Dublin quality system.

To ensure TU Dublin meets the expectations and needs of its key stakeholders, the quality system will have the following key characteristics:

- Student Engagement in Quality Processes
- Role of Professional Body Accreditation
- Inclusion of Industry / Professional / Community representatives in quality processes
- Use of Collaborative Design Processes
- Embedding the Irish Higher Education Authority Compact requirements into quality processes
- Actively linked to quality framework of any regulated programmes to ensure mutual benefits of quality enhancement

An Example: Societal Engagement in TU Dublin Programme Approval and Review Quality Processes and Procedures

TU Dublin quality processes, including programme approval and review will require TU Dublin staff to state how the objectives and learning outcomes of programmes are aligned to TU Dublin strategy and how the delivery of the programme will contribute to the University meeting its strategic objectives. In preparation for programme approval or review, TU Dublin programme teams will be expected to engage with external stakeholders and obtain feedback on how the new / existing programme will meet their needs. These external stakeholders include community-based learning partners, work placement providers, relevant professional bodies and potential graduate employers. Programme Approval and Review panels will also include societal representatives. Criteria for evaluation includes:

- Does the programme adequately address University strategies in relation to Sustainability, Internationalisation, Equality, Inclusivity and Diversity?
- Is the programme design well informed having taken into consideration current trends, stakeholder feedback and market analysis

Conclusion

Within higher education, a range of systems, best described as quality assurance, ensure prescribed minimum standards are met or even exceeded. These systems, which may or may not also include elements of quality enhancement, can very often result in 'islands' of innovation and best practice, but rarely lead to a systemic change to student-centred learning or consistently high standards in teaching and learning. The quality enhancement system developed for TU Dublin will not only provide QA



processes and criteria, but will include a supportive process that engages all relevant stakeholders to address any identified issues and make appropriate changes for enhancement ensuring that the university is both addressing the needs of its students but also the wider societal needs. This system will facilitate the university to continuously seek to identify weaknesses and areas for improvement and most importantly provide the university with a diversity of external stakeholder input that will ensure that the outputs are effective.

Such a system will change the perception of quality assurance from a process that must be completed and adhered to, to a process that supports, enhances, improves and is effective. The quality enhancement system will be developed by bringing together experts in quality assurance, education development, pedagogy and practitioners, in addition to all stakeholders. Adhering to this new QE system will inevitably lead to programmes which are well informed to meet societal needs and which adopt student-centred pedagogical approaches which will result in the provision of graduates that have the knowledge, know-how and skills to provide an effective contribution to society.

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