University College Dublin

REVIEW GROUP REPORT

Periodic Quality Review

UCD School of Politics and International Relations

September 2022

Accepted by the UCD Governing Authority at its meeting on 24 October 2024

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Key Findings of the Review Group

The Review Group (RG) has identified a number of key findings in relation to areas of good practice operating within the UCD School of Politics and International Relations (SPIRe) and also areas which the RG would highlight as requiring improvement. The main section of this Report sets out all observations, commendations and recommendations of the RG in more detail. An aggregated list of all commendations and recommendations is set out in Appendix 1.

Examples of Good Practice

The RG identified a number of commendations in particular:

1. Staff are highly committed to the continuing success of the School, with clearly evident collegiality, exemplary leadership among faculty and professional staff, supporting excellent programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. (3.14)

2. Management structures are inclusive, the decision-making process is transparent and consensus based, involving faculty and professional staff and contributing to a positive and inclusive working environment. (3.15)

3. Diversity of offerings, modules and programmes makes for very attractive and competitive programmes which are marked by their innovative and entrepreneurial nature and are popular and well-thought of by students and external stakeholders alike. (5.17)

4. The School's interlinking of research to teaching and the inclusion of students in research projects is well developed and mutually fruitful. (6.15)

5. The quality of the School's research is excellent resulting in significant institutional reputational enhancement. (6.19)

6. The RG commends the School's efforts in promoting Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), in particular the availability of school funding to drive and generate EDI events and policies. The recent award of an Athena Swan Bronze award demonstrates the School's clear commitment to Equality, Diversity and Inclusiveness. (8.9)

Prioritised Recommendations for Improvement

The RG would suggest that the following recommendations be prioritised:

1. There is an urgent need to address student:staff ratios, which are high by institutional standards and international norms. In the absence of changes to the Employment Control Framework and/or the University Resource Allocation Model, the RG recommends that SPIRe should be prioritised in current and future Ad-Astra recruitment rounds in order to address student:staff ratios. (2.9)

2. Increasing student numbers have severely impacted the administrative burden and warrant additional administrative support. (3.21)

3. The RG recommend that consideration be given to stage specific career advisory sessions for undergraduates to help them navigate the diversity of modules, particularly at stages 3 and 4. The RG recommend also that consideration be given to the development of typical pathways towards a specialisation. (5.23)

4. In the post Brexit arena, a revitalisation of the Dublin European Institute (DEI) with a renewed focus on EU institutions, politics and policy-making should be considered as both an opportunity and a necessity. (6.23)

5. The RG recommend that the University and the College support the School's ongoing efforts to address the gender imbalance among the faculty in SPIRe. The RG recommends that the School advocate with the College and the University for extra resources to resolve this EDI issue. (8.12)

1. Introduction

Introduction

1.1   This report presents the findings of a quality review of the UCD School of Politics and International Relations University College Dublin, which was undertaken in April 2022. The School response to the Review Group Report is attached as Appendix 2.

The Review Framework

1.2   Irish Universities have collectively agreed a framework for their quality review and quality improvement systems, which is consistent with both the legislative requirements of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, and international good practice (e.g., Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2015). Quality reviews are carried out in academic, administrative and support service units.

1.3   The purpose of periodic review is to assist the University to assure itself of the quality of each of its constituent units, and to utilise learning from this developmental process in order to effect improvement, including:

- To monitor the quality of the student experience, and of teaching and learning.

- To monitor research activity, including management of research activity; assessing the research performance with regard to research productivity, research income, and recruiting and supporting doctoral students.

- To identify, encourage and disseminate good practice, and to identify challenges and how to address these.

- To provide an opportunity for units to test the effectiveness of their systems and procedures for monitoring and enhancing quality and standards.

- To encourage the development and enhancement of these systems, in the context of current and emerging provision.

- To inform the University's strategic planning process.

- The output report provides robust evidence for external accreditation bodies.

- The process provides an external benchmark on practice and curriculum.

- To provide public information on the University's capacity to assure the quality and standards of its awards. The University's implementation of its quality procedures enables it to demonstrate how it discharges its responsibilities for assuring the quality and standards of its awards, as required by the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012.

The Review Process

1.4   Typically, the review model comprises four major elements:

- Preparation of a self-assessment report (SAR)

- A visit by a RG that includes UCD staff and external experts, both national and international. The site visit normally will take place over a two- or three-day period

- Preparation of a review group report that is made public

- Agreement of an action plan for improvement (quality improvement plan) based on the RG report's recommendations. The University will also monitor progress against the improvement plan

Full details of the review process can be found on the UCD Quality Office website: www.ucd.ie/quality.

The Review Group

1.5   The composition of the RG for the UCD School of Politics and International Relations was as follows:
- Associate Professor John Crean, UCD School of Biomolecular & Biomedical Science, Chair
- Associate Professor Tara McMorrow, UCD School of Biomolecular & Biomedical Science, Deputy Chair
- Professor Adrienne Héritier, Political Scientist, European University Institute

1.6   The RG visited the School remotely from 11-14 April 2022 and held meetings with School staff; undergraduate and postgraduate students; graduates, employers, and other University staff. The site visit schedule is included as Appendix 3.

1.7   In addition to the Self-assessment Report, the RG considered documentation provided by the School and the University during the site visit.

1.8   This Report has been read and approved by all members of the Review Group.

Preparation of the Self-assessment Report (SAR)

1.9   Following a briefing from the UCD Quality Office, a Self-assessment Report Coordinating Committee (SARCC) was established by the School.

1.10   The SAR was prepared in the period September 2021 – February 2022. Staff were consulted during the process with specific aspects of the report discussed in various fora. The final draft report was developed by the SAR Co-ordinating Committee reflecting the various inputs with individual members taking responsibility for chapters of the report.   All staff were given the opportunity to comment and contribute to the final report.

1.11   The opinion of the RG was that the SAR was excellent, meticulously researched, well written, reflective and comprehensive and the School should be commended on its efforts.

1.12   The RG noted however, that the structure of the report did not follow the general headings in the University guidelines for a self-assessment report.

The University

1.13   University College Dublin (UCD) is a large and diverse university whose origins date back to 1854. The University is situated on a large modern campus about 4 km to the south of the centre of Dublin.

1.14   The University Strategic Plan (2020 to 2024) states that the University's mission is: "to contribute to the flourishing of Dublin, Ireland, Europe and the world through the excellence and impact of our research and scholarship, the quality of our graduates and our global engagement; providing a supportive community in which every member of the University is enabled to achieve their full potential".

The University is currently organised into six colleges and 37 schools:

- UCD College of Arts and Humanities

- UCD College of Business

- UCD College of Engineering and Architecture

- UCD College of Health and Agricultural Sciences

- UCD College of Social Sciences and Law

- UCD College of Science

1.15   As one of the largest universities on the island of Ireland, UCD supports a broad, deep and rich academic community in Science, Business, Engineering, Health Sciences, Agriculture, Veterinary Medicine, Arts, Law, and Social Sciences. There are currently more than 33,000 students on our UCD campus, with approximately 18,000 undergraduates, 12,600 postgraduates and 2,200 Occasional students. This includes over 9,500 international students from 152 countries. In addition, UCD has almost 5,200 students studying UCD degree programmes on campuses overseas. Undergraduate degree students have the choice of 38 entry routes on offer via the CAO system, while UCD offers many other options at graduate level.

UCD School of Politics and International Relations

1.16   The UCD School of Politics and International Relations was created in 2006 as the result of a merger of the then Department of Politics – established in 1855 as one of the oldest politics departments in the world – with the Dublin European Institute and the Centre for Development Studies.

1.17   The UCD School of Politics and International Relations is one of thirty-six Schools in UCD, and one of eleven that fall under the umbrella of the College of Social Sciences and Law.

1.18   At undergraduate level, the School offers a single undergraduate programme in the College of Arts and Humanities (History and Politics), a Single or Joint Major in Politics and International Relations or major with a minor in the College of Social Sciences and Law. The School (hereinafter referred to as SPIRe) also runs hugely successful graduate taught programmes, as well as housing a number of PhD candidates as part of a structured PhD programme in Politics and International Relations.

1.19   The SAR notes that for 2021-22 academic year, the School provides 36 active undergraduate modules across all undergraduate programmes. Undergraduate teaching is allocated 440 Full Time student Equivalents (FTEs) when including the occasional students, representing 56.8 percent of the School's teaching focus.

1.20   At institutional, national and international level, SPIRe has an excellent reputation and this is reflected in international QS Subject Rankings, where it consistently ranks in the top 100.

1.21   SPIRe also has an excellent track record in research, with significant income from EU Horizon programmes and the Irish Research Council (IRC). Several European Research Council (ERC) applications are in preparation.

1.22   Publications in international, peer reviewed journals have clearly increased and the impact factor and field-weighted citation impact has risen. The School has access to the UCD Output Based Research Support Scheme (OBRSS) and seed funding which acts as an effective incentivization system to promote new research projects.

1.23 The School now has four University research centres – the Connected_Politics Lab, the Centre for Sustainable Development Studies, the Institute for British-Irish Studies and the Dublin European Institute – that draw together the research interests of colleagues in computational political science, sustainable development, conflict and peace studies, and EU politics respectively. The SAR notes other main research clusters include globalisation and sustainable development, international relations and international political economy, comparative politics, public policy, and political theory.

1.24 The School's cross-university research activities, include collaborations with colleagues in the Geary Institute, the Insight Centre for Data Analytics, and the Centre for Regulation and Governance hosted by the School of Law.

1.25 The School also has had a long history of active engagement with key policy makers, both nationally and internationally. These include sustained relationships with the Departments of the Taoiseach, Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), Public Expenditure and Reform, Defence, and the European Commission and Parliament offices in Dublin.

2. School Profile

General Comments and Context

2.1 SPIRe in its current configuration is now 16 years old, and as noted, is the result of a merger between the Department of Politics, the Dublin European Institute (DEI) and the Centre for Development Studies. It has inherited a rich legacy and over the years has housed a significant number of high-profile staff who have made huge contributions to political and social discourse at both national and international levels. Indeed, its graduates continue to exemplify this strong legacy, many filling prestigious and important roles in academia, Government and other Non-Government Organisations (NGOs).

2.2 The inherited legacy of its foundation has created a School offering that is successful and diverse with programmes at graduate and undergraduate levels that are of a high quality as evidenced by the consistent high QS World University Rankings by Subject in the top 100 and their excellent institutional, national and international reputation. Student numbers at undergraduate level have remained consistently high (>400) for a number of years and have dramatically increased in recent years in the graduate taught programmes, from 146 in 2016/17 to 290 in 2021/22. While this has resulted in increased fee income for the University, the current funding model means a relatively small proportion of this is returned directly to the School, impacting its ability to recruit extra staff to cope with increased student numbers.

2.3 In some ways, SPIRe has become a victim of its successes despite an increase in staff numbers in recent years, (Nov 2021, the staff of the School consists of a total of 31.5 FTE, of which 23.5 teaching staff, 4 professional staff, 4 post-doctoral researchers, as well as 21 hourly paid teaching assistants. this has only had a modest effect on student:staff ratios; (33:1).

2.4   In fact, the popularity of graduate taught programmes has seen the student:staff ratios increase again in the last three years (6.2 in 2019/20) to a point where it is high by institutional and international standards. (12.3 in 2020/21 as of Nov 2021 figures). In addition, restrictive hiring practices means that non-tenured recruitment is severely hampered as contracts are fixed term and non-renewable, meaning retention of talented junior staff is challenging.

2.5   SPIRe has an academic staff cohort who are all considered research active and are very successful compared to international norms with excellent publications in leading disciplinary journals. Average research income has grown in recent years, partly as a result of individual staff members playing leadership roles in large, externally funded programmes.

Commendations

2.6   A strong legacy from its the foundation has been built upon to create a thriving and successful school, evidenced by its consistent QS World University Rankings by Subject in the top 100.

2.7   The RG commend the School's commitment to inclusive and pluralist approaches to teaching has resulted in diverse, popular programmes that are in turn innovative, adaptable and responsive to changing needs.

2.8   The School houses a thriving and successful, research intensive community whose outputs contribute enormously to its excellent international reputation.

Recommendations

2.9   There is an urgent need to address student:staff ratios, which are high by institutional standards and international norms. In the absence of changes to the Employment Control Framework and/or the University Resource Allocation Model, the RG recommends that SPIRe should be prioritised in current and future Ad-Astra recruitment rounds in order to address student:staff ratios.

3. Organisation and Management of Resources

General Comments and Context

3.1   SPIRe is located in a recently refurbished space within the Newman Building which includes staff offices, dedicated rooms for research assistants and postdoctoral fellows, the School Office and a boardroom which has evolved into a multifunctional space. Teaching space is allocated centrally and the RG noted the concerns over the variable quality of these spaces (for example, non-functioning AV), notwithstanding recent improvements. The School no longer has its own dedicated teaching space and has also lost a room which had previously been used to host meetings with students. Meeting room allocations across the University are now centrally controlled and this can lead to challenges in obtaining suitable spaces for Teaching Assistant-Student interactions.

3.2   School governance is broadly in line with University guidelines. The Head of School, with significant assistance from the School Manager, is responsible for the day-to-day management and ordinary decision-making processes in the School. A School Executive meets approximately every second week and consists of representatives/directors of Research, Graduate Studies, Teaching and Learning and Global Engagement committees, the EDI officer and the Chair of the Athena Swan committee. Each member of the executive in turn chairs a related committee, including those for dealing with plagiarism and research ethics.

3.3   Key School wide decisions are taken at School Board level, with the Board consisting of all faculty and professional staff in the School and decisions are made on a consensual basis.

3.4   The key decision-making body is the School Board; however the RG suggests it would be useful to empower the School Executive on a more formal level, particularly with respect to recruitment and future strategy. The RG also found a clearer definition of the responsibilities of the Executive and the Board would be helpful.

3.5   The RG noted there was minimal undergraduate or graduate representation at the School Executive or School Board level. The School does however respond to any concerns through direct interaction with student representatives through a Staff:Student forum in which class representatives are afforded the opportunity to raise any concerns with staff, once per semester. Matters can also be raised through meetings with the Head of School.

3.6   The School Teaching and Learning committee, supported by an undergraduate administrator, oversees issues relating to undergraduate programmes, and reports directly to the Executive through the committee chair. The RG understood that coordination of diverse programmes across two colleges can be somewhat complicated as the offerings in Arts and Humanities are limited to History and Politics.

3.7   The RG noted the excellent internal communications among staff and the administrative team and School Leadership were both identified as key contributors to the success of the programmes.

3.8   Similarly, the Graduate Taught Programmes committee, supported by a graduate administrator, oversees the extensive and successful postgraduate taught MSc programmes. The RG noted that despite the success of the programmes, staff expressed concerns about the recruitment process of international students, the possible requirement for caps on intake due to workload constraints and a more general wish to maintain and even increase standards.

3.9   The SPIRe Research Committee has responsibility for supporting research activity, supported by a research administrator. SPIRe has a small number of postdoctoral fellows who are associated with larger grants or centres; generally research groups are relatively small, as is standard for the field. The RG noted the success of the School in continuing to support growth in research income and sustainable PhD numbers.

3.10   The SAR highlights that there has been a significantly increased workload for both academic and professional staff in the SPIRe. While the breadth and diversity of programme offerings is a key strength, this complexity can also lead to increased administrative load. Moreover, the successes of graduate taught and graduate research programmes in themselves carry an added administrative burden.

3.11   The RG found academic staff are under considerable pressure, notwithstanding the contributions of Teaching Assistants, with a student:staff ratio of 33:1, a number that is high by national and international norms. Similarly, professional staff identified a number of pressure points which are impacting on the smooth operations of the School Office. Examples given in the SAR included, new and ongoing thematic programmes, the ongoing development of administrative systems by the university, additional reporting requirements, the delegation of responsibilities from central administration to schools and the high level of public outreach activities).

3.12   The RG noted issues with respect to processes for dealing with students with exceptional circumstances, specifically in relation to responsibilities of module coordinators, programme manager/director and administrator. More defined roles should be identified and clarified by the School.

3.13   The School Office also noted that the roll out of the e-thesis system has reduced their ability to oversee the smooth running of the process. In later discussions with professional staff, it was suggested that this change was/is a university policy decision. This should be revisited as it would clearly enhance operations in the School office.

Commendations

3.14   Staff are highly committed to the continuing success of the School, with clearly evident collegiality, exemplary leadership among faculty and professional staff, supporting excellent programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate level.

3.15   Management structures are inclusive, the decision-making process is transparent and consensus based, involving faculty and professional staff and contributing to a positive and inclusive working environment.

3.16   Leadership from Head of School and School Manager delineates clear roles for highly engaged and efficient staff.

3.17   Committed, collegiate and hard-working staff populate committees across SPIRe ensuring the operations are comprehensive and in-line with University policies.

3.18   Excellent administrative structures are in place, supporting the running of operations in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes

Recommendations

3.19   In light of the School's success in the development of successful postgraduate programmes and generating significant income, the RG recommend that more of this revenue be returned to the School to enable improvement in its student:staff ratio.

3.20   A suitable space for interactions between students and teaching assistants should be identified and reserved for SPIRe use at specific times throughout the academic year.

3.21   Increasing student numbers have severely impacted the administrative burden and warrant additional administrative support.

3.22   In keeping with University norms, a clear definition of the responsibilities of the School Executive and the School Board should be developed.

4. Staff Profile

General Comments and Context

4.1   At the time of the review, the staff of SPIRe comprised 31.4 FTEs, of which 23.5 are academic staff, 4 are postdoctoral fellows and 4 are professional staff. There are an additional number (21) of hourly paid Teaching Assistants. Gender distribution is 27% female academic staff and 73% male academic staff.

4.2   As well as the need to address the student:staff ratio, as noted above for 2021 as 33:1, the RG were concerned by the striking gender imbalance of the School's academic staff particularly at senior level. The need to address this balance is also recognised by the School and College, notwithstanding the imminent appointment of a new female Professor and the action plan developed on foot of the School's 2019 Athena Swan Bronze Award (see section 8 below for further discussion).

4.3   The distribution of staff across academic grades is broadly in line with expectations and the RG were satisfied that promotion pathways are clearly identified and accessible to newly appointed and junior members of the teaching staff.

4.4   The RG had some concern with the ratio between fixed term contracts and permanent staff numbers (some of these contracts are as short as one-year). The RG noted that the Ad Astra tenure track scheme is viewed as a mechanism wherein some if not all of these contracts will become permanent. While this is a positive development, this should not be perceived as a means to address the problem with the student:staff ratio; new Ad Astra appointments may not necessarily result in increased staff numbers if fixed term contracts expire. The RG are of the opinion that constraints on recruitment imposed under the Employment Control Framework are incompatible with the continued growth and success of the School.

4.5   Staff are generally well engaged with the University and perform a number of College level and University roles, through committee membership and leadership roles.

4.6   The RG found the commitment and collegiality of staff, both faculty and professional, is a hugely important contributor to the success of the School, notwithstanding increasing pressure from elevated student staff ratios and a sense that graduate taught programmes have little room for growth in the absence of new recruitment.

4.7   The RG noted Continuing Professional Development and training opportunities are provided by the University and are visible and accessible to staff. Engagement with the P4G process is generally seen in a positive light. Mentoring to new staff is mostly informal guidance, relying to a degree on the obvious collegiality within the School.   .

4.8   The RG also noted some concerns in maintaining administrative support and expertise during the onboarding of new staff.

Commendations

4.9   Career development and progression/promotion opportunities are readily identified and supported.

4.10   The RG commends the School's engagement with the University and College, through committee membership and leadership roles.

4.11   The School's professional staff are highly regarded and considered excellent in their practices.

Recommendations

4.12   While acknowledging the efforts already made by the School, (in particular their success in achieving an Athena Swan Bronze award 2019), there is an urgent need to address the gender imbalance in the School; future recruitment strategies should be used to address this issue.

4.13   In light of the gender imbalance at professorial levels, the career progression of junior and newly appointed female staff through the promotions process should be supported.

4.14   A more formal mentoring process within the School should be implemented for newly appointed and junior staff.

4.15   The RG recommend that transition periods allowing for staff training should be taken into consideration.

5. Teaching and Learning

General Comments and Context

5.1 The offerings of degrees in BSc, BA Humanities, BCL Law with Politics comprises a wide variety of excellent modules which can be taken in a large number of possible combinations. Modules in politics and computational science, comparative politics/democracy research, sustainable development, peace and conflict research and international political economy, for example, appear to be very popular.

5.2 As noted in section 3 above, this diversity and breadth of offerings in undergraduate and graduate programmes has been key to the popularity and success of the School.

5.3 The RG found the modules on offer are popular and of a high quality, comparable to similar institutions, leading to extremely rich and varied programmes. The many options available allow students to select a customised programme, premised on the availability and accessibility of individual combinations. One practical consequence of this is high coordination and administration burdens with associated costs and from a student perspective, some challenges were highlighted in navigating the multiple options.

5.4 There is a well-established online system for the navigation of the various module options as students' progress through the programmes; however feedback from students is that more face-to-face advisory opportunities would be welcomed. In addition, because there is such a high complexity of possible options, more transparency for individual students pursuing a specific path and orientation support beyond online systems is desirable. This might take the form of additional advisory sessions, perhaps timed at the end of each stage, to inform students of the choices and options in the following year.

5.5 The RG understood from discussions that at times module capacity can limit multiple possible module options. As a result some combinations of subjects may not be available.

5.6 The satisfaction of students with the taught courses and the linked tutorials is high, as evidenced from both formal student feedback and the meetings the RG had with the student representative cohorts of both undergraduate and postgraduate.

5.7 The Covid crisis has led to new forms of teaching, including live streaming and recording. Both have very positive aspects yet also downsides, for example, less personal presence and attendance at formal classes seems a particularly acute challenge. For some students with special needs however, recording may offer advantages.

5.8 It was noted in discussions that many student-related queries/issues, associated with blended learning need to be resolved online which is frequently more time-consuming.

5.9   Staff-student engagement at other levels appears appropriate, as already noted earlier in this report, through the Staff-Student Forum. However, additional efforts to facilitate horizontal networking among graduate students would help to foster a greater sense of "belonging" to the School

5.10   Subject societies/working groups are successful in engaging students in taught topics and allow for horizontal discussions among students. However, the tutorial group sizes are often still too large with high numbers in classes. The SAR notes class spaces are sometimes not adequate where there are high class numbers If seminar rooms are too small, working effectively in groups may not be possible.

5.11   The RG found in the course of discussion that students appear somewhat detached from the School and would therefore be important for the School to intensify horizontal contacts among students to foster a greater sense of belonging and togetherness at both undergraduate and postgraduate level.

5.12   The RG noted that the internships are popular with students and there was evidence from stakeholders this has helped with later job market integration. The RG however are of the opinion that in terms of grading, undergraduate internships and undergraduate research these are not equivalent and suggest that assessment and/or credit weighting of these options could be reviewed.

5.13   External stakeholders offering possible internships commented that interns could benefit from more knowledge of how political processes and/or policy making processes in national, European and international institutions work. Hence more mentoring and preparation prior to internships would be useful. The RG suggests also that students could engage more in the internship process by preparing proposals for projects during the application process that could be carried out in the context of host organisations activities.

5.14   The RG also noted in discussions a need for more oversight of the internship positions by academic staff in the School to maintain the quality and reputation of the graduates. This might involve working more closely with the College Internship Manager. Guidance for both students and employers could be considered specifically relating to host responsibilities in the area of safety and insurance.

5.15   In discussion with the RG, some students noted challenges in identifying and securing internship positions.

5.16   Students and stakeholders have asked that career advice should be more prominent in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Student peer mentoring should also be considered as a means to further enhance the undergraduate experience and foster a greater sense of identity.

Commendations

5.17   Diversity of offerings, modules and programmes makes for very attractive and competitive programmes which are marked by their innovative and entrepreneurial nature and are popular and well-thought of by students and external stakeholders alike.

5.18   A high degree of stakeholder satisfaction was expressed with the teaching and learning processes.

5.19   The links between research and teaching is well established and very much appreciated by the students.

5.20   Teaching of quantitative methods in political sciences is a particular strength of the undergraduate programme.

5.21   Small group teaching in tutorials, despite large class sizes for formal lecturing, is very popular and successful with students.

5.22   The RG found the quality of teaching and student satisfaction throughout is exceptionally high.

Recommendations

5.23   The RG recommend that consideration be given to stage specific career advisory sessions for undergraduates to help them navigate the diversity of modules, particularly at stages 3 and 4. The RG recommend also that consideration be given to the development of typical pathways towards a specialisation.

5.24   The provision by the School of additional peer mentoring and preparation prior to internships would be useful.

5.25   The RG recommend that the School should make efforts to extend small group teaching, given the clear benefits of smaller class sizes.

5.26   Additional infrastructure and access to active learning environments would be beneficial to expand small group interactive/practical sessions.

6. Research

General Comments and Context

6.1   All staff within SPIRe are considered "research active" and the School presents an excellent and a supportive environment for research.

6.2   The RG found the research activity is excellent, as shown by the breadth and quality of the publications in high level international journals, the high QS subject ranking and the significant external funds raised from prestigious funding sources, such as the Irish Research Council and the EU Horizon 22 programme. Of note, is the upward trajectory of published paper impacts. Several European Research Council proposals are also in the process of preparation for submission.

6.3   Research project proposals are supported as regards the technical/financial aspects by the financial administration of the School once the funds have been granted and the projects are being implemented. There is a favourable research ecology which fosters internationally well embedded, very successful, 'cutting edge' research activity. Politics and data science, sustainable development, deliberative democracy and international political economy are some cases in point.

6.4   The incentives offered to engage in research are multiple. Systems are in place to allow highly funded staff to "buy-out" a portion of their teaching while all staff are offered a "research semester". The 40% rule for research for academic staff seems equitable and contributes to a sense of fairness with respect to distribution of teaching and administrative duties. It would be important that given current high workloads this is rigorously protected.

6.5   The RG noted some concern with respect to the mechanisms through which research funded staff can "buy-out" their teaching; recruited substitute teaching staff should be appropriately qualified and adequately remunerated.

6.6   The on-going research cooperation within the School is to be welcomed and the international links in research activities are very well developed. For example, international co-authorship in papers and journals is frequent. Some extra support is available through the University OBRSS scheme for allocating annual funding based on publication record and number of PhDs supervised.

6.7   Another very positive aspect of existing research projects is the successful integration of students in the research activities and successful teaching in various modules. This also includes the successful interdisciplinary collaboration in research within the College.

6.8   Many graduate PhD students are covered by an internal funding scheme, quite a number additionally apply for external funding by IRC. The linking of internal funding of PhD students and the simultaneous application for PhD funding with the IRC seems to be quite successful. If the IRC applicant is successful, internal funding is returned and used for additional PhD applicants. This is a useful way to increase the overall number of PhD students.

6.9   Once in the programme, more regular interaction between PhD students in research seminars should be encouraged. Those involved in larger research projects are already engaged in regular interactions with their group. However, the RG found in discussions that others can be somewhat isolated and particularly during Covid, missed regular research-based interactions. In addressing this the School might consider, for example, thematic groups in which PhD students regularly meet to present their research and receive comments from other PhD students and their respective advisors. It might be useful and stimulating during the long process of working on a PhD. The School could also consider the development of advisory programmes to help promote the careers of post-doctoral fellows.

6.10   As noted in Section One, Introduction, a number of research centres exist within the School through which staff can coalesce around a specific research area or question. These research centres and research institutes appear to be functioning well around the respective research areas. The RG noted there appeared to be a tendency to create more "centres" with a risk there may be a fragmentation in the overall aspect of the School.

6.11   There are significant opportunities to increase funding and strengthen research centres, increasing postdoctoral and postgraduate numbers. These should include efforts to revive the DEI with a focus on research on EU institutions, politics and policy and additional opportunities in the post Brexit environment.

6.12   Research activity on Irish-British questions after Brexit is currently of great importance and highly relevant. However, the RG noted that research on the European Union in all its aspects; institutional, politics and policy making seems to have moved to the background. An enhanced focus on teaching European politics, institutions and policy-making as well as geopolitics could be a basis of re-nurturing the tradition of the School in producing outstanding public intellectuals in these areas and development of targeted student internships in the relevant organisations. The increased focus on the European Union is also directly relevant for the research and teaching on international/European political economy. Similarly, the Peace and Conflict masters programme is very promising and important to grow in tandem with opportunities to grow EU focused research programmes.

Commendations

6.13   The level of prestigious external funding and research activities/projects is high and shows entrepreneurship and innovation.

6.14   The research activities are well embedded in international networks, with many notable international co-authored papers.

6.15   The School's interlinking of research to teaching and the inclusion of students in research projects is well developed and mutually fruitful.

6.16   Publication numbers in high quality international journals are high.

6.17   PhD funding as a combination of internal funding and IRC fund application helps increase the number of PhD students.

6.18   Continuing support from the Research Administrator is a key component to the success of the School.

6.19   The quality of the School's research is excellent resulting in significant institutional reputational enhancement.

Recommendations

6.20   PhD students would benefit from more frequent research-centred horizontal meetings to mutually comment and critique their work.

6.21   The RG recommends that the School introduce career mentoring for postdoctoral fellows to support routes to employment in the public/private sector and academia

6.22   High level research performing academic staff could be further incentivised outside of the current workload allocation model.

6.23   In the post Brexit arena, a revitalisation of the Dublin European Institute (DEI) with a renewed focus on EU institutions, politics and policy-making should be considered as both an opportunity and a necessity.

7. Continuous Quality Assessment

General Comments and Context

7.1   The RG were generally satisfied with assessment processes and the mechanisms of academic oversight. Each individual module is the responsibility of the module coordinator and quality is assessed in accordance with university-wide practices, through the use of end of trimester student surveys. These produce a satisfaction "score", which for modules in SPIRe is generally high with one or two exceptions; it was noted that students are generally less satisfied with modules they perceive as difficult or challenging.

7.2   In addition, larger stage 1 modules have slightly lower satisfaction scores, likely reflecting the diversity of students taking these modules as part of their degree programme outside of SPIRe. The RG are of the opinion that while the regular evaluation of modules is important, the very general standard questions which are posed, while important, do not offer much insight into what is happening in modules and would encourage more use of open questions filled in by participants on the learning/teaching processes which offer more insight and granularity.

7.3   It was unclear to the RG whether adequate processes for moderating written exams are in place outside of the oversight provided by the external examiner. This might include the use of second markers for a selection of exam scripts and/or submitted coursework and theses.

7.4   The role of the external examiner in teaching and learning (assessing the "range and depth of courses") appears to be based on a very standardised mode of learning and teaching which may not be appropriate for some areas of qualitative process-oriented types of political science research and teaching (e.g. assessing the quality of seminar papers and essays). Faced with hundreds of such papers, it is difficult to see how the external examiner can assess the structure of an entire programme as diverse as that offered by SPIRe. In the future some consideration of additional external examiner review would be appropriate, for example a M.Sc. programme-specific examiner.

7.5   The RG were hugely impressed with the cohort of students they spoke with, and as noted earlier in this report, their satisfaction with the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes was clearly evident. No substantive issues with respect to assessment were raised, notwithstanding the concern that the RG have around the apparent equivalence of internships versus theses-centred research projects. (see 5.12 above)

7.6   The external stakeholder group were complimentary of the quality and breath of the programme and each highlighted the excellence of graduates that they have employed. They also offered suggestions where improvement could be made such as an enhanced focus on European Law and Institutions. (see 5.13 above)

Commendations

7.7   Student satisfaction with modules is high.

7.8   Robust quality assurance measures are in place over all School activities.

7.9   Stakeholders, whether postgraduate, undergraduate or external, were unanimous in their positive appraisal of the quality of the programmes.

7.10   Reputational excellence and employability of graduates is apparent from external stakeholder feedback.

7.11   Module level quality control is excellent and examination processes appear robust and stage/level appropriate.

Recommendations

7.12   The appointment of future external examiners should involve closer alignment of their expertise to ensure appropriate oversight.

7.13   The RG recommend the School consider including more 'open' questions as part of the student feedback on modules, which may allow for more elaboration and may offer more insight.

7.14   A separate external examiner for masters' programmes should be considered given the diversity of offerings.

7.15   More efforts to acquire relevant module specific feedback should be undertaken through the use and analyses of open feedback questions.

7.16   As part of the curriculum review and enhancement process, the School should consider the expansion of taught material relating to European Law and Institutions.

8. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

General Comments and Context

8.1.   The School actively supports the UCD policies for widening participation through alternative entry routes into university such as Quality and Qualifications Ireland level 5 and 6 awards (FET-QQI), mature applications, Higher Education Access Route (HEAR), Disability Access Route to Education (DARE), Access and Open Learning routes.

8.2   The RG were also extremely impressed with the Schools' ongoing commitment to the principles of EDI. This is manifested in particular by their recent Athena Swan Bronze Award in 2019 and as part of this process, generated a commendable action plan with 89 proposals.

8.3   The School through its action plan implementation has adopted policies and practices, informed by University policies, to embed EDI principles in the development and implementation of norms and policies surrounding workplace practices in the School, such as family-friendly practices and policies, to ensure balanced, equitable and accommodating loads and responsibilities.

8.4   The RG met with members of the Athena Swan committee, who are actively involved in incorporating the principles of equality, diversion and inclusion into school practices. It was noted that currently there is no EDI committee in place in the School and that currently the Athena Swan committee is undertaking this remit.

8.5   The School also plans to proactively monitor for shortcomings in equality, diversity and inclusion, through regularise feedback sessions with staff and students, including the use of surveys, focus groups, exit interviews, and informal staff-student engagement.

8.6 Notwithstanding the above, the RG noted that the gender composition of academic staff is currently unbalanced with only 27% female academic staff, who are concentrated in the lower Assistant Professor grade. All three current Full Professors are male, and all professional staff are female.

8.7 In relation to the student cohort, it was noted positively that this is more balanced with 52% female at undergraduate level and 60% female at graduate taught level, which is very positive. There is some concern however that the balance is skewed at graduate research level, with only 31% female postgraduate students.

8.8 Overall the RG noted that the School communities are composed of a wide range of individuals with diverse backgrounds and circumstances, both in staff and in student cohorts. The School has shown that they value this diversity and view it as a great asset. Their Athena Swan award also demonstrates the commitment to provide an environment in which all members of the community can thrive.

Commendations

8.9 The RG commends the School's efforts in promoting Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), in particular the availability of school funding to drive and generate EDI events and policies. The recent award of an Athena Swan Bronze award demonstrates the School's clear commitment to equality, diversity and inclusiveness.

8.10 The generation of the School's EDI action plan is highly commended. The plan contains a significant and very welcome number of recommendations, which the RG found to be excellent, with many novel suggestions.

8.11 The RG also acknowledges and commends the School's significant efforts to address the gender imbalance in the School, in particular with the recruitment of a new female full Professor in Sustainable Development post under UCD's matching funding for the HEI's Senior Academic Leadership Initiative (SALI). This will help somewhat to address the gender imbalance at the most senior level within the School.

Recommendations

8.12 The RG recommend that the University and the College support the School's ongoing efforts to address the gender imbalance among the faculty in SPIRe. The RG recommends that the School advocate with the College and the University for extra resources to resolve this EDI issue.

8.13 The RG recommends that a balanced shortlist be generated by the School for the current and future Ad Astra rounds, with the School's Athena Swan recommendations for recruitment being used to identify strong female candidates.

8.14 It is also strongly recommended that female staff are encouraged and supported to undertake the Aurora Leadership training opportunities to develop leadership skills and to optimise the leadership potential of women.

8.15   The RG recommends that the existing Athena Swan committee should be maintained and its remit expanded to include EDI activities.

9. University Support Services

General Comments and Context

9.1   The School works closely and effectively with a range of UCD support services across a variety of different contexts, including UCD Library, IT Services, College Office, UCD Research Innovation and Impact (UCDRII), UCD HR and UCD Global. This engagement facilitates student-learning support, teaching and learning activity, research activity, research impact and international student recruitment.

9.2   The RG met with representatives from a number of these support services during the site visit. Working relationships between SPIRe and the support services were found be to very positive with all groups complimentary regarding their interactions with SPIRe, who were described as "excellent, engaged and pragmatic".

9.3   While it was evident from discussions that the UCDRII has worked closely with the School in the development of grant-funding applications, the RG understood that there have been some challenges with staffing levels, occasionally leading to challenges with pre-award administration. Similarly, staffing levels in UCD Finance post-award area has led to some delays in the answering of queries; the RG acknowledged that recruitment and retention of professional staff is a university wide challenge and seems particularly acute where expertise in certain systems are required and were reassured that resourcing has been put in place to deal with these issues.

9.4   The student advisory system also appears to be under considerable stress, with issues apparent over resourcing and waiting lists for professional counselling services are growing. SPIRe has been singled out for praise in its responsiveness to student requirements.

9.5   College Office administrative supports are provided in relation to student progression, the management of student records and extenuating circumstances and the grade approvals process (GAP). This relationship appears to function very well.

9.6   Staff within SPIRe are aware of and make use of the online learning tools, student supports, administrative and research platforms and systems available through InfoHub.

Commendations

9.7   The College administrative supports have been expanded and are supportive of school activities.

9.8   Engagement with the library is very positive, especially through the library liaison officer.

9.9   Continuous improvements in the University IT systems have made many processes smoother. School and College support for dealing with the requirements of distressed students are well established.

9.10   UCD Global supports the School in the inward flow of graduate taught international students.

Recommendations

9.11   It was not apparent to the RG that the School actively engages with UCD Careers Network to develop career related skills, therefore consideration might be given to the further development of 'Career Readiness' components/sessions (eg careers evening) at both undergraduate and graduate taught levels to ensure that all students have awareness of and access to career advice in preparation for the job market.

9.12   The School should engage further with the College Internship Manager to provide further oversight and input into the internship opportunities within the graduate taught degree programmes. The development of internships with prestigious institutions can be used to further increase the profile of the School and may provide other opportunities such as high profile invited speakers and/or EU funding opportunities.

9.13   The RG recommends that the School continue to work with UCD Global in respect of the recruitment of international students to postgraduate programmes to continue to identify the highest quality graduate taught, PhD students and candidates for scholarship applications.

9.14   The School Research Manager should continue to work closely with UCD Research and other post award support services to facilitate efficient and timely processes, for example, during recruitment and financial reporting.

UCD School of Politics and International Relations

Response to the Review Group Report

The task of developing the Self-Assessment Report was a valuable reflective exercise, which facilitated the School to review its position from a number of perspectives, highlight and confirm our strengths and opportunities, identify areas of good practice and evaluate our weaknesses and challenges in a systematic way. The Review Group Site Visit, albeit online only, was a positive and constructive experience. We are very pleased with the positive Review Group Report and we welcome the endorsement of the Review Group for our activities through commendations. We will carefully consider the recommendations during the Quality Improvement Planning process, which will be integrated into a wider strategic planning process in the School during the coming months.

There was a high level of engagement from all staff categories and from the student community, both in compiling the Self-Assessment Report and in interacting with the Review Group during the virtual site visit. The School wishes to thank the Review Group for their time, expertise and constructive comments, both during the visit and in their helpful report.

Many of the recommendations of the report align with the Schools current plans and activities for development. As the comments below will show, four of the five priority recommendations are already being actively pursued. Similarly, many of the more detailed recommendations, which will also be addressed in the Quality Implementation Plan, align with ongoing policy developments in the School. We appreciate this endorsement of our direction of travel and will of course pay particular attention to those recommendations that are new.

With specific reference to the prioritised recommendations identified by the Review Group, the School's initial proposals/comments are outlined below:

Student:staff ratios

> *There is an urgent need to address student:staff ratios, which are high by institutional standards and international norms. In the absence of changes to the Employment Control Framework and/or the University Resource Allocation Model, the RG recommends that SPIRe should be prioritised in current and future Ad-Astra recruitment rounds in order to address student:staff ratios. (2.9)*

Addressing the high student:staff ratio is a top priority of the School, and we actively engage with the Ad Astra process, the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative (SALI) professorial scheme, and strategic hiring opportunities provided in UCD to be able to hire beyond the current budgetary and Employment Control Framework (ECF) constraints. This coming academic year we expect one additional Ad Astra Fellow and one SALI full professor and we pay continuous attention to opportunities for strategic hires.

Given the severity of the issue however, these methods are not sufficient to fully address the student:staff ratio. A revision of the resource allocation model that allows for the School to retain a larger proportion of the fee income and a revision of the ECF would be necessary to improve the situation further.

Administrative burden

> *Increasing student numbers have severely impacted the administrative burden and warrant additional administrative support.* (3.21)

As part of the next round of budget negotiations with the University, the School will consider and evaluate opportunities to hire additional administrative staff. In particular in the context of the online MSc degree, which creates a significant additional burden for the administrative team and additional support may be necessary as it. Consideration might also be given to possibilities for pooling of administrative support across Schools, in areas where individual Schools require only part-time support, or where a School is temporarily understaffed.

Career advice

> *The Review Group recommends that consideration be given to stage specific career advisory sessions for undergraduates to help them navigate the diversity of modules, particularly at stages 3 and 4. The Review Group recommends also that consideration be given to the development of typical pathways towards a specialisation. (5.23)*

The School has already begun work to address this recommendation. The School Executive will deliberate further and develop plans to implement both informal pathways to advise our Politics and International Relations students through the various options in the undergraduate degree, as well as implement additional formal pathways through the undergraduate programme, such as pathways targeting journalistic careers, or those targeting secondary school teaching in politics.

Dublin European Institute

> *In the post Brexit arena, a revitalisation of the Dublin European Institute with a renewed focus on EU institutions, politics and policy-making should be considered as both an opportunity and a necessity. (6.23)*

The School strongly agree with this recommendation and also envisage a revival of the DEI's focus on EU institutions and policy-making. As the DEI is an interdisciplinary institute that covers the politics, law, and economics of European integration, the process of revitalisation of the DEI may well involve greater engagement from other affiliated Schools, including potentially a transfer of the DEI to a different School. In this context, SPIRe would still remain closely engaged with the DEI and various colleagues continue to work on topics related to Brexit and European integration.

Gender imbalance

> *The Review Group recommends that the University and the College support the School's ongoing efforts to address the gender imbalance among the faculty in SPIRe. The Review Group recommends that the School advocate with the College and the University for extra resources to resolve this EDI issue.*

The gender imbalance primarily among academic staff is a serious concern for the School and we actively engage with opportunities to address this issue. The main example of this is the recent recruitment of a SALI Professor in Sustainable Development, which will bring in a senior and prominent female academic into the School, who will also help bring new momentum to the area of development studies. Through the Ad Astra scheme and through our own recent hiring processes, we have also been able to recruit several new female academic colleagues into the School, somewhat improving the gender balance issue. Significant further support is needed to address both the student:staff ratio and the male:female ratio among staff.(8.12)

UCD School of Politics and International Relations

Quality Review Remote Site Visit:
11- 14 April 2022

TIMETABLE

Monday 11 April 2022	
All times are local Irish time	
09.00-09.30	3.1 College Principal
09.30-12.00	Review Group only – Key observations & break
12.00-12.45	Review Group prep
12.45-13.30	3.2 Head of School
13.30-14.00	Review Group only – Key observations & break
14.00-14.45	3.3 Discussion of Finances - Head of School, School Manager, CFM
14.45-15.15	Review Group only – Key observations & break
15.15-15.45	3.4 Programme Deans
15.45-16.15	Review Group only – Key observations and prep
16.15-17.00	3.5 Welcome Session – Acting Registrar/ Deputy President

Tuesday 12 April 2022	
All times are local Irish time	
08.45-09.15	Private meeting of Review Group
09.15-10.00	4.1 RG meet with representative group of faculty staff – primary focus on Teaching and Learning and Curriculum issues
10.00-10.30	Review Group only – Key observations & break
10.30-11.00	4.2 Directors of Centres, institutes & labs
11.00-11.30	Review Group only – Key observations & break
11.30-12.15	4.3 RG meet with representative group of faculty staff - research committee
12.15-13.00	Review Group only – Key observations & break for lunch
13.00-13.15	Review Group preparation for afternoon
13.15-14.00	4.4 Representative group of Undergraduate students
14.00-14.30	Review Group only – Key observations & break
14.30-15.15	4.5 School Graduate Studies Committee Representatives
15.15-15.30	Key observations & break
15.30-16.15	4.6 Representatives of Research and Taught Postgraduate students, Recent Graduates
16.15-17.00	Review Group only – Key observations and prep for next day

Wednesday 13 April 2022	
All times are local Irish time	
09.30-10.00	Private meeting of Review Group
10.00-10.30	5.1 VP for Research and Innovation or nominee
10.30-11.00	Review Group only – Key observations & break
11.00-11.30	5.2 Representatives of EDI
11.30-12.00	Review Group only – Key observations & break
12.00-12.45	5.3 Professional Staff
12.45-13.30	Review Group only – Key observations & break for Lunch
13.30-14.30	Review Group only – Prep for afternoon & report drafting
14.30-15.00	5.4 Newly Appointed Staff
15.00-15.30	Review Group only – Key observations & break
15.30-16.15	5.5 School support service representatives (e.g., Student advisors, UCD Global Research Finance, Registry)
16.15-16.45	Review Group only – Key observations & break
16.45-17.45	5.6 External Stakeholder meeting
17.45-18.00	Key observations and wrap up

Thursday 14 April 2022	
All times are local Irish time	
09.30-10.30	Review Group only – Report Drafting and preparation for Exit Presentations
10.30-11.00	*Review Group continue to work on the Review Group Report*
11.00-11.15	Review Group break
11.15-13.00	Review Group only – Report Drafting and preparation for Exit Presentations
13.00-13.45	Review Group break for lunch
13.45-14.45	Review Group only –preparation for Exit Presentations
14.45-15.00	6.1 Review Group feedback initial outline commendations and findings College Principal; UCD Director of Quality
15.00-15.15	Review Group break
15.15-15.30	6.2 Review Group feedback initial outline commendations and findings Head of School; UCD Director of Quality
15.30-16.00	Review Group only – final preparation for exit presentation and Transition to
16.00-16.30	6.3 Exit Presentation of Review Group initial key findings to Head of School; all School staff; and UCD Director of Quality
16.30-17.00	Review Group only – Remote Site Visit close out & next steps