

## Reviewing the Review: An Evaluation of the use of a Standardised Academic Programme Review Process

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### Abstract

*Programmatic review should take place at regular intervals. There are major benefits in undertaking a consistent programme review process in an institution. Such benefits include the standard gains of a well conducted review such as, identification and articulation of good practice and quality enhancements at programme level, highlighting possible need for change, encouraging openness, and transparency, using the programme review to inform other appraisal processes such as professional reviews etc., plus additional returns such as well as sharing of good practice and enabling more equitable comparisons between programmes. A standardised Annual Programme Review (APR) process was developed and implemented across third level institution in the academic year 2012/2013. The Annual Programme Review captured student voice, external examiner reports, statistical data and action/s since previous review. Following completion of programme reviews across the university using a standard template, the APR process itself was evaluated. Using questionnaires and focus group, the programme review process was evaluated by the Associated Deans for Teaching and Learning. The findings and recommendations are presented here.*

### 1. Introduction

Programme review is an important and integral part of academic education. Such review can demonstrate quality assurance of academic programmes and delivery. This paper examines the process of annual academic programme review process in a third level institution. Looking at the history of programme and quality evaluation, which Harvey did this in his paper which considered quality evaluation in the United Kingdom. He notes the development of formal and external quality processes for third level grew from the government need to see higher education more responsive to varied demands, both nationally and internationally as well as responding to the need for value for money and accountability for the use public funding [1]. Programmatic review should take place at regular intervals and there are statutory requirements with the European Standards and Guidelines [2] which articulate the requirement of regular programme review. However the review should not

just be carried out because of a legislative or statutory requirement, there are major benefits in undertaking programme review. If conducted well these benefits can include, identifying and articulating good practice and quality enhancements at programme level, highlighting possible need for change, using programme review results to inform other appraisal processes such as professional reviews etc., encouraging openness, and transparency and sharing of good practice [3]. Bers also recognised the ability of programme reviews to signal institutional effectiveness as well as articulating the strengths and weaknesses of a programme and allowing the institution to use these results for improvement. [3]. Also, as recognised by Lockett [4] to ensure buy in from academics, it is essential that programme review is meaningful as well as offering the benefits mentioned. In her paper Lockett [4] explores the theoretical underpinning for effective programme review, using social realist theory to underpin programme evaluation and ensure a robust process which can aid buy in from academics and further help to ensure the programme review is meaningful and offers clear benefits. Programmatic review should take place at regular intervals.

As the literature search showed there is limited empirical work available on annual review processes at third level. With current emphasis on quality, developments in education and accountability both nationally and internationally, the importance of such reviews shall increase.

### 2. Study

This study explores the introduction of a standardised programme review template across a third level institution. The European Standards and Guidelines [2] together with the IUQB national good practice guidelines [5] give clear direction on what should be considered in a programme review. These standards and guidelines and after consideration of the literature an annual academic programme review template was drawn up for use in the university. These elements which were captured in the template:

- follow up action/s on issues highlighted in previous annual reports have been/are being addressed appropriately
- curriculum, programme design, content and assessment

- issues highlighted by external examiners both positive and/or negative are being addressed appropriately
- statistics on student numbers
- report on student progression and performance
- issues highlighted by students have been/are being addressed appropriately and that feedback provided to students on these issues
- marketing initiatives
- report on proposed changes to academic structures for the following year and to allow full defence of proposed changes to be provided

The programme review was designed to address the requirements for programme quality assurance and meet statutory requirements such as European Standards and Guidelines. It offered a structured approach for programme review and quality assurance with learning outcomes a key instrument for demonstrating curriculum quality in terms of programme to module mapping, assessment and valid demonstration of student achievement. It aimed to ensure streamlining and updating of modules and programmes generating highly focused relevant, quality assured, easily understood learning outcomes with valuable inputs from students and external sources (employers, professional bodies). It would aid both students and staff and help ensure a clear articulation of programme quality and development.

### 3. Methodology

A sequential multi-methods design was used in the evaluation of the annual programme review process. There were two separate phases: a quantitative phase using a questionnaire-based survey completed first, followed by a qualitative phase using focus group discussion. The two phases were then brought together and converged in the analysis. The rationale for this approach is that the qualitative phase further enhances and adds depth to the quantitative data and analysis [6]. Following completion of APR, review of the process commenced, as mentioned earlier it was sequential starting with:

- Questionnaires sent to each programme chair
- Data collected and themes identified
- Follow up focus group with convenience sample of programme chairs to explore themes was conducted by an independent facilitator

#### 3.1. Questionnaire

The survey was based on a series of questions developed and refined over the course of several meetings of the authors. A number of draft versions of the questionnaire were developed and piloted by the authors before the final version was agreed and

sent to all programme chairs in the university. The APRs were conducted at the start of the academic year 12/13 and reviewed the programmes over the previous 12 months. The APR review information was meant to be available to the programme teams for discussion at programme team meetings in November to inform planning for following academic year. It is planned that all APRs should build towards a 5 yearly in depth periodic programme review Periodic Programme Review (PPR).

The questionnaire asked about:

- Understanding of rationale for APR
- Understanding of APR process
- Ease of completion
- Appropriateness of timing
- Relevant information included in APR
- Statistical data

Opened ended questions asking for positives and negative of the APR process were also included:

#### 3.2. Analysis

Tests were conducted (Cronbach's alpha) during the analysis of the questionnaire which showed good internal reliability. The response rate (49%) from the questionnaire showed a high level of interest.

#### 3.3. Results

The 145 programmes were reviewed with 121 programme chairs; there was a 49% response rate to the questionnaire. Both undergraduate (46%) and post graduate (54%) programmes were reviewed. Quality is a fundamental element of the academic process in the university with regular school and faculty as well as theme reviews such as student engagement. This together with professional reviews which many programmes have and a strong accreditation processes meant that programme chairs were familiar with the concept of quality if not with the consistent template approach for capturing same. The initial questions asked about the programmes chair understanding of the rationale for the implementation of the standardised programme review process and ease of use of the template. The responses were positive with the majority of programme chairs (54%) clearly agreeing with the rationale for the APR (see Figure 1). The second question asked about ease of use of the template and here the responses were not as clearly in agreement with (36%) disagreeing the template was easy to use but as many as 25% neither agreed or disagreed (see Figure 2).

The survey also included questions about student survey results and external examiner reports (see

Figure 3). Staff did not appear to find it easy to source the additional relevant data required though the cause of this was unclear in the questionnaire responses. When questioned about the timeline for completion of the APR there appeared to be no major problems (see Figure 4) though interestingly an issue did arise in relation to the actual schedule of the APRs at the focus group. The final element of the questionnaire was two open questions asking for positive and negative aspects of the APR.

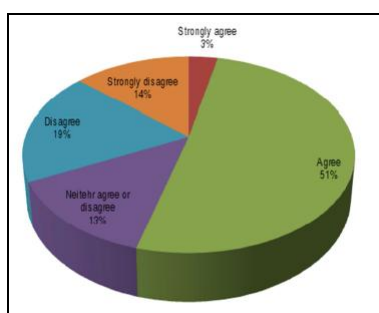


Figure 1. Clear rationale for APR

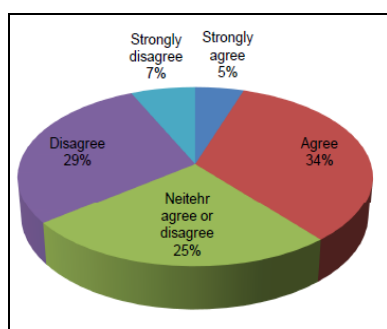


Figure 2. APR template easy to use

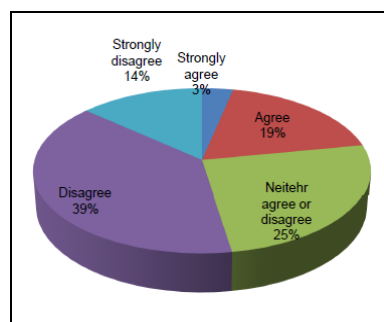


Figure 3. Easy to source information

Positives and negatives tended to balance out but generated some interesting and useful information, with comments such as:

*“The process was useful for me as a new Chair as it ensured that all the key programme areas be looked at afresh ahead of the Semester 1 Programme Board. The process, including the data in the pre-populated template areas, provided an informational*

*framework and a key to areas for future planning and action”.* (Respondent 4)

*“Clear indication of which academic year is involved needed”.* (Respondent 12)

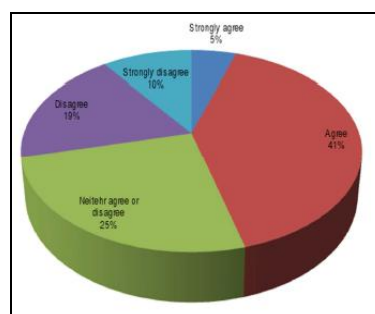


Figure 4. Appropriate timeline for completion of APR

The quantitative comments were illuminating and give additional insight into the APR review process. To explore further, a focus was conducted to gain further information into the APR review process as perceived by the programme chairs. The focus was facilitated by an independent facilitator.

### 3.4. Focus Group

Themes were developed following analysis of the questionnaire which were then explored at the focus group. It was agreed that it would be important to have an independent facilitator to facilitate the focus group to help ensure openness. The focus group was made up of a random sample of programme chairs who responded to an e-mail invitation saying they could attend the focus group at a specific time.

The themes for the focus group were:

- Purpose of APR
- What worked well with APR
- What could be improved with APR
- Enhancement

The programme chairs identified the chief purpose of the APR as review of the programme, identify issues and ensure solutions are put in place. An additional purpose which was highlighted was the ability of the APR to identify changes that could or should be considered. The programme chairs also acknowledged that it was good to have a standardised formal review at school level and it offered a useful mechanism for capturing feedback, flagging issues and addressing them. It would also inform the more in depth periodic programme review that will be conducted at five year intervals. The APR would give the periodic review more depth and a wider perspective.

Considering possible improvements for the APR process generated discussion about where the information would be seen and if it could be utilised in areas such as staff appraisal. There were also

comments voiced here about the information required and the need for easy capturing of the data required. This factor had also been highlighted in the questionnaire responses. Interestingly despite the positive response on the timeline for the APR in the questionnaire in the focus group an issue was identified about timing and a suggestion made that there may be a need for may need separate time for post graduate and undergraduate programmes. AS the post graduate programmes usually complete at different time in the academic year. Finally a need for training on completion of the APR, particularly for new chairs was identified. As this was the first year the APR process was completed across the university, such a finding was to be expected. Discussion: Quality is essential in academic programmes and their delivery. If is not sufficient to say that a programmes are 'quality programmes' it is essential that such claims can be substantiated. Done correctly annual programme reviews can articulate and substantiate the quality of an academic programme but the annual review process must be comprehensive and give voice to all those involved in the programme. This includes students and external examiners and there must be engagement for those involved in delivery of the programme. The APR template used in this study aims to capture all these elements but the process itself must be also be vigorous. The review of the APR process has been informative and useful. The need for regular reviews is identified in the literature but examples of the format of the reviews are limited and research into their use is equally restricted. While programme review has always been part of programme development and delivery in the institution this was the first year standardised APR's templates were used across the university. The review of the first implementation has given valuable information and will inform the future APR process.

The literature also highlighted the need for 'buy-in' from academics, the review of the APR review process is helping to ensure the APR addresses not only the quality needs of the academic programme but also the needs of the academic staff. As seen in the literature while there is much useful and informative commentary on quality and review in higher education there is limited empirical research. There is a need for further research to be carried out in this area. As mentioned there are many benefits to APR. It is needed to maintain and improve standards and also to address statutory requirements. It should inform development. It allows programme teams to have a formal and consistent record of the programme. However it is important that the APR process is robust, transparent and captures the information needed. Further research is needed. As academia becomes more standardised and regulated, it is essential that processes to capture and spread

good practice are identified. Annual programme review is once such method.

#### 4. Recommendations

Some recommendations which have resulted from this review include:

*Training in the completion of APR - this could possibly be in a blended format, using on-line as well as information sessions.*

Consider differing times for under and post graduate awards- this would be individual to the needs of individual academic institutions and dependant on the academic calendar but such a change is being considered as a result of the review reported here. Highlight benefits- as highlighted in the literature, it is important that APRs are meaningful and offer benefits to have buy in from academics therefore it is important that a consistent positive message about APRs and their potential usage is given.

#### 5. Conclusion

This study has explored the use of a standardised annual review process in a single university. It has highlighted some benefits and issues. As programmes continue to grow and evolve, the need also continues for regular review. This 'review of the review' reported here will inform and aid growth and development of the APR and PPR in the institution. It is hoped that the information garnered can also aid others developing similar processes.

#### 6. References

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