



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland  
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

QQI REPORT [MARCH 2016]

# ‘Quality in an Era of Diminishing Resources’ Irish Higher Education 2008-15

An analysis of published institutionally-organised quality review reports of academic departments, schools and programmes in Irish public higher education institutions



# CONTENTS

1.	Acknowledgement	5
2.	Executive Summary	7
3.	Introduction	9
4.	Scope	13
5.	Key Themes	19
5.1	The General Economic Climate and Reduced Resources	20
5.2	Staffing and the Student Learning Experience	23
5.2.1	Staff cuts	23
5.2.2	Promotion and leadership	25
5.2.3	Work overload	27

5.2.4	Reduced staff development opportunities	27
5.2.5	Student learning experience	28
5.2.6	Staff commitment	29
5.2.7	Teaching and research	30
<b>5.3</b>	<b>The Learning and Teaching Environment</b>	<b>31</b>
5.3.1	Equipment and facilities	31
5.3.2	Library and information technology	33
<b>5.4</b>	<b>Other Issues</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>6.</b>	<b>Concluding Remarks</b>	<b>37</b>



# 1

## Acknowledgement

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) wishes to acknowledge the expert role of Dr Claire Carney in conducting background research and analysis and for drafting this report. Claire is currently Executive Strategist at the University of the West of Scotland having previously been Head of Enhancement at the Scotland office of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA Scotland). Claire was commissioned by QQI to carry out an analysis of the statutory institution-led quality review reports produced by the public higher education institutions in Ireland in the period 2008 to 2015 and to highlight comments in the reports related to the quality of teaching and learning and the student experience during that period of significant reduction in the resources available to the institutions.



## 2

# Executive Summary

The period since 2008 coincided with a severe economic downturn in the Irish economy and a concomitant reduction in resources available to the public education sector in general and higher education institutions in particular. During this period, the state grant to institutions fell by 38%. While additional fee income was received from students, overall funding fell by nearly 14% at a time when full-time student numbers increased by 25%. The question of whether this resulted in a reduction in quality in higher education has been legitimately posed by commentators in these circumstances.

Quality in higher education can be an elusive concept and is often defined more by its absence than presence. Institutions, funders and regulators have a number of instruments designed to measure and improve quality. These include surveys of student satisfaction and engagement, surveys of employer satisfaction with graduates, reports of external examiners and periodic institutional quality reviews organised by external quality assurance agencies. Irish higher education institutions, as part of their statutory quality assurance responsibilities, are also required to organise periodic evaluations of the quality of education and to report the outcome of these evaluations. However, it is important to note that there are no internationally agreed definitions or metrics on what constitutes quality in higher education

This report seeks to analyse, in particular, the comments in relation to any perceived reduction in quality of teaching and learning in the internal quality review reports published by Irish public higher education institutions during the period 2008-15, coinciding with the period of reduced funding available to the institutions. The specific source of evidence is the formal published (online) quality peer review reports of the academic units (departments or schools) and programmes of study in the publicly-funded Irish higher education institutions. These reports, although the product of an institution's internal quality assurance system, are drawn together by a review panel comprised mainly of reputable external national and international peers.

A significant number of reports commented on the general economic climate in Ireland and the significant reduction in funding for institutions in the period under review. These cuts were coupled with an increase in student numbers over the period of analysis but also with a reduction in associated funding through the Recurrent Grant Allocation Model operated by the Higher Education Authority. While it is not unusual to occasionally see finance issues and associated impacts mentioned in peer review reports, the number and nature of references across these reports was significant.

The most prevalent feature across all years and by type of institution was the impact of reduced resources for staffing. This was by far the most commented upon area in the reports and there were many clear examples cited of the ways in which cuts to staffing were negatively impacting on the work of units. The ramifications of continued reduced resources primarily as a result of reduced income and controls in place from the national public sector Employment Control Framework (ECF, in place since 2009) were seen to be impacting across key areas: reduced staffing (coupled with an increase in student numbers) with subsequent increased workload; reduced promotion opportunities; reduced staff development opportunities and increasing tensions between time spent on teaching and time spent on research. Ultimately reports warned about the perceived impact on the quality of the student learning experience.

Reports also contained commentary on the impact of reduced resources on the learning and teaching environment particularly on the maintenance of facilities and equipment, IT infrastructure and library resources. There was awareness within reports not just of the negative consequences of these environments on current students but also on the ability of institutions to continue to attract students, particularly international students who bring with them important additional income. What is striking is the general impression from some reports that units have reached a 'tipping point' where continued cuts/reductions may have serious and irretrievable implications for their future sustainability.

What is commendable and important to draw from many of the reports sampled is the continued emphasis by institutions on enhancing the student learning experience and the continued commitment of staff to rationalise, innovate and minimise the impact of reduced resources on students.

Since the significant downturn in the Irish economy arising from the global crisis in 2008, there has been increasing interest from policy makers and contributors to the higher education and training system in Ireland about the effect on quality in higher education institutions (HEIs) given the attendant reduction in funding between 2008 and the present day. The matter was discussed as recently as January 2016 by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection<sup>1</sup> and was also considered at a dialogue in September 2015 on the Future Funding of Higher Education in Ireland<sup>2</sup> organised by the Royal Irish Academy (RIA).

At that RIA meeting, Tom Boland, the Chief Executive of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) (the body responsible for the public funding of higher education in Ireland), summarised<sup>3</sup> the then funding context as follows:

*“Over the period 2007/08 to 2014/15:*

- *There has been a fall in state grants for higher education of 38%.*
- *Overall funding for higher education has fallen by at least 13.5%.*
- *The overall number of full-time students has increased by 25%.*

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1 Transcript of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection discussion on ‘*The quality of teaching in higher education*’ (20 January, 2016) <http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/Debates%20Authoring/DebatesWebPack.nsf/committeetakes/EDJ2016012000002?opendocument#F00100>

2 *A Dialogue on Future Funding of Higher Education in Ireland*, (Royal Irish Academy, 2015) <https://www.ria.ie/news/policy/dialogue-future-funding-higher-education-ireland>

3 Tom Boland, speech at RIA dialogue on higher education funding (Royal Irish Academy, 23 September 2015) [http://www.heai.ie/sites/default/files/ria\\_tb\\_funding\\_speech\\_v2\\_002.pdf](http://www.heai.ie/sites/default/files/ria_tb_funding_speech_v2_002.pdf)

*This has all resulted in an overall decrease in the total funding per student of 22% (from €11,000 to €9,000). At the same time the numbers employed in higher education institutions fell by 13%. In real terms the situation is worse because if we had maintained staffing ratios as they were at the beginning of the crisis we have effectively taken 4,000 staff out of the system.”*

What impact this has had on the ‘quality of provision’ is a key question for all stakeholders and is probably difficult to capture in a clear tangible way. The context has been captured well in the documents<sup>4</sup> arising from the consideration of the group on Future Funding of Higher Education chaired by Peter Cassells (referred to as the Cassells Group). These documents have focussed on some of the more direct known indicators such as the reduction in state capital grants and the impact of the reduction in available experienced staff with some of the obvious consequences cited as evidence:

- » the reduction in the state capital grants together with the less flexible approach available to the annual core operating budgets to offset any acute shortfalls; which has resulted in well publicised gaps in funding for capital maintenance, upgrades and developments;
- » the reduction in available staff due to the conditions imposed by the state’s public sector Employment Control Framework (ECF, in place since 2009) and the increased staff-student ratio. This refers to the ratio of academic staff to students which is currently at 1:19 and well above the OECD average of 1:15.6 according to the HEA and the Cassells Group.

These are in themselves indications of a changed operating environment for HEIs where staff resources and facilities are core inputs or, in a commercial context, they are referred to as “critical success factors”. However, a number of public conversations, debates and dialogue have cited the implicit intangible impact of reduced funding

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4 Discussion documents on the Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education (Cassells Group, 2015) <http://www.heai.ie/news/discussion-documents-expert-group-future-funding-higher-education>

and staff when coupled with an increasing student population. The Cassells Group report states that while staff student ratio is:

*“only one of a number of factors that contribute to student success, the level of staffing does provide capacity for many [perhaps unnoticed by stakeholders] elements of good practice in high quality teaching such as pedagogies that allow active learning, prompt feedback and respect for diverse learning styles. It also allows for greater levels of engagement with students – smaller classes and tutorials, closer supervision of project work, and greater capacity to incorporate research projects and work placements”.*

The Chief Executive of the HEA provided further comment in his RIA speech by saying that there is *“less and less room for innovative approaches to pedagogy and curricula, work experience and internships becoming nice to dos instead of core to the quality of graduates”* and that *“we are also hearing anecdotally about institutional decisions to reduce content, diversity and invaluable components like placements and practice-based learning from degree programmes in order to operate within the confines of the available budgets.”*

The overall question of how the Irish higher education system is currently positioned for future competitive growth was posed by Tom Boland when he offered two possible scenarios:

*“... do we have a system which is now much more efficient, developing the same quality of graduates and delivering the same excellence in research for significantly less resource, or do we have a system now characterised by poor infrastructure, a decline in quality and which is severely at risk of breaking down unless the trend of underinvestment is reversed?”*



## 4 Scope

QQI was established by the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act (2012) through the amalgamation of four bodies that between them were responsible for qualifications and quality assurance in the further and higher education sector. The Irish public higher education system consists of 7 universities and Dublin Institute of Technology (which have self-awarding powers) and 13 other Institutes of Technology (which have delegated authority to make their own awards from QQI).

As the state agency responsible for external quality assurance of Irish higher education, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is aware of how difficult it is to point to a particular event or series of events to seek reliable evidence of reduced quality.

QQI has itself in place a number of mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of quality assurance in Irish higher education. In addition to the mandated periodic review of the effectiveness of quality assurance in the individual higher education institutions conducted by QQI (and its predecessor bodies), QQI receives Annual Institutional Quality Reports (AIQRs) from the public higher education institutions and conducts annual dialogue visits (ADMs) to the universities, institutes of technology and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI). QQI also publishes, on an annual basis, a summary report on the themes arising in the AIQRs.

In addition to highlighting aspects of good practice for enhancing quality in the self-awarding sector, the QQI summary report for 2015<sup>5</sup> (based on the 2014 AIQRs from the universities and other self-awarding institutions) also provides some sector-level analysis on how the economic environment, the reduction in state funding and the

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5 *Quality within the Universities, RCSI and DIT in 2014 - A summary report (QQI, 2015)* <http://www.qqi.ie/Publications/AIR%20Summary%20Report-2014-WEB.pdf>

Employment Control Framework (ECF) are perceived to have impacted on quality in higher education. The following extract is illustrative of the theme:

*“The economic environment, the reduction of state funding and the Employment Control Framework (ECF) continue to be highlighted by the institutions as significant factors impacting on quality. Some of the impacts cited were increased student/staff ratios, constraints on staffing levels, challenges pertaining to the maintenance of buildings and resources, the sustainability of the delivery of particular programmes and the pressure on staff time leading to an unwillingness by staff to take on additional burdens.*

*Two institutions reported that external review teams highlighted concerns relating to their financial position, constraints on staff development and challenges filling vacant academic positions and promotion. Another institution highlighted a concern relating to the financial burdens impacting on a sizable proportion of their students. This was due to an increase in the Student Contribution Charge, a reduction in the Student Maintenance Grant and a reduction in affordable accommodation available in the greater Dublin area which has led to long and expensive daily commutes for students.*

*Other factors impacting on quality that were highlighted by institutions include: continuing uncertainty regarding the budgetary framework and associated projected performance-based funding; regulatory reform and uncertainty in the International Education Sector and Student Immigration Scheme combined with increased numbers of international students; the anticipated QQI guidelines, which will impact upon the profile of the institution; and the impact of the implementation of the QQI Act, including the volume and implications of Green and White Policy Papers and associated activities.”*

In addition to the above reports, the individual public higher education institutions are required under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012 and the predecessor Universities Act (1997)

and Qualifications Act (1999) to put in place procedures to periodically review (and publish the outcomes of any such review of) the quality of the education, research and related services they provide.

These reviews look at the domain of the academic disciplinary unit (typically the department, school or college) or the study programme (or groups of related programmes). These reports are more numerous and provide a greater level of granularity than is possible in the more high-level institutional reports undertaken by QQI.

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area<sup>6</sup> (adopted by the Ministerial Conference in May 2015) include standard ESG 3.4 on thematic analysis which notes that quality assurance agencies “gain information on programmes and institutions that can be useful beyond the scope of a single process, providing useful material for structured analysis across the higher education system” and that “a thorough and careful analysis of this information will show developments, trends and area of good practice or persistent difficulty.” The present report has been prepared in fulfilment of the expectation that QQI publish reports that synthesise findings from Quality Assurance activities. It has been prepared to provide a thematic overview of the commentary in relation to the quality of teaching and learning in the institution-led quality reports between 2008-15, coincident with the period of significantly reducing resources in the Irish higher education system. These reports covered a very broad range of disciplines and also services related to provision<sup>7</sup>.

The source of evidence is the formal published (online) quality peer review reports of the publicly-funded Irish higher education institutions. Although these reports are the product of an institution’s internal quality assurance systems, they are the statutory product of the evaluation by peer experts largely from outside the institution and many from outside the state.

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6 *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (2015)* [http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/ESG\\_2015.pdf](http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/ESG_2015.pdf)

7 The institutional reports referenced in this report include a broad range of fields and disciplines: Business, Computing and Law; Archaeology, Creative Arts, Cultural Studies, Geography, Languages and Literature, Media Studies and Music; Mechanical, Materials, Electrical and Electronic Engineering; Biological, Chemical, Environmental, Food, Mathematical, Pharmaceutical and Physical Sciences; Nursing and Veterinary and Human Medicine. Quality reviews for a range of service departments/units were also analysed.

These internal quality reviews are organised by the institution's quality office (or the Registrar's office) and consist of periodic evaluation (every five or six years) of the academic (department or school), administrative unit, service unit, academic programme or suite of programmes in the institution. The unit produces a self-evaluation report which is sent to the review team in advance of a site visit to the institution where the review team meet with staff and students in the unit and in the wider institution. The review team normally consists of national and international peers in the relevant discipline (supplemented in some cases by staff from the institution but always from outside the unit under review). The review team writes a report highlighting strengths and weaknesses of the unit/programme and makes recommendations for improvement. The report is then published on the institution's website.

In addition to the obvious external accountability requirements, the internal quality reports also provide an opportunity for the institutions, programme teams and/or service units to take a holistic view of the quality and standards of their provision and to:

- » monitor the quality of the student experience, and of teaching and learning opportunities;
- » consider and review the management of the programmes to ensure that a high quality student experience is being provided;
- » evaluate the extent to which intended learning outcomes are being met and standards attained, taking account of the award qualifications and external reference points;
- » initiate specific actions to remedy identified shortcomings and improve current practice if possible, within the resource base;
- » identify areas of good practice and consider ways of dissemination;
- » monitor research activity, including: the management of research activity; assessing the research performance with regard to: research productivity, research income, and recruiting and supporting doctoral students;
- » provide public information on the HEI's capacity to assure the quality and standards of its awards.

A key advantage of accessing peer review reports is that they provide a largely external, independent overview of provision, the evidence of which is drawn from an academic unit's self-evaluation document which is explored and tested through a series of scheduled meetings with staff and students at the institution with the expert review panel. The periodic review is not seen as a "tick box" exercise but a means of continuous improvement and enhancing the student experience.

Given the heterogeneous nature of the institutions it followed that the reporting style across the institutions was varied. Some institutions followed a reporting template which provides an easy mechanism to draw comparisons, others were more free-flowing in style while others merely produced reports consisting of lists of commendations and recommendations. Disappointingly, a large number of institutions did not make their reports available online despite all institutions being required<sup>8</sup> since 2012 to publish the outcomes of the reviews.

For the purpose of this report, peer review reports published (and available online in November 2015) and other reports from programmatic reviews indicated online by public higher education institutions during the period 2008-2015 were accessed. Two institutions only provided lists of recommendations and commendations in their quality review reports and as such were very much limited in the provision of narrative information and unfortunately a large number of reports also had broken links and inaccessible URLs. The total number of accessible peer review reports for the period in question was counted as 161; of this a sample of 90 reports were analysed for the purposes of the present report which represents 56% of the available sample distributed across 12 (5 universities and 7 institutes of technology) of the 21 public higher education institutions within the seven-year period.

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8 Section 28(4) (e) of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act (2012) <http://www.oireachtas.ie/documents/bills28/acts/2012/a2812.pdf>



# 5

## Key Themes from institution-led reports

This report is focusing on the outputs of evaluative quality assurance processes, rather than the institutional processes and procedures themselves and includes a range of subjects and professional services. It is a qualitative high-level analysis of outcomes identifying key themes across the sample of reports in relation to the perceived impact of reduced resources of quality. Each theme identifies the number of specific references (given in brackets) across the 90 reports analysed but it is important to emphasise that this report does not attempt a rigorous quantitative analysis of areas but rather an identification of key issues.

Three key thematic areas were identified from peer evaluation reports (2008 to 2015):

- » The General Economic Climate and Reduced Resources;
- » Staffing and the Student Learning Experience; and
- » The Learning and Teaching Environment.

Each key theme has a number of subthemes which are explored in each of the sections below.

1. The General Economic Climate and Reduced Resources (24 references \*)
2. Staffing and the Student Learning Experience (91 references)
  - ~ Staff cuts (19); Promotion and leadership (13); Work overload (12); Reduced staff development opportunities (5); Student learning experience (13); Staff commitment (13) and Teaching and research (16).
3. The Learning and Teaching Environment (21 references)
  - ~ Equipment and facilities (11) and Library and Information Technology (10).

\* the numbers in brackets refer to specific references in individual quality review reports in the 90 reports analysed.

In the following sections, the sources of the quotations cited are given as being from either the university or the institute of technology sectors. The individual departments within the institutions are not identified in this report even though these reports are publicly available. This is done to avoid reputational risk to the 12 institutions that have published comprehensive reports and whose reports address the shortcomings of provision most frankly. As all institutions are funded using the same model (allowing for some differences between sectors) and have suffered broadly the same proportionate reductions in funding, there is good reason to believe that the comments are representative of the situation that pertains in all of the institutions.

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## 5.1 Theme 1: The General Economic Climate and Reduced Resources (24 references)

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Many of the reports sampled contained comments on the general economic climate in Ireland and the resulting reduction in funding for institutions. These cuts are coupled with an increase in student numbers but also with a reduction in associated funding from the Higher Education Authority through the Recurrent Grant Allocation Model. While it is not unusual to occasionally see finance issues and associated impacts mentioned in peer review reports internationally, the number and nature of specific references across the recent Irish reports was extensive and stark. It was clear that cuts to public funding had very clearly made their way down to the workings of individual units<sup>9</sup> and many reports positioned their overall evaluation within the economic climate in order to ensure the report was appropriately contextualised. One report went as far as to invite the unit to use the report as a form of evidence to demonstrate the very serious nature of the problems associated with resource reductions.

*“Resourcing within the [unit]: The reviewers are aware that the [unit], in common with many academic units across the HE sector, is working within an environment where resourcing levels are reduced and*

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9 The term ‘unit’ is a summary term for the object of the peer evaluation report, therefore it could refer to a programme, service, department, school or college.

*where resources, once lost, are not replaced. Many of the constraints on available levels of resources are extra-institutional. The review panel regrets the apparent reduction in resources within the [unit], while recognising that similar situations have arisen across the [...] sector in general.” (University Report, 2009)*

*“Income is credited on the basis of a Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM) weighted on student numbers. While there has been a significant increase in student numbers over the five-year period preceding the review, the RGAM unit funding has been cut consistently year on year from €3,867 in 2009 to €2,337 in 2013. In addition, the [unit’s] non-pay budget is also now calculated on RGAM weighted numbers regardless of discipline which has resulted in a 44% reduction in budget.” (Institute of Technology Report, 2014)*

It is worth mentioning that references were made across all years but language became more emotive in later years where the effect of continuing cuts are obviously having a cumulative effect. Some more recent reports commented on the ‘crisis’ nature of the current situation, that the situation was at a ‘tipping point’ and that the events thus far had led to a ‘perfect storm’. Some reports commented on the sustainability of courses and in one particular case a fear that a ‘high value’ course, if resource reductions were to continue, could potentially have its future accreditation from the associated professional body affected, which would be a severe blow not only to the unit, the students and institution but also nationally.

*“It is important to point out that this quality review comes at a point in time where the [unit] is experiencing a “perfect storm” in terms of the overall recession, reductions in higher education funding, the drying up of external research funding and the constraints on the ability to fill current and future vacant positions.” (University Report, 2012)*

Another report noted that:

*“Nationally, this is a time of unprecedented financial difficulty, imposing very serious financial constraints on [HEIs]. It is probably not going too far to say this is an emergency situation, and the [HEI] has to take drastic action in order to survive.” (University Report, 2012)*

Reports noted that while units were on a continual drive to contain or reduce costs there was also an enhanced focus on income generation from new sources of revenue. In the main these income sources stemmed from increasing international student numbers with associated enhanced fees, increase research income and fee-paying postgraduate students where possible. However, there is a running note of caution (which will be more fully explored in the next section) about the difficulties in planning these activities as they require additional investment in staff time to develop and progress, but the focus and challenge is on actually delivering current activities within a reduced resource environment. It was also noted that continual cuts made forward planning beyond an annual cycle very challenging.

*“The Panel is of the view that this situation was untenable however and that the workload involved may have prevented the formulation and implementation of strategic developments highlighted elsewhere in this report.” (Institute of Technology Report, 2013)*

*“The [unit] is in deficit. The current deficit is 2.5 times that of 2011/12 due to a reduction in fee income and an increase in expenditure. The [unit] is looking at ways to balance its books, by increased numbers of overseas students and reducing electricity consumption, for example.” (University Report, 2014)*

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## 5.2 Theme 2: Staffing and the Student Learning Experience (91 references)

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When reviewing the reports, the most prevalent feature across all years and type of institution was the impact of reduced resources for staffing. This was by far the most commented upon area and there were many clear examples of the ways in which cuts to staffing were negatively impacting on the work of units. The ramifications of continued reduced resources primarily as a result of reduced income and controls in place from the national Employment Control Framework were seen to be impacting across key areas: reduced staff (and associated increase in student numbers) with subsequent increased workload; reduced promotion opportunities; reduced staff development opportunities and increasing tensions between time spent on teaching and research. Ultimately reports warned about the impact on the quality of the student learning experience.

### 5.2.1 STAFF CUTS (19 REFERENCES)

The national public sector Employment Control Framework introduced to higher education in 2009 has had far reaching implications not the least of which is the negative impact on staff as a result of its ‘successful’ implementation. There were concerns expressed in reports about upcoming retirements of staff and the impact they would have on already reduced staff numbers and the number of staff on temporary contracts both of which served to influence the motivation of staff and influenced the ability of units to forward plan and ‘grow’ activity.

*“The Employment Control Framework (ECF) imposes serious constraints on the ability of [the unit] to conduct effective succession planning and strategic development of its HR profiles.”*

*(University Report, 2014)*

*“However the Employment Control Framework is hampering programme development. Plans to roll out a degree programme in (the) area of agri-food are on hold and the [unit] is not able to cater for all qualified applicants for its agricultural programmes due to a staff shortage.” (Institute of Technology Report, 2013)*

*“A particular concern of the staff is a number of upcoming retirements from the [unit] and their replacement. The [unit] hopes to be able to recruit surveyors in particular in order to support current programmes but also programme development in this area, but it is not clear to what extent it will be able to replace those staff who are due to retire in the next few years. The Panel notes concerns in relation to the Employment Control Framework which may impact upon the replacement of staff.” (Institute of Technology Report, 2010)*

*“In recent years, a number of staff have left the [unit] and have not yet been replaced. This has placed considerable strain on the existing staff members who do not know when these staff will be replaced and are concerned about the [unit’s] continued ability to provide the same quality education experience with this reduced staffing. Academic staff have a large range of duties including a heavy teaching load, research duties and responsibility for training students for skills competitions. With very few promotional opportunities and incentives available within the [unit] it will be difficult for the [unit] to retain the level of motivation and commitment required for staff to significantly engage further in all of these activities.” (Institute of Technology Report, 2009)*

While there was no explicit mention of student: staff ratio (SSR) in any of the reports there was mention of increased student numbers coupled with a decreasing staff complement. The SSR is a key measure in the provision of higher education and is currently used either as an explicit benchmark, or as a broad guideline, by many public, statutory and regulatory bodies in terms of input quality when accrediting higher education courses. It is quoted by HEIs as an indicator of investment in resources, and importantly is used in a number of national and international league tables for rating higher education institutions, which are of increasing significance both nationally and internationally in a global higher education market. Therefore, the importance or impact of SSR may be masked at a local level but when scaled up to a macro level across an institution it potentially has much wider implications.

*“Relative to peer institutions, the [unit] is rather under-staffed. The age profile is reasonably typical but the proportion of staff on short-term contracts is disproportionately high and despite the increased research activity since the 2008 review, the [unit] does not have a critical mass of permanent staff.”*  
(University Report, 2015)

*The Review Group noted the current fiscal climate and diminishing resources both financial and human, in parallel with increasing student numbers. It was noted that the number of staff [in the HEI] has reduced by approximately 8% during the period 2008-12 with a corresponding increase in student intake.”* (University Report, 2013)

#### 5.2.2 PROMOTION AND LEADERSHIP (13 REFERENCES)

Reports noted the difficulties around promotions and the absence of any promotion activity for a number of years for both academic and ‘professional/service’ staff. The main concern expressed in reports is the effect that the lack of career progression will have on morale, productivity and retention of staff. Certain complements of staff are/were therefore ‘stuck’ at a certain career level while taking increasing responsibility without attendant rewards (through promotion) which would normally be expected.

*“Lack of promotion is a major problem affecting all types of staff: academic, administrative, and technical. The PRG (Peer Review Group) realises that this is outside the control of the [unit], imposed by Government on public sector workers. The maintenance of morale will be very important for the immediate and medium-term future, given the cumulative effect of reductions in staff numbers, lack of promotions, lack of sabbaticals, salary cuts, pension changes, the Croke Park agreement, and possible removal of salary increments (noting that all new appointments are being made at the bottom of the scale).”* (University Report, 2012)

Reports noted that lack of promotion coupled with reduced recruitment of senior staff was impacting on the leadership and future strategic planning of units. There were a number of cases where for a variety of reasons (retirements, staff departures) the remaining staff taking on the leadership and management of units were relatively junior. The concern here was the experience required for the role of leading a unit in 'difficult times' but also making strategic decisions for forward planning which comes with experience – there was associated concern for the junior members of staff in this position and the effect it may potentially have on their career path.

*“Especially given the impending retirements of a number of senior colleagues and how this will exacerbate an already extremely heavy imbalance between senior and junior members of staff, providing leadership for the [unit] as it goes forward in an unfavourable institutional context is perhaps the single greatest challenge it faces.” (University Report, 2015)*

*“That this situation is somewhat anomalous is immediately obvious: it is extremely unusual for a staff member at the lecturer-grade to be placed in a position of such authority, especially given that the Subject Leader’s position includes direct responsibility for the [unit’s] budget line, which of itself constitutes a significant administrative burden. Moreover the situation is not merely unusual - it is problematic for a variety of personnel and strategic reasons. The reviewers’ sense is that, thus far these problems have been held off and largely mitigated by dint of sheer hard work on the part of the Subject Leader position incumbents. However, it is unrealistic to expect three staff on a relatively junior grade to continue fire-fighting indefinitely and it is also clear that this is likely to have a deleterious impact on the development of the research careers of the individual staff and on the [unit] as a whole.” (University Report, 2011)*

While there was some indication that some of the earlier 'freezes' were being relaxed, it was intimated in one report that the opportunities available are limited still.

*“Like all units in the current environment, a number of concerns were advanced on the freeze on promotion opportunities. Though these have recently reopened, there is considerable concern with the number of opportunities open to staff to promotion.” (University Report, 2013)*

### 5.2.3 WORK OVERLOAD (12 REFERENCES)

A further outcome of reduced staff numbers is the inherent increase in work load for the remaining staff. This has manifested itself through academic staff taking on increased academic as well as administration work. There was concern that basic tasks are not being completed, for example, the updating of websites and a perception that the current situation is not going to be resolved anytime soon with continuing restrictions on staff recruitment and the need to increase student numbers to drive up income.

*“It is the opinion of the RG (Review Group) that this group functions well, but work overload is a problem that is set to deteriorate with the planned increases in student numbers and non-exchequer income; there is no safety margin in place in respect of absences and illness.” (University Report, 2013)*

*“The administrative staff are working to full capacity and workloads are likely to become more intense. This has an impact on the time available to expand and improve the website (and other initiatives). The lack of administrative support in the [unit] also at times impacts on staff as they have to undertake administrative work previously done by administrative staff.” (University Report, 2013)*

### 5.2.4 REDUCED STAFF DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES (5 REFERENCES)

Concurrently, a small number of reports commented on the reduced opportunities for staff development through attendance at conferences or to avail of training. Staff development is central to the quality of higher education and

with increasing expectations on higher education institutions to 'serve' wider audiences of students, at different levels, in different ways, it is incumbent that staff development opportunities are made available. However, it can be seen how the area of staff development could be viewed as a 'low hanging' fruit when trying to reduce costs. One report commented on the continual difficulty of keeping up with developments in that subject area while another commented on the need to develop staff in order to maintain and grow the success of the unit.

*“Funding difficulties have inevitably threatened the support for staff to attend conferences. The loss of [institution] travel and conference grants is regrettable. The PRG (Peer Review Group) strongly commends the [unit] on taking an initiative to meet these challenges through the establishment of the [unit’s] strategic research fund. However, if the [HEI] wishes the [unit] to maintain its level of success, it must continue to make efforts to maintain such support.” (University Report, 2013)*

#### 5.2.5 STUDENT LEARNING EXPERIENCE (13 REFERENCES)

Interspersed within a number of reports are references to the combined accumulative effect of reduced funding, staff numbers, the casualisation of staffing and increased workload on the quality of the student learning experience (SLE). Reports noted that despite staff efforts to contain these issues to 'protect' students that over time these were now coming to the fore and some reports took the opportunity to 'warn' about this combined effect on the quality of the SLE. One noted that the unit was at a 'tipping point' beyond which there would be negative consequences for the quality of provision while another spoke about the 'detrimental' impact on not just the quality of teaching but also the reputation of the unit. Increased pressure on the remaining staff has led to limited time available to develop and innovate learning and teaching methods, for example, the development of Technology Enhanced Learning, an innovation which arguably could save time if used appropriately. Other reports noted that impacts were now apparent in the reduced provision of tutorials, academic student support, services available to students and assessment feedback provided to students.

*“The overburdening of staff may also pose a risk to the quality of teaching and the student experience. The first signs of this may already be evident; we heard evidence of concerns about the quality of feedback to students, the provision of tutorials and field trips.” (University Report, 2012)*

*“The scope for the [unit] to make any further reductions without affecting the quality of educational experience of students is limited and if further reductions are imposed the [unit] will reach a tipping point where it will have to decide if it will be able to continue to offer its full programme portfolio.” (Institute of Technology Report, 2010)*

*“The Panel was informed that the current non-pay budget available to the [unit] stands at only €280,000. This represents a 50% cut in four years. The fall in resources is impacting the student experience, with larger class sizes now necessary. Plans to free up two staff members to work on Technology Enhanced Learning have been put on hold.” (Institute of Technology Report, 2013)*

#### 5.2.6 STAFF COMMITMENT (13 REFERENCES)

Notwithstanding the challenges faced by institutions in the preceding years and associated impacts documented throughout peer review reports, staff commitment to learning and teaching was notable. Reviewers commended staff for their continued commitment (in the face of increasing pressures) and ‘sense of duty’ to their roles in order to minimise the effect on the student learning experience and to providing the ‘best possible level of service in difficult circumstances’. But as the above section testifies, all of these positive citations come with a note of caution in that there is possibly a limit to this level of commitment/loyalty demonstrated before evidence of negative impact appears.

*“The panel was also highly impressed with the way in which the [unit] has managed to maintain, develop and grow its portfolio of applied programmes as well as maintaining a high quality student experience,*

*in a period of significant change which included changes to the workload of staff, decreased staff numbers, increased student numbers, and decreasing budgets. The [unit] is commended for prioritizing the student experience despite these challenges.” (Institute of Technology Report, 2014)*

*“The [unit’s] support staff appear to have coped remarkably well with the additional work pressures that have resulted from the need to expand student numbers at a time of reduced funding to support the [HEI’s] administrative and support functions. However, the [HEI] must recognise that there are practical limits to the requirement to ‘do more with less.’” (University Report, 2012)*

#### 5.2.7 TEACHING AND RESEARCH (16 REFERENCES)

Quality reports from the Institute of Technology sector in particular contained concerns about the tensions between teaching and research activities. The common factor was the contractual prescription of time allocated to teaching which many viewed as compromising research development activity. There was a real tension around this area because all viewed the development of research activity as a means of assuring future viability through developing independent income streams and enhancing the quality of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes available but were very much compromised by the time available to commit to developing and maintaining research activity. This can be viewed as a ‘vicious cycle’ for staff and units who are trying to develop research activity but are compromised by high teaching workloads.

It must also be remembered that participating in research is not just for generating an additional income stream (while important) but is also part of the fabric of the ‘higher’ in higher education where students are engaged in learning and teaching activity that is informed by, and where students have an opportunity to participate in, research activity. There was some mention of reduced research funding available and the associated pressures this has for units and future viability.

*“Staff within the [unit] are being pulled in two directions. Due to the reduction in staff numbers, staff have had to undertake more teaching and administration duties. This has reduced the amount of available time for research but at the same time staff are being actively encouraged to further develop their research portfolios at a time when the funding available to do so has been severely reduced.”*  
*(Institute of Technology Report, 2010)*

*“Research activity is greatly impeded by the increased teaching schedule, requiring assistant lecturers to deliver 20 hours teaching per week. The Panel acknowledges the national framework, within which the [Institute of Technology] sector must operate but notes the difficulty this poses for staff. Striking the balance between teaching and research is difficult in this regard. This should include addressing the issue of allowing buyout of teaching time in national research funding programmes.”* *(Institute of Technology Report, 2014)*

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## 5.3 Theme 3: The Learning and Teaching Environment (21 references)

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Review reports commented on the impact of reduced resources on the learning and teaching environment particularly on the maintenance of facilities and equipment, IT infrastructure and library resources.

### 5.3.1 EQUIPMENT AND FACILITIES (11 REFERENCES)

There was mention of the general decline and state of the learning environment in some units. Some reports commented on the general ‘state’ of facilities and how students were unhappy with the facilities available to them, units were aware of these short-comings but with reduced resources and curtailment of funding for capital projects

there was no immediate resolution. One stark example was from a unit where there were significant issues with teaching spaces, including water ingress and damp:

*“There are however serious maintenance problems, including a leaking roof that is a potential health hazard as it encourages substantial growth of fungi and mould on ceilings and walls, but could also lead to disaster if rain water runs along the many exposed electrical cables and fittings. One room has such an unpleasant smell from damp and rot that it is unusable. Damp is damaging valuable books and journals in the basement library. Some teaching rooms and computer rooms have big windows but no blinds, and overheat in the summer months. The leaking roof and damp problems need to be addressed, as they raise serious health and safety issues. They are also a deterrent for potential students or staff members that the School may wish to attract.” (University Report, 2014)*

There was awareness within reports not just on the negative consequences of this environment on current students but also on attracting international students who bring important additional income.

*The [unit] is aware that teaching facilities are now well below international standards and already jeopardise attempts to increase international students; given the facilities in other Irish [HEIs] they will soon undermine the [unit’s] national recruitment.” (University Report, 2014)*

The impact of reduced funding for equipment was particularly apparent in technical or specialised areas where equipment needs to be upgraded or replaced on a cyclical basis. These inherently required significant investment and as this has been reduced it has negative consequences on the quality of the learning facilities for students:

*“Other facilities would benefit from being upgraded and the panel found that a significant proportion of the equipment available to the [unit] in the teaching laboratories either needed to be upgraded or replaced. It was also reported to the panel that both technical and academic staff spend considerable*

*time maintaining old equipment to ensure it can be used by students and that this is becoming more difficult each year. The panel noted that national capital investment which may previously have facilitated the upgrading of such equipment stopped over 3 years ago.” (Institute of Technology Report, 2014)*

*“Some laboratories were inadequately equipped for the purpose of teaching and demonstrating to undergraduate students. Some were extremely old, run down and poorly equipped. It is recommended that these laboratories be refurbished to higher and more uniform standard, as a matter of urgency, to augment the quality of teaching in the [unit].” (University Report, 2009)*

### 5.3.2 LIBRARY AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (10 REFERENCES)

Both library and IT provision are central to the student and staff learning environment and experience. Reports noted cuts to funding during a time when fees associated with licences and online journals have increased and when there is increased demand from users (staff and students) for new and better services and from those experiencing different modes of learning through online and distance learning. The global economic crisis has not stymied the developments in information technology and as such user expectations are higher.

The lack of investment in IT is also seen to lead to inefficiencies where time could be saved by developing an automated student information system rather than relying on manual processes that are not only time consuming but also lead to inaccuracies. This of course links back to the commentary on staff work overload and how a lack of investment in one area leads to over burdening in another.

*“IT Services functions in an operating environment that is characterised by significant and long-term resource constraints, coupled with persistent increases in demand for new and better services, systems, and infrastructure. The Review Group acknowledges that all units within [the HEI] are grappling*

*with resource constraints, but most are not dealing with the incessant growth in expectations for new services as are evident in the information technologies domain.” (University Report, 2015)*

*“For example, the lack of investment in IT systems has resulted in an inability to automate processing and data entry. The current Student Record System is old and lacks the flexibility needed for current developments. There is not the staff capacity to dedicate to the implementation of a replacement, even if it were possible to purchase one. The [unit] is therefore heavily reliant on manual processes which are not always well documented through Standard Operating Procedures and Service Standards. This risk is compounded by a demand to respond to changing business needs, such as the increasing complexity of student and programme types which add to the manual processes. The increased risk is not a result of a lack of planning and ambition in the unit but a consequence of the lack of resources and opportunities in the environment within which higher education in Ireland is currently operating.” (Institute of Technology Report, 2015)*

Particular issues pertaining to libraries coalesced in reports around reductions in library staff budgets and the budgets available for books and online journal subscription costs. The former issue primarily had a bearing on library opening hours and the available time for users. The reduction in hours was most keenly felt by part-time students who visited campus outside of core hours. The latter issue (like IT) has seen increasing advances but with associated and well documented subscription fee surges during the same time as the economic downturn. This conflicting situation has led to difficulties for libraries catering for different types of users.

*“While the Library currently provides electronic access to most of the major journals and databases in the areas relevant to the [unit], subscription costs are rising at an alarming rate and there are serious fears about the continuation of this service.” (University Report, 2009)*

*“The panel is concerned, however, that budgetary cuts are affecting the delivery of services and that part-time students who are important to the [unit] are being particularly affected by the evening closure of the library.” (Institute of Technology Report, 2010)*

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## 5.4 Other Issues (3 references)

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Finally, there were a small number of instances where comment was made on the ‘viability’ of particular subject areas. The more obvious and (possibly) understandable was around the general construction/building/surveying areas of study which as a result of the collapse of the building sector in Ireland resulted in much reduced student numbers and therefore questions arose about the future viability of such courses. There was also the suggestion that in times of economic constraint students tend to choose subjects aligned to employment and/or of a practical application hence pointing to a risk for the social sciences.

*“Recruitment to all the [unit’s] programmes has traditionally been very strong, particularly in the years of economic growth in Ireland. Given that the programmes offered by the [unit] are oriented towards the construction and property industries and the built environment more generally, the collapse of the Irish economy and the construction industry in particular has had a severe impact on the [unit] and its programmes.” (Institute of Technology Report, 2010)*



# 6

## Concluding Remarks

This report was commissioned to provide a thematic overview of the commentary in institution-led quality review reports on the impact of the reduction in funding to institutions on the quality of learning and teaching in the Irish higher education system over the seven-year period from 2008 – 2015. While it might not be unusual to see an occasional reference in peer review reports to the impact of limited resources on the quality of learning and teaching, it has to be noted that the level and amount of referencing to resource issues across a large number of reports was significant.

Evidence from the reports points to the cumulative effects of reduced funding, reduced staff numbers, increased teaching burdens, the casualisation of staffing and promotion limitations for staff. These issues have particular effects on early career staff and the capacity of those remaining in post to develop, maintain and grow research careers. The negative impact of limited funding available to maintain, enhance and develop the learning environment through facilities and equipment was also evident. What is striking is the general impression from some reports that some units have reached a 'crisis point' where continued cuts/reductions may have serious and irretrievable implications for their future sustainability.

An important reference point and locus for these findings are the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015) which provide guidance necessary for successful provision of quality learning environments in higher education and against which all providers are measured. Two of the key elements of the ESG are particularly relevant here: Teaching staff (ESG 1.5) where HEIs have primary responsibility for the quality of their staff and for providing them with a supportive environment that allows them to carry out their work effectively and; Learning Resources and Student Support (ESG 1.6) where HEIs should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources

and student support are provided. These vary from physical resources such as libraries, study facilities and IT infrastructure to human support in the form of tutors, counsellors and other advisers. Given the evidence from this sample of reports it would appear that a number of units would be challenged by these guidelines and as such this should be a matter of concern.

The other reference point is key indicators for international comparison rankings of HEIs which among other things cite staff, student ratios, institutional income and research productivity. However, it is clear from the reports that Irish HEIs in spite of continual challenges are not complacent and have risen to the continual challenge by diversifying and generating income through research and through attracting international students. The latter brings its own challenge as to compete in the global market of higher education, HEIs need to offer a learning and teaching environment and resources that are attractive in a highly competitive and 'rankings' driven market.

The 2015 Cassells Group discussion paper on the further funding of higher education has noted that Ireland—as a society, a state and an economy that aspires to global competitiveness— needs to urgently address issues such as those highlighted in the quality reviews analysed for the purposes of this report. The discussion paper contends that 'a continuation of the existing funding level for higher education is not an option if Ireland wishes to ensure quality across all disciplines and activities'.

The present report provides evidence of a system perceived to be at a 'crisis'. It is commendable and important to draw from the sample of reports that the emphasis placed on the student learning experience and the commitment of staff has continued in spite of increasing pressures so as to minimise the impact on students. However, it is very clear that this commitment and resilience is not sustainable for the long-term.