

2005-05-01

## Developing a Participatory Consultation Process for Quality Reviews: the Initial Stage of the European University Associations Quality Review of the Technological University Dublin

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### Recommended Citation

Kennedy, A. (2005). Developing a participatory consultation process for quality reviews: The initial stage of the European University Associations Quality Review of the Technological University Dublin. *Level3*, no. 3, May. doi:10.21427/D71041

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# Developing a participatory consultation process for quality reviews: The initial stage of the European University Associations Quality Review of the Dublin Institute of Technology

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Kennedy, Aidan: Developing a participatory consultation process for quality reviews: The initial stage of the European University Associations Quality Review of the Dublin Institute of Technology. Level3, Issue 3, May 2005.

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## **Title**

Developing a Participatory Consultation Process for Quality Reviews:  
The initial stage of the European University Associations Quality Review of the Dublin Institute of Technology

This is the first of a two paper series the next paper will outline the data analysis methodology and the triangulation of the findings.

## **About the author,**

Aidan Kenny has been an Assistant Lecturer for five years in the Plasterwork Department, School of Construction Skills, Faculty of the Built Environment in the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). The author comes from a construction trade background, he was a Subject Matter Expert for ITAC and a World Skills Examiner for the Department of Education and Science. Presently Aidan is on a two years secondment in the Department of Academic Affairs as Qualification Framework Development Officer. Aidan also worked as Community Development Officer for the Clondalkin Partnership and was the elected Chairperson of Dublin Colleagues Branch, Teacher Union of Ireland from 02-04. He done a BA (Hons) in DUC, Major Psychology, minor Sociology and is a graduate member of the British Psychology Society. Currently he is completing a dissertation for a MSc Education Training Management in DCU.

## Abstract

*This paper describes the evolution of a consultation process utilized by the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) as part of a quality review process. An emphasis is placed on outlining: the collaborative nature of the enquiry; the guidelines and code of ethics adopted; the social research methodology utilized both quantitative (online surveys, staff n=1831, student's n=21094) and qualitative (6 staff focus groups n=45 and 4 stakeholder focus groups n=24 and faculty board submissions 6). Instrument construction, theme sheet design and sampling procedures and response rate are detailed. The author, as consultation facilitator, provides an narrative of events and applies theory to actual practice. He claims that the DIT operationalized the consultation process under the principles of inclusion, openness and transparency, and that the process captured both a valid and reliable account of the attitudes and opinions of the DIT community.*

## Introduction

In an 'Age of Supercomplexity' (Barnett 1990) change for the university is inevitable. In order to assess and assist institutional change strategies, and provide accountability for national resources allocated to higher education providers, universities are required to instigate cyclical quality reviews of their organization and the services they provide. Hughes (2002: 2) claims 'evaluations are firmly embedded in national and international tertiary practice'. The European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) have produced a document, 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area' (2005) under the remit of the Berlin communiqué 2003. This document presents a framework for both internal and external quality review procedures and promotes continued quality enhancement policies. Coolahan (2004: 141-145) suggests the process of establishing a European wide Quality Assurance system for education commenced with the signing of the Bologna Declaration in 1999. And the Irish government adopted a proactive participatory response to this endeavour by signing up to the communiqués of Salamanca (2001), Prague (2001) and Berlin (2003).

Under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 the DIT is required to undertake a quality review every 5-7 years. The European University Association (EUA) which is a member of the ENQA was commissioned in 2004 to commence a quality review of DIT. The findings from their final report will be presented to the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) in late 2005 and then made public. The EUA requested DIT prepare a Self-evaluation Report during late 2004, as part of the preparation stage of their review process. To this end the DIT established a Steering Committee (SC) to oversee this work and developed a multi-level consultation process to give voice to the members of the DIT community in the Self-evaluation Report

The DIT Steering Committee responsible for the organizing and drafting of the Self-evaluation Report to inform the EUA Quality Review team was established in October 2004 in accordance with the EUA *Quality Review Guidelines* document (2004: 6). The guidelines state:

- '... the steering committee should not work in isolation but seek, through institute-wide discussions, to present as broad a view as possible of the DIT'
- '... support and encourage the process along by explaining its worth's and allaying fears' (EUA 2004: 6).

To fulfil these aims the SC adopted a process approach based on inclusion, openness and collegial discourse: this mirrored some of the main tenets of a partnership approach, or what Withers calls 'the enhancement paradigm of Quality assessment' (2002: 40). All staff and stakeholders were to be included and encouraged to engage with the consultation process. The process had to be open and transparent with a readily accessible information channel. A dynamic mechanism to enable free dialogue and exchange of views and opinions in a safe environment was to be developed. These were the three overarching principles that supported the SC in the development of a consultation process. In order to align with international standards and best contemporary practice the SC adopted the following;

- (i) 'Principles of good practice approach to information and consultation', from the EU Information and Consultation Directive (2004: see Table 4 in this paper).
- (ii) Ethical guidelines suitable for social research/evaluation: underpinning these guidelines is the guarantee of confidentiality, respect, diversity, participation and equality (see Table 5 in this paper).

*The author suggests that by adopting these guidelines the SC put in place a framework of expectations and commitments or 'psychological contract' Maguire 2002 (Maguire reference Aygre 60; Schein 80; Rousseau 89 for further information related to the psychological contract). Both potential participants and researchers had a set of clear guidelines of what to expect from the consultation process.*

The SC, as a team, created a synergy from the expertise of its members, whose specialization ranged from; Arts, Science, Social Science, Technology, Engineering, Construction, Research, Administration and Students. The profile of the SC was representative of a 'multi-dimensional model'. Membership ranged from senior and middle management, academic staff, administrative staff and students. However the authority/power dichotomy did not impede the collaborative approach: decisions were made by consensus and all members' input was respected and valued. This process was enhanced by the participation of support staff from Academic Affairs and the secondment of an academic staff member from the Department of Construction Skills, School of Construction, acting as a consultation facilitator. The dynamic of the steering group was cyclical in nature comprising of;

- Analysing (What had to be done? This was carried out during the SC meetings).
- Problem solving (How could it be done? Small teams developed solutions and presented them to the SC).
- Action (implementing the agreed plans, usually carried out by the Academic Affairs support staff, facilitator and SC members).

The outcome from this collaborative team dynamic was the development of a multi-level consultation process which dovetailed the unique qualities of both quantitative and qualitative social research paradigms, 'multi-method research', (Morgan cited in Sarantakos 1998: 180), into an applied, practical, action model (see Appendix 1 for a diagram of the consultation process).

*The author claims that throughout the development and operationalizing stages the process was informed by the participants experience and expertise rather than a specific theoretical framework. 'Questions of ontology and epistemology were secondary to method:' while a research 'world view' was not explicitly discussed it was implicit in decisions like adopting the code of ethics and EU Directive. However the process was task focused the primary concern was to agree a method that could meet the deadline set, while capturing a truthful record of the opinions of the DIT community.*

## Methodology

The methodology utilized sought to address the following statements outlined in the EUA Guidelines document;

- 'The self-evaluation process is a collective institutional reflection and an opportunity for quality enhancement of any aspect that is part of the Self-evaluation process' (EUA 2004: 6).
- The focus should be on 'institutional critical reflection' and 'actual practice' rather than citing existing policy documents. The process should be representative, collaborative, open, transparent and truthful (EUA 2004: 11).

The size, complexity of structure and dispersed location of the DIT community (student population 21,094, staff population 1,831 and variety of stakeholders, 6 faculties and support services, housed in 35 locations throughout Dublin's city centre. See Figures 1 and 2 for graphical profile of target populations) proved problematic in deciding on a research mode that could adequately fulfil the requirements as set out by the EUA.

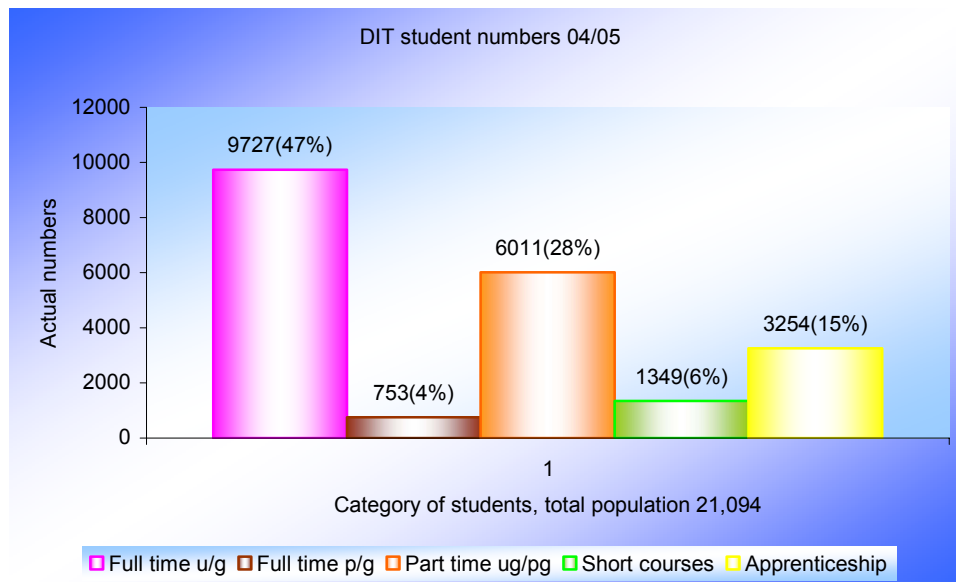


Figure 1: Student target population profile per category (actual no. plus percentage), n=21,094

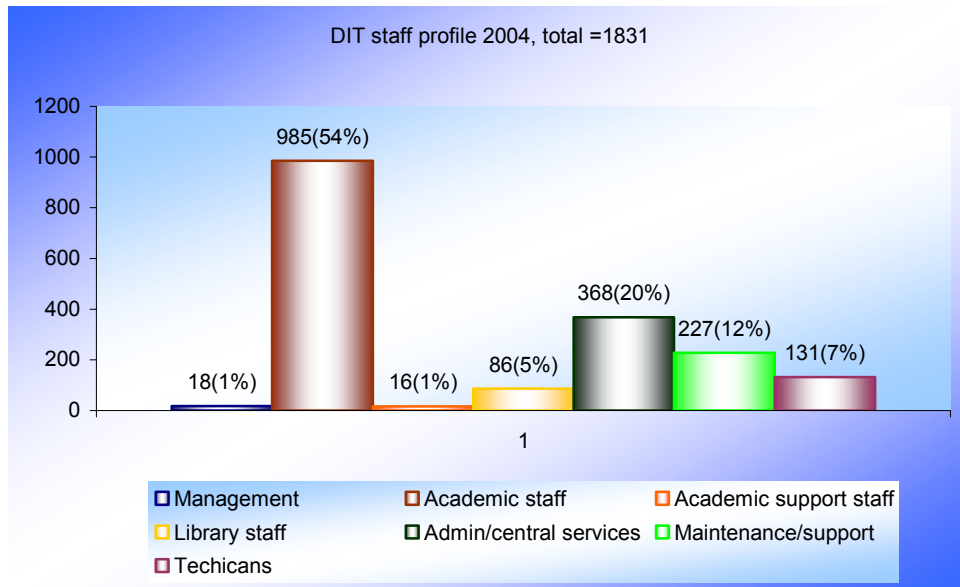


Figure 2: Staff target population profile per category (actual no. plus percentage), n=1,831

In order to give a broad section of the DIT community an opportunity to participate in the consultation process and provide baseline empirical data, a quantitative methodology was employed, consisting of two structured online survey instruments. A qualitative methodology was used to explore and map out the DIT community attitudes and opinions, relating to specific themes and issues in greater detail. These two different methodologies were used in a ‘complimentary’ fashion, in that the findings could be compared and contrasted. It was not intended to utilize the separate research findings in a ‘corroborative’ or ‘facilitative’ fashion (Hammersley cited in Seale *et al.* 2004: 314). Underpinning this methodology was the rationale to systematically signpost quality practices and map out potential weaknesses that need enhancement moving forward. In essence it is a retrospective reflective study of the DIT community. The premise is that the baseline data will facilitate the institution’s decision-making mechanisms to assess, plan and implement improvements.

## Method

The primary focus of both the qualitative and quantitative modes was to explore issues relating to the strengths and weaknesses of the following six themes as stated in the EUA Guidelines document.

Mission statement	Strategic plan	Facilities and resources
Learning and teaching	Quality assurance	Organizational structures

*Six themes or variables, used to construct online survey and theme prompt sheets*

A team-based approach was adopted by the Steering Committee (SC) to develop appropriate methods and procedures. Key tasks were communication, research design, quantitative research and qualitative research. Team designation was on a voluntary basis and members of the Academic Affairs support staff gave administrative support. This type of team development approach further reinforced the collaborative and collegial nature of the research enquiry. See Figure 3 which depicts the structure, tasks and team composition.

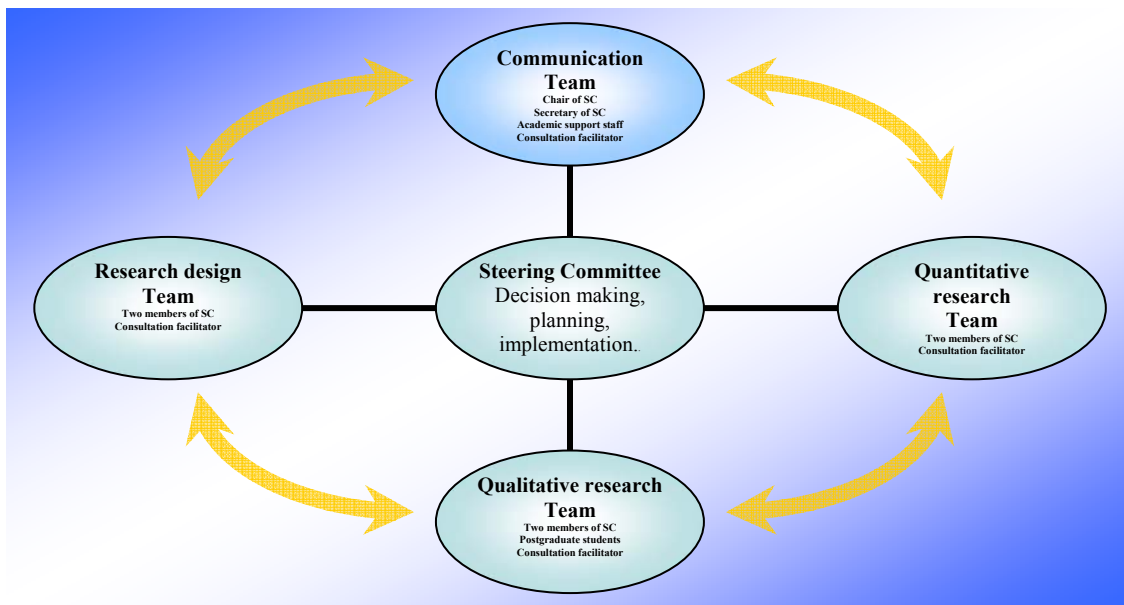


Figure 3: Team dynamic

*The author proposes that the team dynamic (structure and communication) utilized is comparable with both Robbins and Coulter (2002: 295) 'All channel communication model' and some of Belbin's (1996) characteristics of effect teams. Team construction was based on a multi-level model, emphasis was placed on open discourse, and decisions were then made in a rational collaborative fashion.*

### Communication

Accurate and accessible information flow was viewed as crucial to the success of the consultation process. The majority of the DIT community have access to the DIT intranet (active emails accounts: 16,350 (students) and 2,050 (staff)). Therefore electronic communication was identified as a primary conduit for information flow. An EUA consultation webpage was constructed and hosted on the Academic Affairs page. This was continuously updated as the process unfolded and all relevant documents were posted on this site. Access was obtained to utilize the 'all-staff' and 'all-student' email lists. This allowed information and surveys to be sent directly to colleagues' and students' personal addresses. All interested parties were invited to make submissions or suggestions relating to the consultation process, via direct correspondence to their email accounts.



In order to stimulate awareness and create a readiness to engage in the consultation process, a series of presentations were organized. The principal target groups were; the six Faculty Boards, Academic Council, Directorate, the Partnership committee, Human Resources Department and stakeholders (academic staff trade union TUI, non academic staff trade unions AMICUS, IMPACT, SIPTU, students representative body DITSU) see Table 1 for schedule of presentations.

Faculty/committees	Venue	Time	Male	Female	Date	Presenters
Built Environment	Linenhall	2.30	18	3	17/11/04	2
Applied Arts	Mountjoy Square	2.30	14	9	23/11/04	2
Engineering	Kevin St.	3.30	16	2	23/11/04	2
Tourism and Food	Cathal Brugha St.	3.00	6	6	25/11/04	2
Business	Aungier St.	12.00	13	4	02/12/04	2
Science	Kevin St.	2.30	21	9	02/12/04	2
Academic Council	Cathal Brugha St.	10.00	36	10	01/12/04	1
Directorate	Aungier St.	9.00	13	3		1
Faculty of Business, 'Away Day'	Aungier St.	11.30	60 <i>Estimate.</i>	20 <i>Estimate.</i>	10/12/04	2
Partnership Committee	Rathmines	3.00	6	2	01/12/04	1
Human Resources Dept.	Pembroke St.	11.00	4	3	17/12/04	1
Total number of staff at presentations			207	71	N=278	

*Table 1: Schedule of presentations given to Faculty Boards and other committees/dept*

### Research design

The research design utilized a robust multi-method model, which provided data comprised of several different modes of investigation. A quantitative mode which provided statistical data through the online surveys. Qualitative mode, which provided descriptive transcripts from focus group sessions and submissions. The premise was to encourage the sample groups to engage in critical self reflection from their 'lived experience' of the DIT community. The gathered data mapped out participants attitudes and opinions on potential strengths and weaknesses. The commonality of the research modes was limited to the six themes (variables). It was not envisaged that one mode would feed off the other but rather that they should stand alone. However findings could be used in a complimentary fashion to align mutual trends or clusters of common issues. It was noted that the quantitative mode is more suitable to generalizations, while the qualitative mode provides depth and insight. It was envisaged that by utilizing comparison mapping between qualitative and quantitative findings a gauge of the validity of the study can be extrapolated.

*The author suggests that both the validity and reliability of the study was bolstered by the nature and experience of the research team. In essence the SC and support staff are all members of the DIT community, with diverse expertise and 'lived experience'. Their accumulative understanding of the DIT community (policies, strategies, practices, resources) is far reaching, this gives the research an invaluable 'knowledge stock'. The author proposes that this type of model could be compared to an action research mode, which Thomson and Perry (2004: 405) link to Critical theory. The primary*

characteristics of comparison are, (1) collaborative approach, (2) critical self reflection, (3) practical application, (4) participant/researcher (5) produce data that informs institutional enhancement ,While these five characteristics resonate with the tenets of action research the author locates the mode within the interpretive paradigm with a strong alignment with the naturalistic paradigm of Guba and Lincoln.

### Quantitative research

The quantitative research comprised of two structured online survey instruments, one for staff and one for students. A small team developed both questionnaires; items were constructed from DIT documents relating to the six themes, the criteria in the EUA Guidelines, and the team members' personal experience and understanding of the DIT community. A pilot test run of both online surveys was carried out with ten participants before the surveys were operationalised, to ascertain their usability and technical reliability. The questionnaires were then administered to the target populations; 'all-student list' and the 'all-staff list'. Three reminders were sent out during the operational periods. In the case of the staff survey, different mail-out lists were used: (i) all-staff list; (ii) faculty staff list; (iii) 'Update' staff electronic magazine.

The student questionnaire consisted of a three-question student profile (locations of study, full or part-time, classification of registration), and a 14 item attitude and opinion questionnaire. A Likert scale was used (see Appendix 2). The student population is 20,000 of which 16,500 have active email accounts: this was the target population. In order to achieve a representative sample size from the target population De Vaus (2002) suggests 660 and Sarantakos (1998) suggests 377 would be the necessary sample size. However the actual response rate was 960 see Figure 3 for profile.

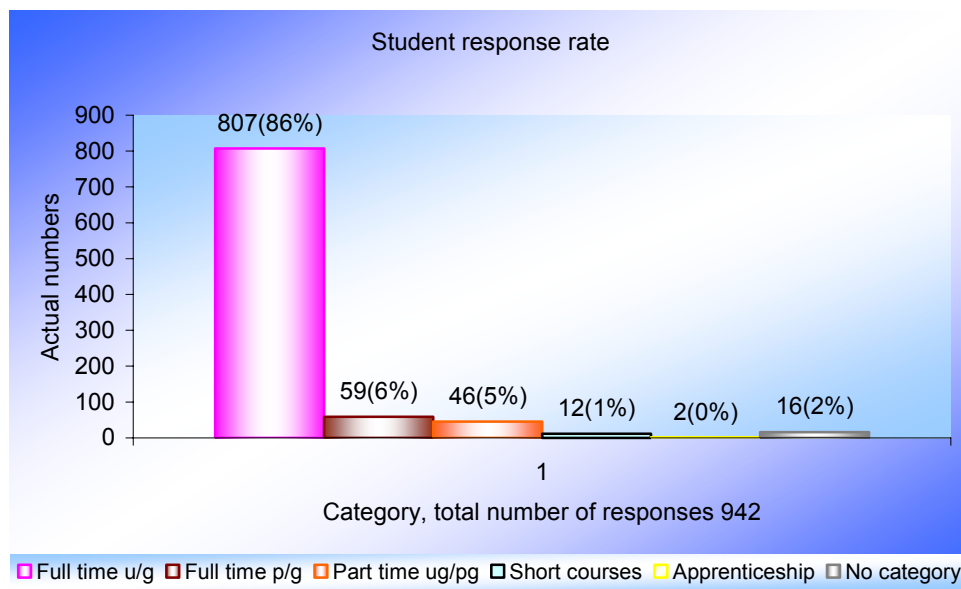


Figure 3: Students online survey response rate profile

The staff questionnaire consisted of a six-question staff profile (location, grade (2), category, length of service and age), and a 60 item attitude and opinion questionnaire with a Likert scale (see appendix 3). The staff population is 1800, however active staff email accounts are 2200 (part time bring the population up). In order to achieve a representative sample size from this target population De Vaus (02) suggests 237, Sarantakos (98) suggests 322 would be the necessary sample size. However the actual response rate was 472 (see Figure 4 for response rate profile).

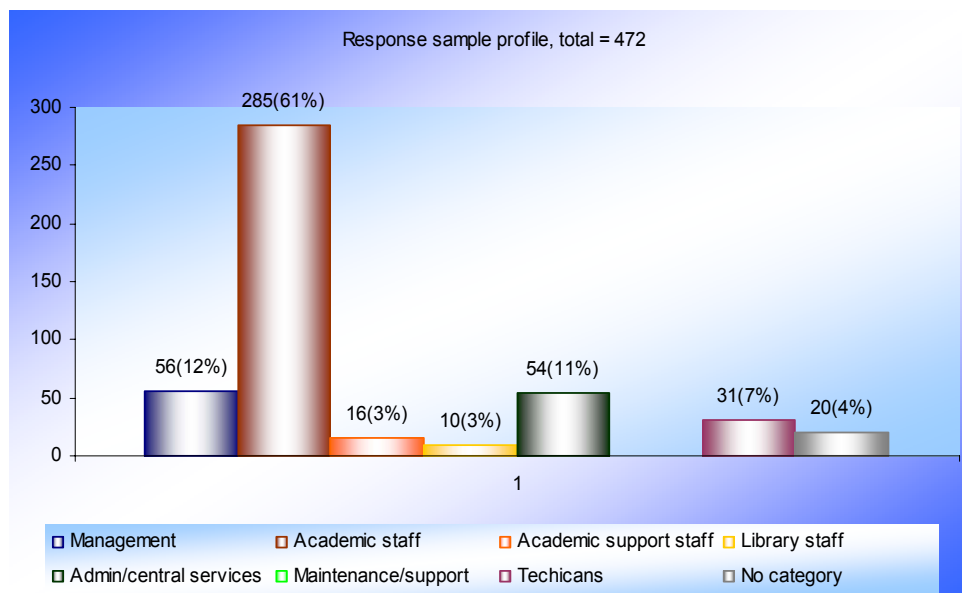


Figure 4: Staff online survey response rate profile

## Qualitative research

Qualitative research was operationalised in the following four phases:

(i) Presentations were given to each Faculty Board explaining the EUA requirements and the consultation process. This was followed by a request that Faculty Boards draft a two-page reflective response relating to the strengths and weaknesses of the six themes. This type of approach gave Faculty Boards the opportunity to reflect and identify strengths and weaknesses in a collaborative fashion, and then produce an agreed semi-structured draft document for inclusion in the appendix of the Self-evaluation report. The SC deliberately asked for a draft document, to give faculties the latitude to make changes as the consultation project evolved, with a reminder being sent to faculties to ascertain if they wanted to make any changes.

(ii) Faculty boards were also asked to nominate two staff members from each school who were not members of the Faculty Board to participate in a series of focus groups. This facilitated direct contact with another layer of staff. From this target population a sample group of 68 staff members was received (see Figure 5 for location and grade, accurate up

to the end of December 04). Actual participation attendance figures are presented in Table 2.

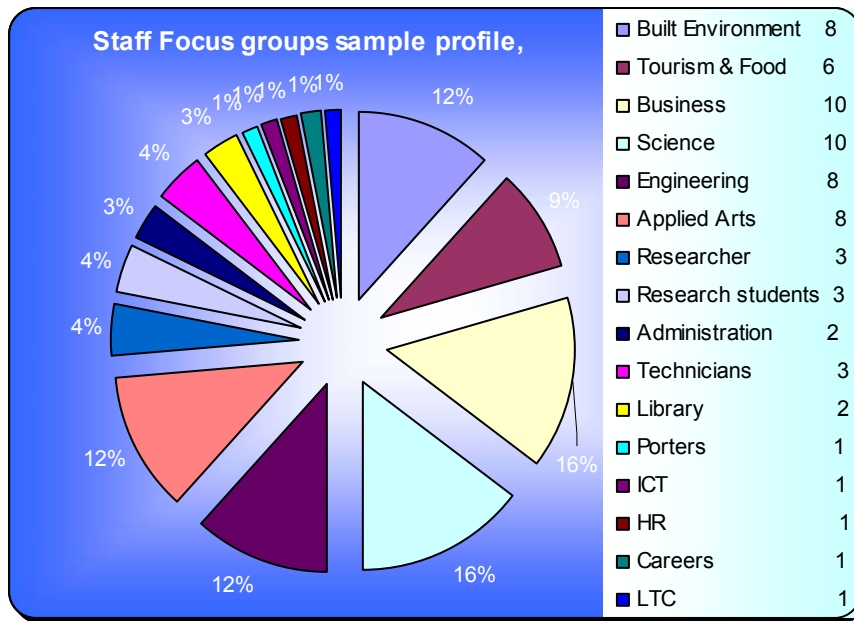


Figure 5: Profile of total staff focus group sample

The focus group sample design comprised of mix sampling, and participants with particular expertise were placed in a related theme. The main sample body was then divided on gender grounds and placed into a focus group. All potential participants received three emails (invitation with consent details, greeting card, and focus group procedures notice). They were contacted by telephone (messages were left on voice mail if there was no response). Six focus groups were formed: each one was given a specific theme and asked to discuss the strengths and weaknesses. Prompt sheets were developed in order to stimulate discussion (see Appendix 4 for prompt sheets). These sessions were moderated and recorded by two alternating groups of two postgraduate students. The same location was used for all these focus groups, with a duration of one hour, see Table 2.

Themes	Venue	Time	Male	Female	Date	Moderator
1.Strategic plan	Aungier St.	10:00	2	3	10/1/05	2
2. Facilities/resources	Aungier St.	12:00	4	3	10/1/05	2
3. Quality assurance	Aungier St.	15:00	4	3	10/1/05	2
4. Organizational structure	Aungier St.	10:00	4	2	11/1/05	2
5. Research	Aungier St.	12:00	4	4	11/1/05	2
6. Learning & teaching	Aungier St.	15:00	7	5	11/1/05	2
Total number of participants at staff focus groups			25	20	N= 45	

Table 2; Staff focus group schedule and actual attendance figures

(iii) Stakeholders were invited to select participants from their membership to take part in focus group sessions. Four focus groups were formed, and members from the following

stakeholders were represented: academic staff trade union TUI, non academic staff trade unions AMICUS, IMPACT/SIPTU, students DITSU. These focus groups had the option of discussing some or all of the six themes in terms of the strengths and weaknesses. The selection of the sample group was left up to the individual stakeholders, the only parameter was that the sample be less than ten participants and that a gender balance should be considered.

The focus group sessions were moderated and recorded by a member of Academic Affairs support staff and the consultation facilitator. Before each of these focus group sessions it was stressed that they should not be viewed as negotiation forums, the consultation process had no remit in that area. The *draft* transcript of each of these focus group discussions was sent back to the stakeholders to determine accuracy and seek any clarification necessary. Locations differed for each focus group; stakeholders suggested the most suitable venues for them, and duration varied from 1 to 2 hours.

*The author notes that in some cases considerable informal communication was necessary to alleviate stakeholders' concerns relating to participating in the consultation process. From their previous experience they felt that DIT was not committed to operating an inclusive consultation mechanism and that trust was an issue. The author proposes that the root of this perception is linked to the immense change the institute went through during the faculty structure development, in essence a merger of six different organizations. Further the author draws the reader's attention to two theoretical perspectives for analysis of macro and micro issues relating to stakeholder/employees; Guba and Lincoln (1989: 51-57) 'Stakeholders claims, concerns and issues as organisers' and Pate, Martin and McGoldrick (2003) paper "The impact of psychological contract violation on employee attitudes and behaviour". Both of these sources provide useful tools to analyse stakeholders trust issues. However, this is outside the remit of this paper.*

Stakeholder	Venue	Time	Male	Female	Date	Moderator
TUI	Bolton St.		6	1	15/12/04	2
DITSU	Aungier St.		6	1	13/1/05	2
AMICUS	Pembroke St.		4	1	17/1/05	2
IMPACT/SIPTU	Aungier St.		5	0	19/1/05	2
Total number of participants at stakeholder focus groups			23	3	N=26	

*Table 3: Stakeholder focus group schedule and actual attendance figures*

The total focus group sample consisted of 45 staff and 23 stakeholders' participants: total participants equal 71. The gender ratio was 2:1 male/female (profile is presented in Figure 6).

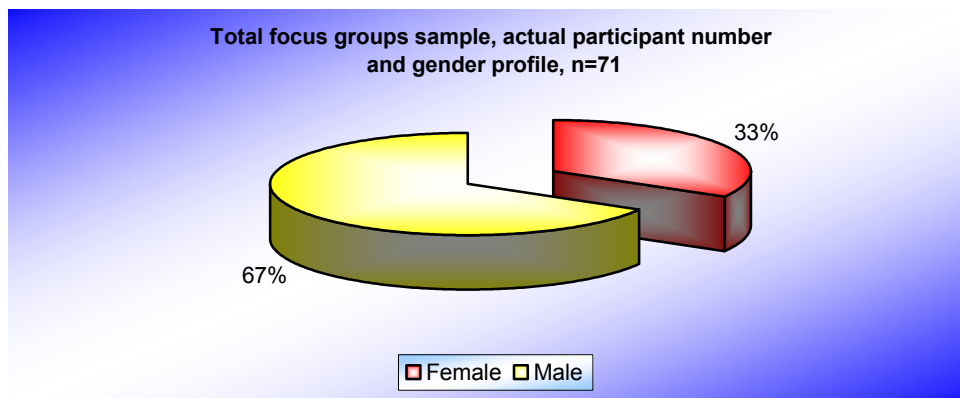


Figure 6: Gender profile of total focus group sample

### Limitations

This research was carried out under the following constraints. The time frame was restrictive, from the initial establishment of the SC to the development, implementation and analysis of the research. There were only 18 weeks in total. The seasonal holiday (see Appendix 4, for project time frame) stopped the research momentum and caused difficulties with the timing of the staff survey and some focus groups, particularly the period after Christmas where many academic staff members were busy with examinations.

The diverse location of DIT sites and the size of the DIT community proved a logistical difficulty. To overcome this a decision was taken to use electronic communications to promote and create awareness about the EUA review and to deliver the surveys. Despite the fact that the majority of staff and students have email accounts, we were aware that a proportion did not have email accounts or computer facilities. Under the circumstances it was decided that the consultation process could move forward with this restraint acknowledged.

Some industrial relations issues arose concerning (1) the EUA Guidelines, particularly the section that suggests the main stakeholders as ‘academic, students and administration’. This caused some difficulty for members of the technicians trade union AMICUS. However this matter was dealt with in an expedient and collegial manner. (2) The issue of stakeholder buy-in to the process needed considerable informal contact; the adoption of both the ethical guidelines and EU Consultation Directive assisted this process. (3) Other technical problems arose with some members of staff and students experiencing difficulties opening electronic links to online surveys which were distributed by using the Outlook Express application. Participants using the Web mail browser experienced encryption problems, and this was solved by resending the online surveys on the web mail clients.

### Quality assurance

Quality assurance was interwoven into the consultation process by the adaptation of the EU Consultation Directive Guidelines (Table 4) and a robust code of ethical guidelines (Table 5).

●	Adhere to the spirit of the Directive, which is to ensure employees receive the information to which they are entitled, and to implement arrangements that enable information and consultation to improve decision-making and organisational performance.
●	Recognise that there is no one model of good practice and that the key is to develop and customise practical arrangements that meet the needs and culture of the organisation and its employees.
●	Adopt benchmarks of good practice when developing an information and consultation strategy. This will assist the organisation to measure the impact of information & consultation on its performance and profitability.
●	Approach the implementation of the Directive with a commitment to openness and transparency.
●	Be mindful of the need for confidentiality in today's competitive environment.
●	Foster a culture of information sharing, joint problem solving and consultation in the organisation. Identify 'champions' who will advocate this approach. Ensure that all managers in the organisation have the necessary skills to inform and consult with employees and their representatives.
●	Recognise that the key to more effective informing and consulting lies not so much in the bundle of practices that are adopted as in the context, manner and spirit in which they are introduced and progressed.
●	Ensure that employee representatives have the skills necessary to engage in information and consultation activities on behalf of the organisation's staff.
●	Ensure that information and consultation arrangements are built on existing practices, not in addition to them, and that the arrangements are aligned with the objectives of the organisation's HR and industrial relations approaches.
●	Align information and consultation activities with the organisation's strategy and business plan.
●	Understand that information and consultation arrangements evolve as trust grows, and allow room for experimentation and innovation

*Table 4: Consultation and information principles of best practise from the EU directive*

<i>General</i>	
Confidentiality:	Members of the Steering Committee will not identify, or discuss, other members' opinions expressed during meetings, with other people. Collective discussions may be reported to others.
Respect;	Members of the committee will have respect for other members' dignity
Diversity:	Diversity of opinion will be allowed.
Participation:	All committee members should feel they can participate in this process in an open and safe fashion.
Equality:	Statutory equality policies will apply to the committee
Fair and reasonable:	The committee will endeavour to carry out its work in a fair and reasonable manner.
<i>Online questionnaire</i>	
Informed consent:	All necessary information should be available to potential participants, so that they can make an accurate and informed decision whether to participate or not.
Confidentiality:	Any participants' comments, or queries, relating to the survey, will be treated as confidential, unless the participant wishes to waive this guarantee.
Anonymity:	All responses are anonymous and no tracking software is used.
Access:	All participants will have access to the findings of the survey.
Diversity:	Diversity of opinion will be allowed.

<i>Focus groups</i>	
Informed consent:	All necessary information should be available to potential focus group participants, so that they can make an accurate and informed decision whether to participate or not.
Confidentiality:	Comments and opinions expressed during focus group discussions will be recorded collectively. Individual identity will not be attributed to statements. Focus group participants are requested not to identify or discuss other members' opinions expressed during the session with other people. Collective discussions may be reported to others.
Anonymity:	Focus group participants will have a choice whether to remain anonymous or not.
Access:	All focus group participants will have access to the findings of their group discussion.
Diversity:	Diversity of opinion will be allowed.
Respect:	Focus group participants are requested to respect the dignity of other participants.
Participation:	All focus group participants should feel they can participate in this process in an open and safe fashion.
Equality:	Statutory equality polices will apply to the committee.
Fair and reasonable:	The focus group facilitator will endeavour to facilitate the focus group session in fair and reasonable manner.
<i>Submissions</i>	
Identity:	All submissions must be identifiable (name and contact details of author), however, the author may request confidentiality and this will be respected.
Diversity:	Diversity of opinion will be allowed.
<i>Data collation</i>	
Professionalism:	All data will be treated in a professional manner in accordance with contemporary best practice.
Truthful:	Data findings will be reported accurately and truthfully.

*Table 5: Ethical guidelines. The author constructed the above guidelines from The British Psychological Society Ethical Guidelines (2000) and Denzin and Lincoln, ethics (2000: 133-151)*

By adopting the working guidelines presented in Tables 4 and 5, the SC made a strategic decision to carry out all of its social research activities in accordance with best contemporary practice. The rigor of the guidelines provided safeguards for both the participants and the SC (as participant/researchers) during the development and implementation stages of the consultation process. The academic support staff enhanced this dynamic through their professional conduct in their engagement with the DIT community. Email and phone queries were responded to within a day in most cases. All comments whether they were positive or negative were valued, and all inquirers were treated with courtesy and respect.

### Conclusion

Quality reviews are now the norm for higher education providers in Europe. They provide valuable data for benchmarking, accountability and quality enhancement. The methodology utilized during these reviews is paramount to the process and the successful implementation of any recommendations. To this end the ENQA has developed a set of guideline proposals for quality reviews within the European higher education sector.



The DIT enthusiastically engaged in a current quality review process, proactively developing mechanisms to fulfil the criteria set down by the EUA. The DIT Steering Committee overseeing the review adopted best practice guidelines in both consultation procedures and code of ethics. Three overarching principles were inclusion, transparency and collegiality. A team-based structure was utilized to develop a multi-level consultation process that dovetailed both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The data gathering stage consisted of three procedures, empirical online surveys, focus groups sessions and submissions from faculty boards; this enabled triangulation of data during the analysis stage.

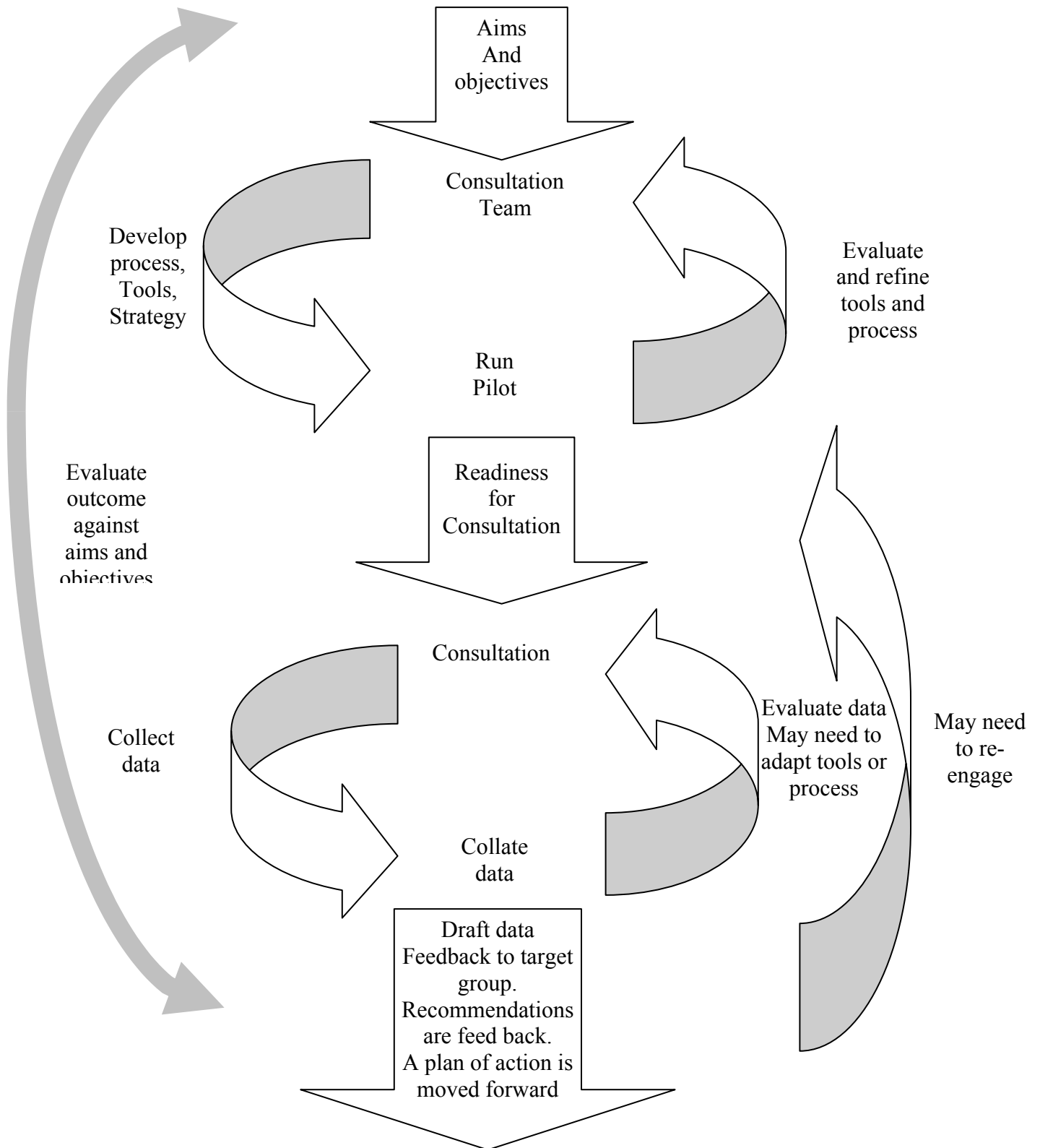
Information flow was central to establishing a readiness to engage in the consultation process, a dedicated website was constructed and updated regularly: email correspondences were sent to the ‘all-staff’ list (2,100 active addresses) and ‘all-student’ lists (16,500 active addresses). Face-to-face presentations were given to various committees totalling 278 staff members, and 71 participants from staff and stakeholder groups agreed to take part in focus group sessions.

*The author as participant/researcher contends that the consultation process utilized was both dynamic and inclusive, and that the robust multi-method social research model operationalized to gather data fulfilled contemporary best practice, and that the procedures were scientifically rigorous. By applying this methodology throughout, the validity and reliability of the research design is enhanced.*

*From personal reflection on the work to date, the author would locate the theoretical framework utilized in the critical theory paradigm, with key indicators being collaborative nature of enquiry, critical reflection, participant/researcher, identifying issues and providing data for decision maker to plan and implement change. The operationalised process also parallels some of the main tenets of a complete cycle of action research such as: identify, plan, implement and evaluate. However, as stated previously, the development and roll-out of the consultation process was more informed by actual practice and the present reality of the context than by theoretical frameworks. However the ‘knowledge stock’ of the team and its dynamic rendered initial discussions on epistemology and ontology redundant as members’ research ‘world views’ were implicit in their decisions and actions.*

Appendix 1

Consultation process



**Level 3 – May 2005 – Issue 3**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Draft, Aidan Kenny, 30/05/2005**

**Appendix 2: Draft copy of student survey**

Draft copy student survey
<b>1. Which faculty are you studying in?</b>
Faculty of Applied Arts
Faculty of Business
Faculty of the Built Environment
Faculty of Engineering
Faculty of Science
Faculty of Tourism and Food
<b>2. Are you registered as a:</b>
Full-time student?
Part-time student?
<b>3. Are you registered on a:</b>
Postgraduate taught programme?
Honours degree programme?
Diploma/Ordinary degree?
Certificate programme?
Apprenticeship programme?
Other?

**4. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements**

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I made the right choice in coming to study at DIT					
DIT is fulfilling its commitment to excellence in teaching					
The teaching facilities in DIT are 'state of the art'					
The sports facilities in DIT are 'state of the art'					
The canteen facilities in DIT are 'state of the art'					
The library facilities in DIT are 'state of the art'					
DIT offers a 'caring' learning environment					
Any issues raised in relation to our course are responded to quickly					
Our class rep. reports to the class on the course committee meetings he/she attends					
The surveys we complete at the end of each course are useful					
IT facilities and support are excellent at DIT					
My expectations of the course have not been met					
The programme is career focused					
My programme is industry focused					
There are good feedback mechanisms in place for students to make suggestions on how DIT might improve its service to students					

**Appendix 2.1: Draft copy of staff survey**

Draft copy staff survey
<b>1. Please indicate what area of the Institute you currently work in</b>
Faculty of Applied Arts
Faculty of Business
Faculty of the Built Environment
Faculty of Engineering
Faculty of Science
Faculty of Tourism and Food
Academic Affairs
Research and enterprise
Other (Please Specify):
<b>2. Please indicate the category below that best describes your role within the Institute</b>
Management

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Academic Staff
Academic Support
Library Services
Technical
Administrative/Central Services
Maintenance
Other (Please Specify):
<b>3. For lecturing staff</b>
<b>Please indicate your grade</b>
Assistant lecturer
Lecturer 1
Lecturer
Senior lecturer 1 (teaching)
Lecturer (structured)
SLII
SLIII
<b>4. For administrative, support and technical staff</b>
Grade 1-2
Grade 3-4
Grade 5-6
Grade 6+
<b>5. Years of service in DIT</b>
1 to 4
5 to 9
10 to 14
15 to 19
20 +
<b>6. Age profile</b>
<20
20-29
30-39
40-49
50-59
60-65
>65

**7. Quality assurance and improvement please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements**

	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
DITs' quality assurance procedures work very well					
Course committees are functioning well.					
The chairperson of all course committees I sit on has been elected by the committee members					
I understand the functions of Faculty Boards					
I am not aware of the functions of Academic Council.					
I receive regular information from our faculty board representative					
The course validation process is rigorous					
The course validation process is inclusive					
Validation panels are objective and impartial					
The examinations/assessment process is rigorous					
The external examiner provides an objective peer judgement on the standards achieved at the completion of the course.					
Recommendations in external examiners' reports are taken seriously and acted upon.					
The student surveys give very useful feedback.					
The annual monitoring report (Q5) is effective in ensuring that academic standards are maintained.					
Academic standards are dropping at the DIT					
The quality assurance procedures are too bureaucratic					
Recommendations in the Q5 forms are not taken very					

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seriously.					
Management is committed to ensuring high academic standards.					
There needs to be quality assurance and improvement procedures for management's role in maintaining high academic standards.					

**8. Organisational Structures, Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements**

	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
The faculty structures are appropriate for the Institute					
The DIT management structure is very hierarchical in nature					
The elaborate committee structure operating in the institute ensures the organisation is very democratic					
Serving on committees is a waste of time as they have no real decision making powers					
Decision making in the Institute is too centralised					
Faculty, School/ Department structures need to be reviewed on a regular basis					
There should be more co-operation between faculties					
Management posts should be rotated					
There are too many committees in the DIT					
The interview process for posts in the institute is fair and transparent					
There are clear selection criteria for management appointments					
All management posts including acting posts should be advertised and candidates interviewed					
There should be an agreed structured appraisal system of management by staff working in their area					
The additional management posts created under the new faculty structures has reduced the administrative workload of lecturing staff					
The faculty structure has produced synergies by bringing disciplines together within faculties					
The DIT human resources department operate in a professional and caring manner					
Faculty management are committed to a partnership approach					
The selection procedures for interview panels ensures that they are impartial					
There should be staff representatives on Faculty executives					

**9. Learning and Teaching and Research, Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements**

	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
Excellence in teaching and learning is highly regarded within the DIT					
It is essential that high quality research producing publications in refereed journals be undertaken in DIT					
More flexible modes of delivery including modularisation, e-learning and distance education need to be introduced quickly					
Class sizes are too small in the Institute					
Those involved in research are supported strongly by the DIT					
The level of research activity needs to be increased within the DIT					
Student retention strategies are working					
The issue of student retention has led to increasing pressure being exerted on academic staff to pass students					
The pressure to get students through a programme has led to a decline in standards					

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Excellence in research is recognised by the institute					
DIT offers a flexible learning environment					
DIT is fulfilling its commitment to providing excellence in teaching					
DIT is fulfilling its commitment to providing excellence in research					

**10. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements**

	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
DIT is responsive to the needs of industry					
DIT interacts sufficiently with local communities					
DIT provides a supportive environment for staff					
DIT fosters career development for staff					
Staff accommodation in the DIT is inadequate					
Each member of academic staff should have an office of his/her own					
The institute has an international reputation for excellence in teaching					
The institute has an international reputation for excellence in research					
DIT provides a multi-level learner-centred environment					
The facilitates for postgraduate students are very good in the DIT					

### Appendix 3: Invitation letter to participate in online surveys

#### Information sheet - EUA Self-evaluation report

Under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, the NQAI is required to carry out a review of the effectiveness of QA in DIT. So NQAI, with the agreement of DIT has commissioned the EUA to carry out an evaluation study.

The preparatory stage of this study is already underway; the EUA has supplied DIT with a document entitled 'Quality Review Guidelines, Self Evaluation and Review Visits' (available on the Staff Intranet under Academic Affairs). The guidelines set out clearly the process, procedures, focus and timeframe of the EUA's study.

The initial stage of this process requires DIT to produce a self-reflective evaluation report to be presented to the EUA in January 2005. A Self-Evaluation Steering Committee has been established to prepare the report, based on an open and transparent consultation process. The formation of this Committee is representative of the main stakeholders within the Institute, students and staff. The Membership is as follows:

Director of Academic Affairs (Chair)	Dr Frank McMahon
Academic Registrar (Secretary)	Dr Tom Duff
Faculty Director	Dr Matt Hussey
Student	Ms Sharon Hughes
Faculty Administrator	Ms Andrea Marcelin
Head of School	Ms Kate Uí Ghallachóir
Head of Department	Mr Don Byrne
Lecturer/Academic Staff Member	Mr Dominic Dillane
Head of Learning Development	Lloyd Scott
Researcher	Dr Steve Jerrams
Qualifications Framework Development Officer	Mr Aidan Kenny

The Steering Group wishes to consult widely in accordance with the Principles of good practice as set out in the EU Information and Consultation Directive. There will be four main information-gathering phases.

1. An online survey of all staff
2. Focus Group discussions
3. Meetings with Faculty Boards
4. Trade Union discussions

There will also be an opportunity for interested parties to view a draft copy of the Self-Evaluation report (mid January 2005 on the staff intranet). Clarification comments will be accepted at this stage. Interested parties can forward to the Secretary or any member of the Steering Group, a one page summary document now addressing the questions below if they so wish:

- What is the Institute trying to do?
- How is the Institute trying to do it?
- How does the Institute know it works?
- How does the Institute change in order to improve?

It is hoped that this process will encourage colleagues to adopt a 'reflective practice' approach and facilitate an open discourse.

The views of students and external stakeholders on the present stage of DIT's development are also being sought.

Thank you for reading this short document. We hope you can engage with the consultation process as it is rolled out.

Dr Frank McMahon  
Chair: Steering Group

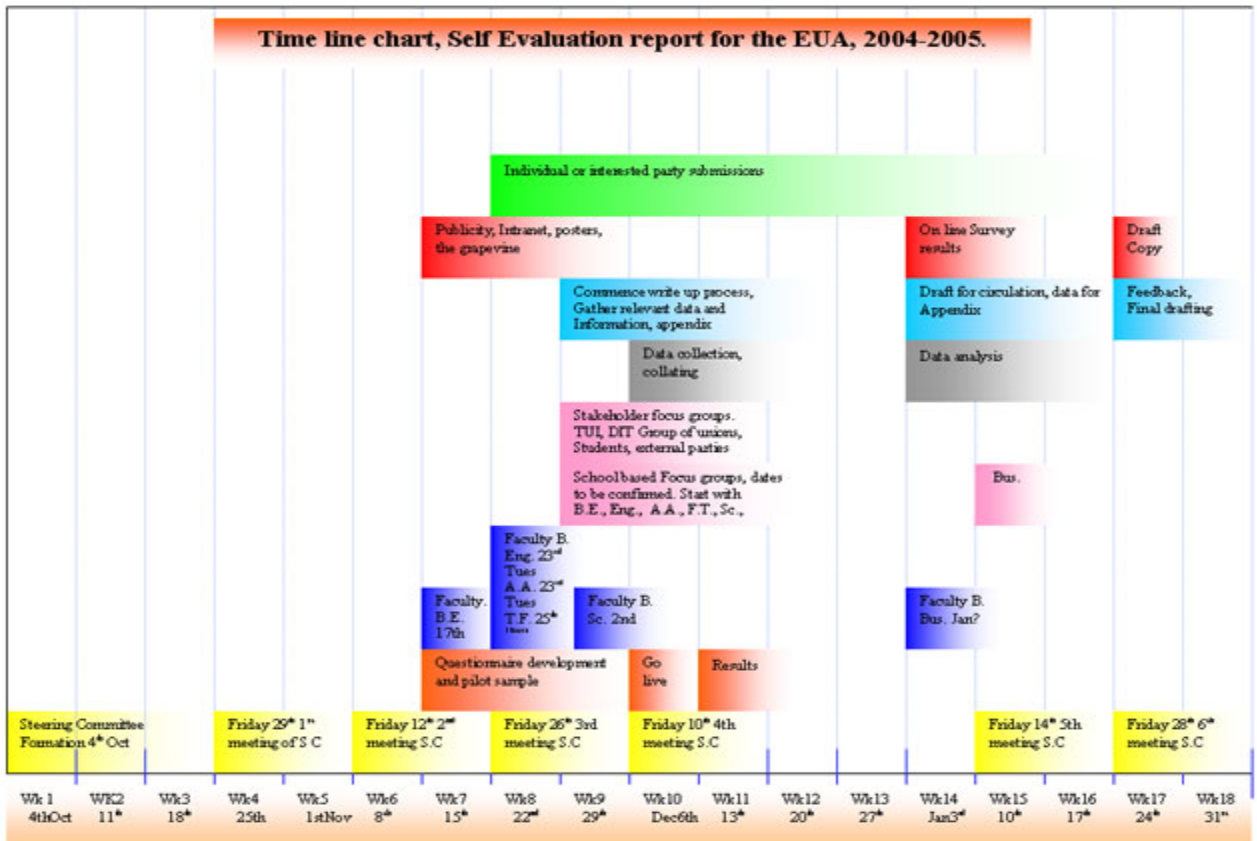
Appendix 4

**Focus group schedule**

Can you give practical examples of the strengths and weakness of the following themes?

<p><u>Resources and facilities</u>                  Examples of strengths;                  How can these be consolidated?                  Examples of weaknesses                  How can these be improved?  <u>Research</u>                  Examples of strengths;                  How can these be consolidated?                  Examples of weaknesses;                  How can these be improved?  <u>Quality Assurance</u>                  Examples of strengths;                  How can these be consolidated?                  Examples of weakness;                  How can these be improved?</p>	<p><u>Strategic plan</u>                  Examples of strengths;                  How can these be consolidated?                  Examples of weaknesses;                  How can these be improved?  <u>Learning and teaching</u>                  Examples of strengths;                  How can these be consolidated?                  Examples of weaknesses                  How can these be improved?  <u>Organisational structures</u>                  Examples of strengths;                  How can these be consolidated?                  Examples of weaknesses;                  How can these be improved?</p>
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Appendix 5





#### Acknowledgements,

Thanks to; The members of the DIT community who participated in the online surveys and focus group sessions; the administrative support staff in Academic Affairs and the Faculties; the President and Directors for the priority they placed on this process and the access they provided; the following stakeholders and committees for their co-operation, academic staff trade union TUI, non academic staff trade unions AMICUS, IMPACT, SIPTU, students representative body DITSU and the Partnership committee.

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