



**Maynooth
University**
National University
of Ireland Maynooth

Ollscoil Mhá Nuad / Maynooth University

QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND ASSURANCE

PEER REVIEW GROUP REPORT

RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

ACADEMIC YEAR 2023

Date 17 August 2023

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1. Introduction

The Peer Review of the Research Development Office took place on the 28 and 29 June 2023.

The Research Development Office (RDO) is a central unit of the University with responsibility for providing administrative support for all research related activity across the university. The Office is responsible for implementation of the research goals within the University Strategic Plan. The RDO, and as well as Maynooth Works, are under the portfolio of the VP – Research and Innovation.

The research support function was established in 2002, and since then there have been several restructures aimed at streamlining processes, including integration of the research finance and postgraduate finance functions into RDO. The RDO provides a ‘one-stop shop’ support for researchers, and notably provides guidance and support across the full research proposal life cycle including funding identification, proposal development and consortium building, post award financing, reporting, audit, legal and contracting, as well as ethical and compliance matters.

The RDO is centrally located in the John Hume Building with colleagues from Maynooth Works, with whom the RDO works collaboratively on areas such as industry collaboration, and management of IP and licensing.

The Office last underwent a Quality Review in 2016. In the period since the review the University has achieved a growth in value of research awards and success rate of applications, aligned with ambitions set out in the MU 2018/22 Strategic Plan. This has been delivered against a backdrop of a challenging external landscape with the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the RDO had been operating with interim VP-R&I leadership for over 2 years; the new VP-RI took up post in April 2023. The new institutional Strategic Plan 2023-2028 is due to be launched later in 2023 and will articulate further ambitions for growth.

2. Peer Review Group Members

Name	Affiliation	Role
Dr Wendy McLoone	Queen's University Belfast	External reviewer (chair)
Ms Anna Grey	Edge Hill University	External reviewer
Professor Sean Doyle	Maynooth University	Internal reviewer
Professor Gerry Kearns	Maynooth University	Internal reviewer

3. Timetable of the site visit

The timetable for the visit conducted over two-days, is provided as an Appendix. The site visit, which took the form of a series of pre-arranged interviews, formed the primary element of the review process. The meetings took place in the John Hume Building.

The Peer Review Group (PRG) met for an introductory meeting, with Dr Teresa Lee, Director of Quality, in virtual format on 19 June at which Dr Lee provided a briefing on the process and requirements of the Quality Review. Additional information requested by the PRG following this meeting was provided in a timely manner in advance of the site visit.

The Peer Review Group attended an informal dinner with Dr Teresa Lee, the Director of Quality and Professor Rachel Msetfi, Vice- President for Research & Innovation on the evening before the site visit. This allowed for a general conversation on the internal and external context in which the RDO operates and, in particular, the Irish Research and Innovation landscape, and the Institutional Strategy. There was also an opportunity to seek clarification on any aspect of the paperwork or process. The panel also took this opportunity to have a short introductory meeting in advance of dinner.

The timetable was comprehensive and well structured, and the meetings enabled the PRG to understand the functioning of the RDO, its interactions and interfaces internal and external to the service and, in particular, interactions with academic and research colleagues. The review process concluded with the PRG delivering a brief presentation of its findings to the VP-R&I, all members of the RDO staff and the Director of Quality. There was no requirement for any adjustments to the timetable.

The panel appreciated meeting with all members of the RDO team as a collective. However, the smaller unit level discussions were the most informative, allowing for more in-depth discussion on process and procedures.

Additionally, whilst it was helpful to meet with a wide range of researchers representing the breadth of the research community, in some of the later sessions limited additional

information was provided. For a small number of sessions academic stakeholders appeared unclear on their role in the process.

4. Peer Review Methodology

4.1 Site Visit

Overall, the process ran very smoothly over the two days and throughout the process staff in the Quality Office were helpful and informative in their communication with members of the PRG. Careful consideration was given to all the details of the process, which was outlined with great clarity to the PRG.

The site visit was complemented by a Self-Assessment Report (SAR) which had been prepared by the RDO in April 2023 and made available to the panel 3 weeks in advance of the site visit. This allowed sufficient time for review and the preparation of questions. This was an extremely informative and comprehensive report which included a SWOT analysis developed during a RDO 'Away Day' in February 2023 and a Quality Improvement Plan. The PRG acknowledges the collective efforts of the entire RDO team in preparation of the paperwork.

The PRG enjoyed engaging with the various members of MU staff during the visit and thank those who participated. Overall, the members of the panel found the visit to be an extremely insightful and positive experience.

4.2 Peer Review Group Report

The PRG report was written jointly by the members. Throughout the visit the PRG recorded its observations and comments which formed the basis of the report. At the end of the site visit, the PRG met to discuss the report, in particular collectively agreeing many of the commendations and recommendations for improvement. These unanimous findings were presented to the RDO staff at the exit presentation. Subsequently a virtual meeting of the PRG was organised to agree the approach to the report preparation. Both external and internal members took responsibility for leading out on particular sections. The first draft was made available through Microsoft teams for comment and amendment. The PRG then met virtually to discuss and agree final amendments. The final version was sent to the Director of Research Development Office for factual correction prior to submission of the report.

5. Overall Assessment

5.1. Summary Assessment of the Present State of the Unit

The Peer Review Group evaluation of the RDO at Maynooth University occurred at an interesting time; shortly after the commencement of a new Vice-President for Research and Innovation (VPRI), virtually simultaneously with the internal circulation of the new University Strategic Plan (2023-2028), and as a new Graduate Research Academy is emerging. It is indeed a time of change for the overarching research structures and research-related plans at the

University and follows a period of transience for the RDO regarding interaction with interim VPRIs.

The RDO is functioning excellently to provide a research support service to Maynooth University researchers via a 'one-stop shop' model. This model, which includes a cohesive and specific RDO Finance Unit, was introduced subsequent to the previous Quality Review. RDO Finance has developed quickly and established excellent work practices. From detailed discussions with RDO/RDO Finance Staff and multiple service users, this integrated model is working very efficiently and to the satisfaction of all concerned.

Importantly, the level of collegiality within the RDO, including with respect to the Director of Research (DOR), is extremely high. It is clear that within Maynooth University, RDO is staffed by very well-led collegial personnel, functioning very efficiently, is extremely aware of its operational roles and responsibilities, and at all times seeks to implement these for the benefit of researchers. This is especially the case with respect to pre- and post-award activities, efficient online processing of ethics applications, legal support, more recently the highly satisfactory operation of postgraduate funding schemes, engagement of researchers in the funding process and from a key strategic perspective, via engagement with and potential recruitment of highly-research active personnel via specific funding mechanisms. The latter is enabled by two internal strategic postings, one of which involves direct interaction with a university research institute – Hamilton Institute.

The RDO achieves this high level of delivery by virtue of a flat organisational structure, significant staff expertise, dedication and engagement, as well as significant University input and direction. RDO staff reported that Maynooth University is supportive of work-life balance considerations. Career-related opportunities arise for RDO staff on an ad hoc basis to take on new roles and responsibilities, which was positive, but self-reflection activities were limited due to work pressures and time limitations. Indeed, it is clear from both a detailed reading of the SAR, and our extensive consultation with RDO Staff and service users, that the RDO is under severe pressure to deliver and support researcher grant applications— which requires staff working late hours, additional time and on weekends. While this, in itself, is not an especially negative phenomenon, or unprecedented occurrence on an occasional basis, the PRG formed the opinion that this extra work requirement is ongoing - recognised as such by external service users - and is a major source of concern amongst RDO staff. To some extent, the RDO is a 'victim of its own success', and its high-quality service is raising the expectation level of service users. Combined with the extra workload issue is a request from RDO staff regarding regrading and restructuring of the office to a more 'team-based' model which provides opportunity for career progression (but one which still retains the collegiality, cross-function support and efficiency of the present system).

It is the opinion of the PRG that a business case can certainly be made for additional RDO staff but that is within the scope of the DOR function, along with the VPRI, to address this issue in the short-medium term. Relatedly, it was noted by the PRG that although the parallel appointment of three Associate Deans of Research (ADR) by the three Faculties at the

University had occurred, the precise roles and responsibilities of these positions were still under development. We recommend that the University, and relevant functions, might consider these roles to support current RDO function, and that the implementation of the new ADR roles should certainly not place additional workload on RDO staff. For instance, there may be a role for ADRs in supporting Post-Doctoral Researchers (PDR), research communications or the emerging Graduate Research Academy, at Maynooth University. Indeed, the PDR cohort reported to us that although they receive valuable RDO support for research grant writing and applications, which was very much appreciated, further assistance with early-career development (e.g., in securing Teaching experience and promoting PDR research activity), and recognition of PDR delivery, would be both useful and appreciated.

Many service users expressed the view that RDO should acquire the role of HR to support and enable the recruitment of temporary research staff (e.g., Post-Doctoral Researchers, Research Assistants) on funded research projects. This was especially and clearly voiced by ERC recipients and Directors of University Research Institutes, and we understand that there is a desire by some academic colleagues for an HR function within RDO. We note that a research-related post within HR existed until 2021 and we suggest that this is reinstated in line with the suggestion in the SAR. As we understand it, no decision has been made to establish an HR function within RDO and, after much discussion and consideration, the PRG formed the opinion that to do so may not represent a long-term sustainable solution (e.g., may evolve into dealing with personnel issues and other matters which would not add value to RDO function) and so would caution against this action - although it may satisfy immediate researcher needs. Both the RDO and University Senior Management Team (SMT) need to give further and prompt consideration to this issue of temporary research staff recruitment as a matter of urgency, as it is adversely affecting research project initiation and research delivery/income. PRG did not meet any HR staff members, but the resolution to this issue may best lie in that Unit.

The growth in research activity has been accompanied by a concomitant increase in the requirement for detailed legal support for research contract finalisation, inter-institutional agreements and a range of other legal services. It was abundantly clear from our discussions, and the SAR, that although excellent, the current commitment of 0.7 FTE to this activity was insufficient even with cross-support functionality with Maynooth Works staff. Indeed, it was brought to our attention that the extreme complexity of finalising data sharing/use and related matters for certain contracts had resulted in severe delays to specific project commencement. This resource issue, in the view of the PRG, needs to be addressed by the University to ensure research spend (reported as 'Research Income') can commence as efficiently as possible for awarded grants.

Herewith find a summary of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats which the PRG has agreed following our assessment exercise and subsequent discussions:

5.1.1. Strengths

- RDO is functioning extremely well within the University and adds significant value to the research activity, and reputation, of the Institution.
- RDO staff are committed to their roles and responsibilities for the benefit of individual researchers, Departments, University Research Institutes and the overall University.
- RDO is recognised by all internal clients and service users as a well-functioning and extremely well-managed unit, which is largely well-integrated into university administrative functions.
- RDO staff always seek to find solutions to issues and RDO activity is very much appreciated by all concerned.
- RDO Finance unit within RDO is functioning excellently, and its systems may positively impact any new structures which emerge within the overall RDO.
- The RDO sits within a system where research development functions are widely shared and embedded in Departments and Research Institutes through the distribution of overheads via the Research Incentivisation Fund (RIF). This was enthusiastically supported by academic staff.

5.1.2. Weaknesses

- RDO now feels over-stretched to deliver its current level of service, let alone any further ambitions articulated in the new strategic plan.
- There is an apparent lack of reflection on external benchmarking of the RDO, in terms of size and grant performance.
- Its flat organizational structure may no longer be fit-for-purpose as roles and responsibilities have changed significantly since the last Quality Review in 2016.
- Staff expressed the desire to have opportunities for training, self-development and promotion; current opportunities were seen to be limited.
- RDO Finance interaction with Bursar's office requires management for the benefit of the University.
- Although it is outside RDO control, there has been sub-optimal strategic direction of research development for almost 2 years, particularly in relation to visibility of the research agenda at the University SMT level.
- Post-Doctoral Researcher requirements are evolving, increasing and may not be fully addressed at present.

5.1.3. Opportunities

- There is an opportunity for RDO management, in conjunction with the VPRI, to make a case for increased investment and the recruitment of additional staff.
- New organisational structures within RDO should assist with Unit management and potentially provide opportunity for staff progression and development.
- Changes elsewhere within the University (e.g., ADR positions) may provide synergistic added value for RDO function and University research activity.
- The new University Strategic Plan (2023-2028) will provide a structure for RDO planning and growth of university research activity.

- The recent recruitment of a new VPRI gives a strong voice to RDO at University SMT level.
- Simultaneous promotion of RDO and value of university research output for societal good- internally and externally.
- New models to engage and utilise Associate Deans of Research and Post-Doctoral Researcher expertise to promote research.

5.1.4. Threats

- Failure of University SMT to facilitate RDO capacity and commitment to further develop and support research activity.
- Loss of experienced staff to other institutions (e.g., nascent Technological Universities) and over-dependency on key staff.
- External events (e.g., new national funding agencies, changes in funding agency priorities and compatibility with university research base).
- Inaction on Post-Doctoral Researchers concerns and requirements.
- Continual expansion of remit.
- Given the current review of RIF, a revision of RIF to potentially retain a higher share of overheads by central administration could imperil the broadly shared research development function of which the RDO is currently part.

5.2. Self-Assessment Report

5.2.1. Overall Assessment of the Self-Assessment Report

The RDO produced a Self-Assessment Report (SAR) just shy of 100 pages, plus ten appendices that were devoted largely to their standard operating procedures. After an executive summary and a review of the structure of the office, the main parts of the review described the principal RDO functions, before moving to a treatment of current developments, and concluding with an assessment of the current situation and future prospects. Throughout, the claims in the report are supported by tables and figures.

The PRG found the SAR to be extremely helpful and detailed. In particular, they noted the comprehensive nature of the engagement with users and the in-depth reflection particularly around the strengths and weaknesses. The commentary in the self-assessment aligned with the comments made in the meetings during the review visit, indicating that the self-assessment was an honest and accurate reflection of the unit's performance.

5.2.2. Additional Information Requested

Prior to the review and after the initial reading of the document, the PRG requested additional information including the outcomes of a review of the Research Evaluation Fund (REF) undertaken in 2020, any data that might be available on the outcomes of the review and any information on the outcomes or impact of activity supported by the fund. Given that the REF was seen as a major driver of research at the institution, the PRG would advise that some

more reflection on how this fund was used and therefore impacted on the effectiveness of the office would be helpful in future reports.

A short summary was also requested regarding the interactions with other professional support areas of the university. This information was provided, and it highlighted to the PRG that the RDO might want to consider how well it operates and builds relationships with other professional services across the institution. Given the important role of the RDO in managing research income, the Panel was surprised that it did not meet the Bursar and that the interaction with this office seemed to be more limited than expected. In future self-assessments, it might be useful to the RDO to conduct some stakeholder surveys with areas of professional services.

The PRG asked if there were any common themes that arose from exit interviews. Exit interviews were not undertaken and during the review the panel also asked about annual appraisals/development meetings. Whilst the panel did note that appraisals were not part of institutional practice, the opportunity for staff to discuss their training needs and any other concerns might be beneficial for future exercises. This might help in the retention of staff or identify themes in relation to areas of concern, though it is recognised that not all of these concerns were areas that the RDO would control.

Within the report, the PRG noted the reference to a national benchmarking exercise, which due to confidentiality requirements, the PRG were unable to see. However, the lack of external benchmarking within the self-assessment was seen as a weakness, suggesting a focus on internal performance. Without this benchmarking, the panel could not comment on issues relating to the appropriate size of the department, but more importantly the RDO were not able to present this information to the institution.

On a related theme, the PRG asked for information in relation to the success of the institution compared to other Irish Institutions. This was provided but again the PRG would advise that using such benchmarking data on a regular basis would help the RDO assess its performance.

5.2.3. Obstacles Facing Review

There are three destabilising contexts that complicate the presentation and interpretation of the RDO performance as detailed in the SAR.

- First the COVID public health emergency affected both the operation of the office and, more dramatically, the activities that the RDO supports. It was clear from the testimony of academics interviewed by the Peer Review Group (PRG) that the RDO switched quickly and effectively to an online service, if anything extending the availability of staff to the researchers they support (negligible diminution in services noted by academic and research staff, pp. 72, 76). However, the impact of the public health emergency on research activity was massive and, in many ways, makes the Research Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) reported in Table 1 (page 8) very difficult to assess.

- Second, over the period covered by this review, the governance system into which the RDO is placed has been unstable with multiple interim or temporary Vice-Presidents for Research and Innovation (VPRI). This makes it difficult to assess the division of labour and relations between the VPRI and the Director of Research Development (DOR). It is clear that the current DOR has faithfully and effectively tried to implement the strategy of Maynooth University (MU), but, with the benefit of hindsight, at least part of our assessment was hindered by not having had a full institutional narrative from the perspective of successive VPRIs.
- Third, the RDO has recently joined a consortium of comparable offices at other universities, and this offers the prospect of sharing best practice and comparing RDO performance with comparable entities. However, although this is all to be commended and is reported on in outline in chapter 16 of the SAR, the co-operations are at an early stage and there are confidentiality concerns that mean benchmarking is opaque or rudimentary. As trust develops it is to be hoped that the National Benchmarking Project might yield fuller details on operations at comparable, larger and smaller Higher Education institutions (HEIs). The PRG did ask for some further benchmarking evidence, and some was quickly provided although with this caveat about the National Benchmarking Project: “The data being collected as part of this project is confidential and [...] will only be shared between the HEIs and not externally.”

5.2.4. Measuring Performance

Apart from special projects and to cover additional obligations, for example, the transfer-in of the financial side of postgraduate training, it would appear that the core staffing complement of the RDO has seen little growth over the past five years and now stands at 21.7 full-time equivalent staff (FTEs), including 3.5 currently vacant (Table 10, pp. 88–9). In 2017 it was 17. If we deduct the 2.5 transferred across for the new postgraduate functions, the office has grown from 17 to 19.2 and was currently operating with 16.2 since there were three vacancies at the time of the writing of the SAR (one FTE due to have been filled since). The SAR does note (p. 90) that in two comparable institutions a broadly equivalent level of research activity is fielded by 14 and 18 FTEs of staff respectively, compared to RDO’s 8 FTEs as research officers (and only 5 FTEs currently filled). However, it is important to note that within the ‘comparable’ institutions the responsibilities of the individuals are limited to managing the pre-award function, whereas the 8 research officers in the RDO have a much broader range of responsibilities, managing all non-financial post award aspects of a grant through to close out.

There has been a steady growth in the grant-related research activity supported by the office. Applications (up 70%), awards (doubled), and the number of academic staff involved with applications (up about 50%) has increased steadily (Figure 3, p. 15). The grants awarded directly to Maynooth has tripled, and (although this appears to have been reported only for the second half of the reporting period), when research funds transferred from other research partners on joint awards are included, the value of awards appears to have quintupled (Figure 4, p. 16). This is the primary activity of the RDO and the integrated service it offers, covering all aspects of the research grant cycle from a single office, is universally praised with many

academic colleagues noting the quality of support across the growing number of applications and awards. There is commentary in the report, underlined in our interviews that the growth in this core activity is proving difficult to keep pace with under more-or-less static FTE level.

The SAR also reports on particular emphases and initiatives. There has been a concerted effort to promote European-level grants and it is notable that university drawdown from the Horizon 2020 (H2020) scheme, which more or less corresponds to this reporting period, was double that under the previous Seventh Framework Programme (Figure 6, p.18). While Maynooth was ranked eighth among Irish HEIs for H2020, it is currently fifth during the first two years of the new Horizon Europe programme, which the RDO is surely right to attribute to earlier “successes in ERC, MSCA and other MU coordinated projects” (Supplementary Information, p.1).

Beyond grant applications and management, there are other research supports in the university, some provided through the RDO. The RDO administers schemes supporting publications, networking and conference travel (Research Enhancement Fund: REF) and also distributes a share of the research overheads (Research Incentivisation Fund: RIF) to PIs, Research Institutes and Departments. In addition, the university supports research through its sabbatical scheme. None of these were comprehensively reviewed in the current SAR. Some academics, particularly in the Humanities, as well as Heads of Department more widely, noted how heavily they rely upon these schemes and funds to initiate, sustain and enhance a more broadly-based suite of research activities by both staff and research postgraduates than are encompassed by the scholarship and science that proceeds from the larger grants. The KPIs and promotional activities of the RDO and the University might be supplemented to highlight the scholarship and science that is not only associated with the larger grants, including postgraduate publications, research monographs, and academic honours and international profile.

5.2.5. Supporting the Research Cycle

The account in the SAR of the integrated service offered by the RDO highlights bespoke support for individual researchers, together with a recognition that the largest grants come for a relatively small group of researchers who need careful attention. It is also clear that, at least in the case of MUSSI, research institutes provide research support functions for a few of the most productive individual researchers. In the case of the Hamilton Institute there is a (0.5 FTE) member of the RDO acting within the institute to support grant application and administration. It is not clear if the RDO has concluded that this is an initiative it sees value in replicating, as it notes is the case in several other universities, or if the value of centralisation is too evident for such diversification.

5.2.5.a. Applications

It is clear that the RDO does offer and can access further professional services to support a very wide range of grant applications, some of which raise complex contractual issues around data compliance, ethical matters, legal arrangements, intellectual property, and co-working with other HEIs, as well other partners from civil society, government, agriculture and industry at home and abroad. One issue noted in the report is the shortage of ready access to relevant

legal advice at this stage of the grant cycle (p. 7), and indeed something similar was raised in the Quality Review (QR) of 2016 with respect to “InterReg, EPSON or other similar awards,” but that “no further resources were approved for legal and contracts” (p. 70). The tailored support offered to potential ERC candidates is particularly highlighted (p. 34) and there is some mention of support for IRC Laureate candidates (p. 62), which might in turn increase the pipeline towards ERC awards. For many researchers the RDO website is the principal source in preparing an application and while the RDO posts a wealth of material there, the SAR recognises that the poor functionality of university websites in general means that the information provided is not as easily found or used as should be the case (p. 22).

The RDO notes the help it gives, even on the eve of submission, to a range of submissions and while it would be helpful to have longer time to help researchers it is recognised that, perhaps particularly for researchers submitting only an occasional grant application, this help can be the difference between making a submission and not doing so. For these “occasional” applicants it was mentioned in interviews, and it may be true for others, that the effort in making, often unsuccessful, applications received little or no recognition. Perhaps particularly for failed applications where there is any measure of feedback provided, an RDO follow-up might offer advice and encouragement to re-draft, re-package and re-submit, perhaps to an alternative granting body.

The expansion of ethical review is dramatic (Figure 10, p. 47), particularly in the social sciences (currently 90% of the projects undergoing review and having grown tenfold over the past decade). The SAR reviewed changes made to the submission and management of ethical reviews showing a continual attention to the efficient use of the time not only of staff in RDO but also that of the academic staff who conduct the reviews. There was some suggestion in our interviews that it was difficult to recruit sufficient staff to these sub-committees.

It might be reassuring that there was no need for report on how MU handled cases of research misconduct, either cases taken against the university by research staff or research postgraduates, or cases where individual researchers are found to have breached professional ethics with respect to plagiarism etc. However, ethical matters can’t be expected to stay in the research proposal stage, and it is not clear, at least for the non-biological sciences, if there is any way that the university exercises responsibility for these matters during subsequent stages of the research process.

In November 2021 RDO assumed responsibility for postgraduate research funding and training supports. The University currently offers 18 full PhD scholarships per year, and in addition in the most recent year there were 20 further awards where Departments (or in rare cases an external agency) fund a full stipend and the University covers fees (pp. 48–9). Given that the total PhD intake last year was 114 this is a significant contribution (a third). From the SAR, it is not clear how the success of these schemes is measured and incentivised between departments or faculties: completion rates, transfers to competitive IRC awards, etc.

5.2.5.b. Conduct

One significant bottleneck was noted with respect to the timely hiring of research staff. Granting bodies often require an even unreasonably quick commencement to research after an award is announced. This puts great stress on PIs and after submitting a grant application that had university approval, they find that subsequently they have to submit job applications to HR for approval, and this has been taking months. It is recognised that HR has been under particular pressure of late with significant consequences for PIs and all would no doubt endorse the RDO request that HR “re-instate a research recruitment dedicated role/business partner,” as had been the case until 2021 (p. 92). If not this solution, then, some other is urgently needed.

In relation to the conduct of research, the SAR summarises what the RDO learned from the MU application for the ‘HR Excellence in Research Award’ (pp. 39–40). Research awards place significant Human Resources (HR) responsibilities on Principal Investigators (PIs) and on PhD supervisors. As a result of the consultation that was part of the application the HR website has been enhanced to support better the growing community of postdoctoral researchers at MU (an increase of over a third from 2016 to 2021, p. 58). The SAR does not report on what has been done to prepare PIs and supervisors of postgraduates to meet the implications of these new recognitions.

RDO Finance offers substantial support to grant holders about the management of grants helping with budgets and necessary revisions of budget headings. The SAR does note a significant difficulty in achieving timely draw down of research funds during the Covid emergency.

Engaged research is mentioned as a future priority (p. 93), however, there is no audit of how extensive may be MU’s current practices of socially engaged research. This is clearly an important part of the case for public funding of universities.

5.2.5.c. Outputs

The SAR describes how the RDO helps grant holders make final budgetary reports and close-out grants. The online Research Information System (RIS) is the primary way the university learns of and monitors outputs and the Maynooth University Research Archive Library (MURAL) is the principal repository. It is not clear what proportion of research outputs report to RIS reach MURAL. It is unclear what use is made of RIS to investigate the research profile of the university; for example, the relations between grant activity and publications, the spread of publication activity across individuals within departments, the relation between publication and sabbatical, the effect of significant administrative duties such as headship on publications.

There is a single page on promoting the university research profile (p. 44). There was little evidence given of how effectively the RDO has been working with the MU Communications Office, nor of how the latter office sustains the research mission of the university. There is mention of promoting “new awards and significant outputs” and our conversations with academics underlined the first but the depth of engagement with promoting outputs seemed

less clear, at least in terms of university news headlines. MU Research Week offers a chance to communicate research more widely as do more focused events such as Social Justice week or the Food Sovereignty Festival. Nevertheless the recognition of a broad range of scholarship should not be left to bodies like the Royal Irish Academy but should be championed extensively by the RDO and others, such as the Communications Office, and it is notable that the 2016 Quality Review asked that the RDO “enhance” links with the Communications Office and that “this function remains as previously outlined” (p. 68).

5.2.6. Responding to Strategic Challenges

The SAR gives the RDO responses in light both of the last Quality Review (2016) (ch. 13) and of the MU Strategic Plan (2018–22) (ch. 12). When it is considered that these have been achieved with more or less static staffing levels and with frequent changes in the VPRI role, the RDO deserves all the plaudits evident in the user surveys summarised here (ch. 14). It is particularly gratifying to note the number of targeted training and support functions developed by the RDO in response to needs identified by external review or proposed by the university plan.

There are further challenges now evident with a new Strategic Plan and a new VPRI. Each faculty now has an Associate Dean for Research. The SAR provides little comment on these and, certainly with respect to the ADR little further illumination came from our meetings. Nevertheless, the leadership and comradely spirit of the RDO give every confidence that new challenges will be addressed effectively within and perhaps beyond resource limits. Indeed, one concern from the stakeholder reviews was echoed in many our meetings that “being viewed as ‘too responsive’ and solutions focussed,” the RDO will have “increased workload placed on it without the additional resources to support the extra demands” (p. 81). The SAR does note as the first among the threats faced by the RDO: “Staff burnout and difficulties in retention” (p. 87).

5.2.7. Quality Improvement Plan

The SAR is predominantly about research support functions with a few development initiatives around, for example, identifying and helping likely ERC applicants. The overwhelming support, even affection, for the RDO identified in their stakeholder surveys also largely relate to its research support functions. Seeding research prospects is a function exercised more directly by the research institutes and departments where familiarity with research issues and academic potential is clearer. There is certainly a central university function to support how academics learn about the priorities of and opportunities offered by granting agencies although it is striking how little this information function came up in stakeholder surveys or even in our own meetings with academics, although it was also clear that there were some individual relationships between singular academics and members of the RDO that took on this colour.

It is also striking that the majority of the operational suggestions in the Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) relate to supporting academics to find granting opportunities, make strong applications, manage research projects, and produce final reports. There remains, of course, a need to support non-funded research across MU. Offering training to departmental

assistants on aspects of the research grant process so that they can help local researchers, and training to heads of department so that they can make fuller use of RIS to document and analyse the research of the department (p. 94) certainly promises to bring the RDO support closer to more academics.

In some respects the QIP anticipates the new Strategic Plan, notably with the reference to Engaged Research but it is notable how quickly that moves towards “funding opportunities.” There are other aspects to the cultivation of partnerships over the long term that require different sorts of support than the identification of possible grants; for example, collaborative teaching, offering research capacity pro bono to community groups, directing doctoral research towards topics identified in collaboration with community partners.

The research income of the university has grown at a rate that outstrips the FTE growth of the RDO and the repeated references to “lack of bandwidth” (p. 91) in the SAR might perhaps be seen in that context.

6. Findings of the Peer Review Group: Commendations and Recommendations

6.1. Overview

Some additional brief comments are provided below with further details provided in Section 5. Firstly, the PRG acknowledges the comprehensive Self-Assessment Report (SAR) and accompanying documentation provided by the Research Development Office and the time dedicated by the team in preparation for the Quality Review visit.

The SAR demonstrated a high level of self-reflection and clear plans of quality improvement moving forward. The PRG also note the very positive and constructive engagement of the team with the review process.

There is clear evidence of strong engagement with users and a culture of providing an excellent service, which is appreciated by the users. However, this strong focus on support is putting pressure on staff within the RDO and potentially leading to some unhealthy working practices in order to meet tight deadlines.

The flat structure of the office means that there is limited opportunity for staff progression and workloads mean that staff find it difficult to find time for staff development or building networks beyond the institution.

A number of staff commented on the issues with the appointment of staff funded on research grants. There was a suggestion that bringing a HR function into RDO would be a solution to these issues. The PRG understood why this was seen as an option, but recommended that the reintroduction of a HR link person was a better, longer term solution.

Future SARs would be strengthened if they included input from Professional Service areas such as the Library and the Bursar's Office, together with more reflection on the performance and staffing levels compared to other RDO at other institutions.

Whilst the RDO was seen as a 'one-stop-shop' for grant-related activity there was less evidence of how other research activities, such as research outputs or the outcomes of research were supported, recorded and described within and beyond the institution. If this was undertaken by other areas of the institution, it was not clear how this work integrated with that of the RDO, especially given the need for final reports on funded research.

This would also seem an opportune time for the office to reflect on their name, as the RDO did not properly reflect the focus of the work undertaken.

6.2. Commendations

As outlined in previous sections, the PRG assessment of the RDO team and the service provided is hugely positive. The panel wish to highlight the below achievements and areas of quality.

- The PRG commends the entire RDO team on the exceptionally high quality of service delivery provided across all departments and Institutes. During the visit, the internal stakeholders were unanimously positive about the support they received from RDO which concurred with the findings of the surveys and focus groups detailed on the SAR.
- The delivery of a pre- and post-award 'one-stop shop' support function is highly valued by researchers across the University and determined to be functioning well. The commitment to continuous service improvement, operational efficiency and effectiveness, and pro-active process and policy development was demonstrated in several areas including post-award financial management and supports for postgraduate and postdoctoral researchers.
- The panel was impressed by the success of the team in supporting a very significant growth in research activity since 2015 with awards up sixfold from €9.83M in 2015/16 to €57.52M in 2021/22 and associated tripling in income from €13.36M in 2015/16 to €30.76M in 21/22.
- The PRG acknowledged the delivery of this performance within a challenging external higher education landscape and during the COVID-10 pandemic, and with clear under-resourcing and absence of recent investment.
- The Office was commended by stakeholders for the quality of support on the research proposal lifecycle. In particular, the support for ERC grants was viewed very positively with several of the ERC award holders (previously employed in other institutions) commenting that the level of support surpasses that offered in other institutions nationally and internationally.
- The PRG was highly impressed by the quality of the staff within the Research Development Office. Their exceptional professionalism and knowledge, coupled with enthusiasm and commitment to the university mission and the wider research

community, as well as their service to researchers, is to be applauded. In all the stakeholder meetings the strong work ethic and dedication of the entire RDO team was highlighted and their drive to make things happen was very evident. The team members were characterised by academic colleagues as individuals with a '*can-do*' attitude, who '*go above and beyond*' to support the research endeavour. Strong and effective working relationships between RDO staff and academic and research colleagues were very apparent to the PRG.

- The RDO was universally recognised as being highly responsive and were considered the go-to service, who '*get things sorted*' even if the issues or difficulties lie outside the RDO remit. Many review participants considered the unit to be the '*most functional part of the University*'.
- The PRG wishes to highlight the dedication and strength of leadership shown by the Director. A strong sense of team identity where the contribution of all members is valued, together with huge respect for the Director, was very evident throughout the visit.
- The supportive, inclusive and collaborative culture within the RDO was evident from the meetings with the team members. This strong and positive culture is to be commended. There was clear evidence of good practise around staff development, for example within the RDO Finance team, and strong feedback that the office promotes work-life balance.

Overall, it is the PRG view that the RDO leadership and team are clear on its future priorities and support the need for re-structuring and investment to enable delivery of the ambitions for growth in the quality and quantity of research activity articulated within the new Strategic Plan.

6.3. Recommendations for Improvement

It is recognised that at this critical juncture, the current structure and ways of working of the RDO are no longer appropriate to support the University's growth ambitions for research and innovation.

The recommendations listed below are not in any priority order and should be read in conjunction with Section 5.1 above which provides further contextual commentary.

Strategic Recommendations

Number	Recommendation	Additional PRG Comments
S1	Examine structure, roles and responsibilities of the current RDO structure to ensure it is fit for purpose in terms of service delivery, including whether the name of RDO accurately reflects its support focus.	<p>Urgently examine structure, roles and responsibilities of the current RDO structure to ensure it is fit for purpose in terms of service delivery. In this context consider if the name of RDO appropriately reflects the nature of services delivered. This should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reviewing the leadership roles within RDO to provide a more stratified leadership structure. - Examining contract conditions for current staff to ensure appropriate recognition of their current responsibilities, particularly in comparison with comparable roles within the University, <p>As a unit put in place approaches to document the level of additional responsibilities given the evidence about the inability to undertake strategic elements of activity.</p>

S2	Review the remit of RDO and develop an evidence base to demonstrate the resourcing needs to support delivery	In the context of implementing the new Strategic Plan review the remit of RDO and develop an evidence-base to demonstrate the resources needed to support delivery – including where are there gaps in support in areas beyond grant capture, such as illustrating research impact, addressing research culture, and promoting research outputs. In developing these new areas for support avail of best practise support from peer institutions nationally and internationally.
S3	In the context of the development of the Strategic Plan, consider the governance and management framework for the research implementation plan.	The framework should include the development of metrics for service delivery, outcomes and outputs, how the university should measure success beyond grants/awards and what success would look like? This should be within the context of the Responsible Use of Research Metrics.
S4	Examine how the university takes account of research activities beyond research grants and then how it recognises and embeds research into the broader culture.	The PRG noted that other RoI institutions use impact case studies to demonstrate the importance of and celebrate the work of research. In addition, the apparent lack of a celebration of research outcomes (beyond research grants) was noted.
S5	Ensure clarity at university level of the roles and responsibilities of Faculty, Institutes, Department and RDO for the delivery of support for postdoctoral researchers.	Consider appointment of a dedicated resource to support the delivery of the HR4SR (HR Strategy for Researchers)

Whole of Unit Recommendations

Number	Recommendation	Additional PRG Comments
U1	Review the current approach to external research communications to engage stakeholders, drive research impact and raise the profile of research in conjunction with communications or marketing department	<p>There seems to be a lack of clarity about linking specific types of communications to specific audiences (for example, for the attraction of new staff, to cultivate further research partnerships, to intervene in public and policy debates).</p> <p>There is perhaps a case for developing communication tools for PIs as well as for targeted programme of strategic activity linked to beacons/themes within new Strategy.</p>
U2	Review internal communications to better articulate the support along the research lifecycle in line with the remit of the RDO	Review internal communications to better articulate the support along the research lifecycle and the remit of the RDO including better use of internal and external websites. Linked to this is the need for the provision of research data information to key stakeholders to support business decisions/strategy, including how the production of information can be automated (i.e. via RIS) and how it can be deployed across the Research lifecycle to optimise support activity.
U3	Examine the engagement between RDO and other professional units to develop an integrated programme of support for strategy delivery.	The support of HR and VPRI will be critical. In particular, instigate regular strategic level meetings between RDO and other key service delivery units namely HR.

U4	Examine how far university functions including RDO, MW and Foundation have the capacity and capability to maximise the opportunities	With the ambition to grow and diversify research awards – particularly from industry - examine whether university functions including RDO, MW and Foundation have the capacity and capability to maximise the opportunities.
U5	Review the policies, processes and system needs to support compliance and legislative requirements (including export control)	
U6	Review and potentially enhance the service provision around legal and contracting within RDO	There is a risk regarding the single point of failure in relation to legal and contracting support within RDO. Undertake urgent review of the capacity and capability requirements. We heard that new resource is coming soon, but that this is seen as a significant area of risk
U7	Create capacity and opportunity for RDO staff development – training, professional support, succession planning,	Consider the use of mentoring and the value of cultivating external networks.
U8	Develop and use data about the university research performance to underpin strategic business decisions	

U9	With the establishment of Graduate Research Academy, agree how and where support will be provided and the role that the RDO will perform	The PRG would note that research students are a major element in the development and promotion of the research endeavour
U10	As a unit put in place approaches to document the level of additional responsibilities given the evidence about the inability to undertake strategic elements of activity and/or individuals to take leave.	

Research Development Office Operational Effectiveness

Number	Recommendation	Additional PRG Comments
SU1	Review use of different email inboxes to manage communications	
SU2	Review the role of the Director in reviewing Tier 1 ethics and consider that whether role might be better undertaken at Faculty or Departmental level, such as by research leads or the new Deputy Deans for research	Consider that this role may be better undertaken at Faculty or Departmental level, such as by research leads or the new Deputy Deans for Research. This would reduce the burden on the Director and as these were low risk projects, would not carry a risk for the institution
SU3	Consider ways to raise awareness of and celebrate research activities beyond research grants success	

SU4	Develop ways to work with grants that have not been successful, with a view to reusing the ideas and work for submission to alternative funders	
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APPENDIX 1: RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT OFFICE: PEER REVIEW GROUP SITE VISIT TIMETABLE**Tuesday, 27th June 2023**

Time	Description	Attending
19:00	<p>Convening of the Peer Review Group.</p> <p>Briefing by: Dr Teresa Lee, Director of Quality</p> <p>PRG agrees a Chair and discuss the visit. Identification of any aspects requiring clarification or additional information.</p> <p>Dinner for members of the Peer Review Group, Professor Rachel Msetfi, Vice President Research & Innovation & Dr Teresa Lee, Director of Quality</p>	<p>Booked Glenroyal Hotel/Enclosure Restaurant at 7.00pm for 6 people</p> <p>Professor Rachel Msetfi Dr Teresa Lee Professor Gerry Kearns Professor Sean Doyle Dr Wendy McLoone Ms Anna Grey</p>

Wednesday, 28th June 2023, John Hume Boardroom

Time	Description	Attending
8:30-9.00	Convening of Peer Review Group	Professor Gerry Kearns Professor Sean Doyle Dr Wendy McLoone Ms Anna Grey
9.00-9.30	Meet with VP Research and Innovation	Professor Rachel Msetfi
9.30-10.00	Director of RDO	Dr Carol Barrett
10.00-10:40	Meet with all RDO Staff (HOD recused)	Ms Alannah Carroll, Executive Assistant Ms Petra Stolfova, Head of RDO Finance Ms Valerie Bartley, PA to the VPRI Ms Lorraine Kane, Postgraduate Research Officer Dr Noreen Lacey, Research Development Officer Ms Deirdre Clayton, Research Development Officer Dr Patrick Boyle, Research Development Officer Dr Kim Reilly, Research Development Officer Ms Rachel Fitzsimons, Research Support Administrator

		<p>Mr Martin O'Donoghue, Research Support Officer Ms Shona Leith, Research Support Officer Ms Marie Carr, Research Support Officer Ms Siobhan Kelly, Research Support Officer Ms Ramya Bhat, Research Support Officer Mr David Steynor, Research Support Officer Dr Elaine McCarthy, Senior Strategic Research Development Officer Dr Eilish Lynch, Senior Strategic Research Officer Ms Louise Corri, SEA Postgrad</p>
10.40-11.10	Meet with Ethics Sub Committees	<p>SRESC Dr Brian Flanagan Dr Veronica Johnson Dr Thomas Walsh Dr Pauline Garvey</p> <p>BSRESC Dr Carol Barrett Ms Deirdre Daly Ms Gillian O'Meara Dr Rafael De Andrade Moral Ms Valerie Bartley</p>
11:10-11:30	Break	
11:30-12.10	Meet with Assoc Dean of Research & Faculty Research Committee Chair FSS	<p>Professor Audra Mockaitis FSS Associate Dean of Research and Chair</p>
12.15-13.00	Meeting with Research Institute & Centre Directors	<p>Professor Linda Connolly, MUSSI Professor Tom O'Connor, Arts & Humanities Institute, Professor Paul Moynagh Human Health Institute, Professor John Ringwood, COER</p>
13.00-14.00	Lunch	<p>Phoenix Staff Dining Room/Table Reserved</p>
14.00-14.30	Meet with Research Committee	<p>Professor Rachel Msetfi, Vice-President Research, Chair Dr William Desmond, FACSP</p>

		Dr Carol Barrett, Director of Research Development Office Dr Duncan Casey, Director of MaynoothWorks Professor John Stephens, FSE
14.35-15.05	Meet with ERC Grant Holders	Professor David Stifter, Early Irish Professor Damien Woods, Computer Science Dr Lorna Lopez, Biology Dr Louise Connell, Psychology Professor Aisling McMahon, Law Professor Rob Kitchin, Geography
15.05-15.25	Break	
15:25-15.55	Meeting with FSE Researchers	Dr Katriona O'Sullivan, Psychology Dr Niamh Cahill, Maths & Stats Professor Tim Mc Carthy, Computer Science Dr Rowan McLaughlin, Hamilton Institute
16.00-16.30	Meeting with Dean of Graduate Studies	Professor John Cullen, Interim Dean
16.40-17.10	Meeting with Postdocs	Dr Fearon Cassidy, Biology Dr Andrei Ermakov, Engineering Dr Ailbhe Brazel, Biology
17.10-17.30	Peer Review Group Meeting	Professor Gerry Kearns Professor Sean Doyle Dr Wendy McLoone Ms Anna Grey
19.00	PRG private working dinner	Booked Glenroyal Hotel/Enclosure Restaurant for 4 people at 7.00pm Professor Gerry Kearns Professor Sean Doyle Dr Wendy McLoone Ms Anna Grey

Thursday, 29th June 2023, John Hume Boardroom		
Time	Description	Attending
8.30-9.00	Convening of Peer Review Group	Professor Gerry Kearns Professor Sean Doyle Dr Wendy McLoone Ms Anna Grey
9:00-9:30	Meeting with FSS Researchers	Professor Honor Fagan, Sociology Dr Niall Connolly, Business
9.35-10.05	Meeting with FACSP Researchers	Professor Antonio Cascelli, Music Dr Deborah Hayden, Early Irish Dr Loic Bourdeau, SMLLC Professor Felipe de Meneses, History
10.10-10.50	Meeting with RDO Team	Dr Noreen Lacey Ms Deirdre Clayton Dr Patrick Boyle Dr Kim Reilly Mr David Steynor Dr Martin O'Donoghue
10.50-11.10	Break	
11.10-11.50	Meeting with RDO Finance Team	Ms Shona Leith Ms Marie Carr Ms Siobhan Kelly Ms Ramya Bhat Ms Rachel Fitzsimons
12.00-12.30 Parallel Session 1	Meeting with PA to VPRI & Executive Assistant	Professor Sean Doyle Ms Anna Grey Ms Valerie Bartley Ms Alannah Carroll
12.00-12.30 Parallel Session 2	Meeting with Postgraduate Research Officer	Professor Gerry Kearns Dr Wendy McLoone Ms Lorraine Kane *(JH Staff Development Room)
12.30-13.00 Parallel Session 1	Meeting with Legal & Contracts Officer Teams Meeting	Professor Gerry Kearns Dr Wendy McLoone Dr Miriam Ryan
12.30-13.00 Parallel Session 2	Meeting with Head of RDO Finance	Professor Sean Doyle Ms Anna Grey Ms Petra Stolfova *(JH Staff Development Room)

13.00-13.30 Parallel Session 1	Meeting with Senior Strategic Research Officer and Senior Strategic Research Development Officer	Professor Gerry Kearns Dr Wendy McLoone Dr Eilish Lynch Dr Elaine McCarthy
13.00-13.30 Parallel Session 2	Meeting with Maynooth Works	Professor Sean Doyle Ms Anna Grey Mr Peter Conlon Dr Paul Tyndall *(JH Staff Development Room)
13.30-14.30	Lunch	Phoenix Staff Dining Room/Table Reserved
14.30-16.30	Preparation of Exit Presentation	Professor Gerry Kearns Professor Sean Doyle Dr Wendy McLoone Ms Anna Grey
16:30-17:00	Exit presentation to all departmental staff, made by the Chair of the PRG, summarising the principal commendations and recommendations of the Peer Review Group.	Professor Gerry Kearns Professor Sean Doyle Dr Wendy McLoone Ms Anna Grey Dr Teresa Lee Professor Rachel Msetfi All Departmental Staff
17:00	Refreshments and Exit of the PRG	