3 YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN

2015 – 2018

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1 Introduction

1.1 History and Brief Overview

The Postgraduate Applications Centre (PAC) was established in 1998 to process applications for the Higher Diploma in Education programmes for the 4 constituent Universities of the NUI, UCC, UCD, NUI Galway and Maynooth. It continues to do this and in addition processes applications to a wide range of post-graduate programmes for DCU, Maynooth University, NUI Galway, University College Cork, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology and Waterford Institute of Technology. It also processes applications for some non-standard undergraduate programmes and currently is planning to process applications for the HSE on a pilot basis. PAC also recruits Public Health Nurses and Midwives for HSE.

2 National and International Trends

2.1 Context for Strategic Plan

The Hunt Report for Higher Education to 2030 identified most of the critical issues likely to impact on Higher Education (HE) in the coming decades. These included:

- The need for more graduates at every level
- The importance of education for international competitiveness
- The need to increase investment in R&D to 3% of GDP (1.68% in 2008)

The Horizon 2020 budget of € 80 billion for Research and Innovation provides significant funding to support University research in the EU. There is increasing emphasis on life-long learning and CPD. The strategic plans of universities envisage increases in PG numbers as a per cent of total students in the coming years. All these factors suggest increasing numbers of PG students in our institutions, and a favourable climate for growth in numbers of PAC applications.

3 Institutional Needs

3.1 A New Approach to Institutional Client Relationships

PAC has two different sets of clients in the HEI sector with multiple stakeholders attaching to each: these are the institutions and the student applicants.

This Plan recognises that each group has its own particular needs, which are outlined in the Plan.

Within institutions PAC has 3 groups of stakeholders:

- Senior management

- Programme Managers/Directors/Academics

- Post-graduate Applications Officers. (normally referred to as the User Group)

Where in the past relationships were primarily with Applications Offices, it is proposed that in future PAC will also establish direct relationships with both Senior Management and Programme Staff. It is recognised that the User Group will continue to be the main point of contact for operational matters.

The development of closer relations with senior management in institutions is strategically important to PAC. This will allow PAC to better understand institutional strategies, objectives and future plans, and to have an opportunity to have an input to institutional strategy at senior level. This may be particularly important where institutions are considering strategic changes which could impact on PAC, particularly in relation to revenue. The importance of multi-year contracts is one example of an issue that will be discussed with senior management and is of critical importance to PAC.

Establishment of regular contacts with Programme Staff is important to enable PAC staff to better understand their needs at first hand and to address issues which may arise from time to time and which it better to hear about directly. PAC will develop a programme of regular contacts with these staff, in conjunction with the User Group in each institution.

4 Applicant Needs

4.1 Meeting the Needs of Student Applicants

To date PAC has acted as merely a conduit to the institutions and an access point for applicants to programmes. It has not tried to cultivate a relationship with this group of clients or provide services other than application access. The new SP proposes that PAC review this approach to students and begin to think of itself as a service provider that goes beyond this limited role. It is proposed that PAC should see its website as a source of useful information to students that facilitates their application process and provides more information than is currently the case. This might include:

- Information on PAC itself ---roll, staff, service level objectives etc
- Information on its members programmes, e.g. listings of where different programmes are available
- Advice on filling out applications
- Information on accommodation, careers etc.

This would give students a reason to visit the website other than out of necessity.
The SP also proposes that regular surveys of student applicants be undertaken to assess satisfaction with the service and to identify any difficulties with the process.

5 Customer Service

5.1 A Customer Service Strategy

The SP calls for the development of a Customer Service Strategy by PAC. As a service business it is important that PAC has a clear and well communicated service strategy relating to all its client groups and that its staff are trained to deliver. All staff in PAC have a role to play in delivering service quality, not just frontline staff and each staff member should be clear about

the role they play. A training programme has commenced in PAC and this should be used to involve staff in the development of the Service Strategy. The Strategy should include:

- Customer service objectives for each client group such as reliability and responsiveness targets
- Assurance standards relating to courtesy, confidence and competence
- Plans for regular assessment of service performance
- Contact and communication objectives
- Communication style and content.

This strategy should be communicated to the various client groups and displayed on the PAC website.

6 PAC System Development Plan

PAC staff has been working closely with the User Group on system development. This will include the following:

- Replacement of the ratings system with a generic status system.
- Establishment of agent accounts
- Re-writing the document scanning and uploading system to allow greater flexibility for enhancements.
- Development of a common form for applications.
- Re-design of College administration systems to improve look and feel.
- Provision of real-time view of data.

7 New Business Development

7.1 Market Segmentation

Analysis of the different market segments, via, Universities, Institutes of Technology, Private Colleges, and the Public Sector identified market opportunities for PAC which could significantly grow its market size. Further research is now being undertaken on these markets to narrow the focus of PAC's marketing effort. A concerted sales campaign will follow.

New potential revenue sources were also identified in the SP, including allowing the PAC website to be used for advertising by relevant organisations such as employers, accommodation providers and financial institutions.

7.2 Brand Development

As PAC diversifies its market base, in particular into public sector markets, and broadens its service levels to existing clients the need to raise its own profile and brand becomes important. To date PAC has largely hidden its identity behind its member institutions. It is now proposed that PAC take on a more active role in developing its own brand in a complementary and supportive role to its clients.

8 Staffing

This SP proposes considerable additional work for PAC staff, in the areas of system development, website development, customer service, research, communication, marketing and selling. The need for the CEO to spend more time liaising with senior management in client institutions and representing PAC in a promotional capacity is one outcome.
Overall, the achievement of the objectives in the SP will have staffing implications, particularly at senior management level. A review will be undertaken of the existing senior positions, with a view to delineating responsibilities, re-assigning these as necessary and filling any gaps arising, within the limits of resources available.