Report of the School Review Panel in relation to the
School of Spatial Planning

Executive Summary

Introduction

The main purpose of the School Review in the School of Spatial Planning was to take a strategic overview of the School itself, its current position and its ability to respond to changing needs. A key element of the School Review process includes making recommendations in relation to the continuing approval by Academic Council of the awards of existing programmes. The Panel considered the programmes within the School giving specific consideration to any proposed changes, particularly the proposed changes to the current part-time MSc in Spatial Planning including a full-time version of the programme.

This is the first School Review which the School of Spatial Planning has participated in and therefore it is an important undertaking for the School.

Summary of Main Recommendations

The Panel was facilitated in its work by the self-study provided by the School and by the frank and open discussions between the staff of the School and the Panel.

The Panel was most impressed by the standing of the School’s staff in their professional areas and beyond and their commitment to the students and the professions they represent. The taught programmes are effective in meeting their stated learning outcomes. The Panel recognised the major resource challenges which the School had faced in recent years and that in working towards resolving these issues the Panel’s report might be of help. The following recommendations were made in this context:

i) The School should prepare a Resource Plan to deal with, firstly, its current provision and set out what resources were required to support this, and its plans for the future and the resource implications for these plans. This Plan should then be progressed through the Faculty Board to the Institute for discussion as a matter of urgency. This recommendation has been made in view of serious concerns regarding a number of issues relating to resources, in particular space, staffing and facilities (see paras 5.3, 5.4 and 5.5). The Panel supported the School’s plans for growth but considered that currently the School was not in a position to expand in this way and should consolidate its current activities and programmes.

ii) The School should prepare and implement a Research Strategy, in line with the Faculty and DIT research strategies, which should include the broad range of activities, applied and pure
research, currently taking place. This strategy should also identify the resource constraints that will impact on this, the already significant pressure on its staff and the undercapacity of staff to supervise research students. A database of its activities and outputs would help in the formulation of a research strategy and to promote further the activities of the School.

iii) The School should develop the potential for centres of excellence within the School, for instance, in the area of geomatics where the School is currently the sole provider of programmes in Ireland.

iv) The School should identify and develop opportunities in the CPD market, in the interests of promoting continuing education and establishing further links with industry and also as a means of income generation.

v) The School should continue to investigate possible synergies and areas of collaboration both within the School and Faculty and beyond.

vi) Consideration should be given to how resources could be distributed across the two departments, to reflect the numbers of programmes and students in each department.

vii) A new management and reporting structure should be put in place and in particular the appointment of Programme Chairs to coordinate the management of programmes and transfer of information to students.

viii) The School should give consideration regarding how best to manage staff time in relation to professional practice, public profile activities and other external activities so that these activities, important as they were, did not compromise the quality of the School’s core business.

ix) The School should give some consideration to devising other mechanisms for providing feedback to students on their assessments and should improve current communication channels with students, perhaps through the use of IT, and develop a communication strategy.

x) The Faculty Librarian should be invited to sit in on School meetings where concerns about the library as a place of study from students and staff, and in terms of the inappropriateness of space for project work were discussed, in order to be involved in finding solutions.

xi) The School should invest in keeping staff abreast of technical developments in their fields, as the Department of Spatial Information Sciences, in particular, is reliant on technology.

xii) The School, as far as possible, should ensure that students have access to the latest equipment and technology during their programmes.

xiii) Measures should be taken to secure a commitment to the ongoing availability of the Knocksink NEEC centre as a significant teaching resource, or relevant and appropriate alternative facilities found.

xiv) Administrative and support staff to the School should be increased, to alleviate some of the burden on academic staff who are already overstretched.
In addition, the Panel was of the opinion that the School should consider timetabling full-time staff across both full-time and part-time programmes.

The School should make best use of PMDS in terms of setting priorities for the School.

The School should continue to pay close attention to marketing its provision.

The School should continue to improve the quality of its programme materials, marketing brochures, Student Handbooks, induction and other materials.

In relation to taught programmes, the Panel recommends to Academic Council continued approval of the following programmes, with no conditions attached:

- BSc (Hons) in Geomatics
- BSc in Planning and Environmental Management, leading to the awards of BSc (Hons) in Spatial Planning and BSc (Hons) in Environmental Management
- MSc in Spatial Information Management
- MSc in Sustainable Development
- MSc in Community and Local Development (currently entitled MSc in Regional and Local Development)
- MSc in Planning and Development.

The School proposed some changes to the MSc in Spatial Planning programme (part-time) and the Panel approved these changes and recommended continuing approval of the MSc in Spatial Planning (part-time). This programme currently carries 100 ECTS and the revised programme 120 ECTS, although part-time students were able to gain exemptions from some of the modules. The School also proposed to run the amended programme as a full-time programme. The Panel recommended approval to Academic Council of this new route, subject to the condition that a new Programme Document, in line with the Institute’s requirements and which details the full-time and part-time routes, is forwarded to the Panel, by 9 June 2008.
1 Introduction

The main purpose of the School Review in the School of Spatial Planning was to take a strategic overview of the School itself, its current position and its ability to respond to changing needs. A key element of the School Review process includes making recommendations in relation to the continuing approval by Academic Council of the awards of existing programmes. The Panel considered the programmes within the School giving specific consideration to any proposed changes, particularly the proposed changes to the current part-time MSc in Spatial Planning including a full-time version of the programme.

This is the first School Review which the School of Spatial Planning has participated in and therefore it is an important undertaking for the School.

2 The Review Process

The focus of the School Review is in respect of the School as a whole. This includes the general position and performance; the range of activities and how these are conducted, reviewed and developed; the range and quality of taught programmes; research and staff development activities; management procedures and quality improvement systems and links with external bodies. The external environment, including the effects of demographic changes and competition from other educational institutions on the programmes offered, was also considered within the review process.

Central to the review process was the self-study, prepared by the School and considered by the Review Panel prior to visiting the School. This self-study is a critical evaluation of the School's activities and highlights strengths and achievements as well as areas of difficulty. The process of review carried out by the School followed the DIT current practice for the review of existing programmes; that is, the documentation prepared by the School was sent to the Faculty Board for endorsement. The documentation was then forwarded, with external assessor nominations, to the Academic Quality Assurance Committee which appointed a Review Panel.

The review visit took place over a two day period on 10th and 11th April 2008. The Panel, through a series of meetings with Faculty and School management, teaching, administrative and support staff, students and graduates of the School and a visit to the facilities available to the School, considered issues raised in the self-study and in the other documentation presented.
School of Spatial Planning School Review Report

2.1 The Purpose of the School Based Review

The broad objectives of the School Review were to evaluate:

- the School's approach to programme design and development, having due regard to the influence of bodies representing students, employers and the sector;
- the learning environment of the School;
- staffing including academic, administrative and technical;
- staff development and research activities within the School;
- the School’s quality assurance systems, including the effectiveness of taught programmes in meeting their stated objectives; and,
- the School's development plans for the future.

2.2 Membership of the Review Panel

The Review Panel appointed by Academic Council to carry out the School Based Review was comprised as follows:

*External Members*

Mr Gus McCarthy  
Managing Director, AP McCarthy Planning Consultants Ltd, Galway

Mr William Mongey  
Consultant, Engineering, Design Systems & Resources, ESBI Engineering and Facility Management Ltd

Mr Tadgh O’Mahony  
Senior Scientific Officer, EPA, Regional Inspectorate, Co. Cork

Dr Gethin Roberts  
Associate Professor, School of Civil Engineering, University of Nottingham

Mr Reinder Rutgers  
Assistant Professor in Urban Design, Department of Architecture, Building and Planning, Eindhoven University of Technology, The Netherlands

*Internal Members*

Dr Aodán Ó Cearbhaill (Chair)  
Head of School of Culinary Arts and Food Technology, DIT Cathal Brugha Street

Phil Hanlon  
Head of Department, Graduate Business School, Faculty of Business, DIT Aungier Street

Dr David Kennedy  
Head of Department of Mechanical Engineering, DIT Bolton Street

*Officer*

Jan Cairns  
Quality Assurance Officer, Office of the Academic Registrar.
2.3 Programme of Visit to School

The Review took place in accordance with the following schedule:

Day 1 – Thursday 10th April 2008

9.00 am  Formal beginning of process: Chair of Panel introduced members of Panel; Faculty Director introduced Head of School, Heads of Department, Faculty Head of Research and Faculty Head of Learning Development.

9.30 am  Formal presentation by Head of School and Heads of Department describing main activities of the School and introducing the key points from the self-study report.

10.15 am  Private meeting of Panel to discuss agenda for day.

11.30 am  Panel meets with School Management Team and Faculty Head of Research to discuss the broad contents of the self-study report and the implications for the School in terms of individual programmes and resources, more specifically the School’s arrangements for quality assurance, programme development, links with business, research activity and staff development.

1.15 pm  Lunch

2.30 pm  Panel meets with School Management Team, Faculty Administrator, Faculty Librarian and Examinations Officer to review contents of School’s evaluation of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, based on self-study report and to discuss School’s Plan for future development.

3.15 pm  Private meeting of Panel to review progress and decide on matters for further discussion or evaluation.

3.45 pm  Panel views the physical facilities and resources of the School.

4.30 pm  Panel meets with Heads of Department and Programme Tutors to discuss the suite of programmes offered by the School and the trends and direction of these – including discussion regarding programme management issues and quality assurance arrangements.

6.00 pm  Panel meets with a group of graduates of the School.

6.45 pm  Panel meets with a representative group of current students of the School.

7.15 pm  Dinner

Day 2 – Friday 11th April 2008

9.30 am  Private meeting of Panel to review progress thus far.

10.00 am  Meeting of Panel with Heads of Department and Programme Tutors to discuss the School’s portfolio of programmes and to address specific issues relating to the changes proposed.

11.30 am  Meeting of the Panel with staff teaching on programmes to discuss syllabuses, teaching methods and assessment issues specific to the programmes.
1.00 pm Lunch.
2.30 pm Panel meets with Faculty Director, School Management Team and Faculty Administrator and Head of Learning Development to discuss issues of resources and staff development arising from self study.
3.30 pm Private meeting of the Panel to consider the draft report.
6.00 pm Final meeting of Panel with the Head of School and School Management Team to outline orally the Panel’s findings.
6.30 pm Dinner.

Apart from the self-study, the School had forwarded the following documents to Panel members prior to the event:
Reports and minutes of various School committees
External examiner reports
Annual monitoring reports (Q5s)
Most recent Critical Review documents for the existing programmes
Staff Curriculum Vitae.
Available for perusal during the review event were Student Handbooks, Programme Documents and other relevant documentation.

3. Background to the Faculty and School

3.1 Faculty Structure

The DIT is comprised of six faculties and the Faculty of the Built Environment comprises four Schools – Architecture, Construction, Real Estate and Construction Economics, and Spatial Planning (Fig. 1).

![Fig. 1 – Faculty Structure](image_url)
The mission of the Faculty of the Built Environment is to develop a centre of excellence for the disciplines of the built environment in Ireland, serving the needs of the community and the demands of the constituent professions in the effective planning, designing, building, promoting and managing of the country’s towns and cities whilst protecting and enhancing the countryside and heritage.

3.2 School Structure and Functions

The School of Environmental Planning and Management, unlike the other three schools in the Faculty, was a new school formed as part of the Faculty structure without an established set of programmes or staff. It comprised in the early days two departments, one of which was a former part of the School of Real Estate and Construction Economics, while the other department had no staff and effectively did not exist. The School provided a number of courses/programmes that were delivered in the Faculty but not assigned to any particular school. Gradually, the school developed an identity of its own and following the first formal appointment of a Head of School in the academic year 2003/04 combined with the move of all staff and students from Rathmines House to the Bolton Street complex, a real attempt was made to integrate the two departments through the establishment of the School Board with regular meetings and social events.

Since September 2000 the School has marketed itself as delivering professional programmes in spatial planning. This was done at a time of a national shortage of planners. The simultaneous introduction of the BSc in Spatial Planning and the MSc in Spatial Planning programmes and the subsequent successful professional accreditation of both courses by the Irish Planning Institute, gave DIT the strategic advantage of being able to position itself as the largest planning school in Ireland.

Simultaneously, the School expanded and strengthened the role as national focal point for spatial data management. This role was established by the Department of Geomatics (now the Department of Spatial Information Sciences) and was therefore long established and well known externally. The initiatives that resulted in a strengthening of this role included the commencement of the EuroSDR secretariat within the School from 2003, the delivery of CPD events in the area of spatial data management and the preparation of an MSc programme.
Table 3 – Key Dates in the School History to Date

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Significance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 1999</td>
<td>BSc Geomatics commenced</td>
<td>New Honours Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2000</td>
<td>Validation of BSc and MSc in Spatial Planning programmes</td>
<td>Establishment of the School as school of planning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2001</td>
<td>Away day held</td>
<td>Formulation of strategic direction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2003</td>
<td>Trip Dutch Embassy with student participation</td>
<td>External recognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>School becomes home for the EuroSDR secretariat</td>
<td>External, international recognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2003</td>
<td>Move of staff from Rathmines to Bolton Street</td>
<td>Physical concentration in Bolton Street complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2003</td>
<td>Strategic Issues Group formed</td>
<td>Strategic direction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2004</td>
<td>School Board decides on school name</td>
<td>Strategic direction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2005</td>
<td>Presentation to City and County Managers</td>
<td>External recognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2005</td>
<td>Relaunch Strategy adopted</td>
<td>External recognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2005</td>
<td>Launch of new school name and website design</td>
<td>External recognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2005</td>
<td>First meeting of the School Industry Board</td>
<td>External recognition, strategic direction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2006</td>
<td>Visit Minister of Environment, Heritage and Local Govt.</td>
<td>External recognition</td>
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</table>

The issue of the name of the School was a matter of concern since the coming into being of the School. Initially this was mainly resulting from a degree of concern amongst the staff in the then department of Geomatics about the inadequate reflection of their work in the title of the school, subsequently it became even more a matter of concern with the length of the name and the misuse and confusion arising from it. The process of finding a name started in earnest with the establishment of the strategic issues group in September 2003, its report to the school board, and culminating in the decision of Governing Body to note the name changes. The formal introduction of the new school and department names became operational from 1/9/05 and this was accompanied by a ‘re-launch campaign’.

A logo for the school was also adopted. It is formed by three squares representing the three streams in the School. This logo (in black and white) is simple to reproduce. The three squares also represent ‘building blocks’, or ‘spatial areas’ (the grid square as the common feature of measurement of space and map referencing). See Fig. 2.

Fig. 2 School Logo
3.3 Constituent Departments

The School currently delivers undergraduate education in three professional areas: Geomatics, Spatial Planning and Environmental Management. Appendix A gives a broad description of each of these areas. At present the Spatial Planning and Environmental Management streams are based on a single intake of students and specialisation after year one (programme DT106). The Geomatics stream intake is into the DT112 programme. Both programmes are NQAI level 8 honours degrees.

The School currently delivers approx. 130 modules. The BSc programmes in Planning and Environmental Management share many modules and the first year also shares some modules with the BSc in Geomatics. The Department of Spatial Information Sciences currently offers 41 undergraduate modules while the Department of Environment and Planning offers 53. In addition the latter Department currently offers 29 MSc modules – while the former Department offers 12 further MSc modules.

3.4 Current programmes and the development of new programmes

The School of Spatial Planning is responsible for the delivery of a number of programmes at BSc and MSc level. The programmes provide significant areas of overlap and have facilitated a sharing of modules before modularisation was introduced in DIT. These programmes are presented in table 18 and are described individually in the following sections.

Table 18 - Programmes in the School of Spatial Planning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of Course</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Full/Part time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geomatics</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>FT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spatial Planning</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>FT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Management</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>FT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainable Development</td>
<td>1 + diss.</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>FT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional and Local Development</td>
<td>1 + diss.</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>FT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and Development</td>
<td>2 + diss.</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>PT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spatial Planning</td>
<td>2 + diss.</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>PT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spatial Information Management</td>
<td>2 + diss.</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>PT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The structure of programmes and the management structure allow for an expansion into additional programmes. This is reflected in the strategic planning of the school which aims to have a number of additional masters level programmes added to the current range. The School now has a critical mass of modules – particularly at MSc level where core topics can be now be jointly delivered as part of a much wider range of programmes.
Figure 6 - Potential Graduate Programmes at the School of Spatial Planning

This diagram illustrates the school strategy to develop and expand a range of MSc programmes based on an existing suite of MSc programmes. Some of the MSc programmes are already running (coloured), some are in advanced or preliminary stage of preparation (lightly shaded), while others are not yet known (dotted). This will ultimately result in the development of a School of Graduate Studies with each discipline area covered by an MSc programme. All MSc programmes share the common themes of ‘spatial measurement and spatial management’ that form the core principle of the school represented in its title ‘Spatial Planning’.

4. Self-study of the School

The report has been written to address all issues that are listed in the DIT documentation. However, the table of contents and the overall structure of the self study report is based on the characteristics of the school rather than the standard template provided in the DIT documentation. The structure has been discussed and agreed in a school forum meeting.
The self study report must address a number of items that are listed in the DIT documentation. Table 2 sets out how these items are addressed in the self study report.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Section</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction to the Faculty &amp; the School;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Faculty in context;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Students Numbers and Projections, to include projected student intake from non-standard applications;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Staff Numbers and Projections;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Student success rates &amp; attrition/retention;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. School budget details, to include details re: income &amp; expenditure for programme/staff development;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Student Profiles;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Graduate Profiles;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Staff Profiles;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Programme and Student Support;</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Physical &amp; other Learning Environments of the School, to include School/Faculty Learning &amp; Teaching Strategy document with details of the School’s participation and development of the strategy;</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Academic Resources and Activities, including library;</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Programme Management and Quality Assurance;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Analysis of Internal and External Environment, including specific industry requirements, changing demand for programmes and the implementation of these;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Self Study for each Programme being offered in the School, including industry-specific courses, short courses and other programmes leading to awards from other awarding bodies (e.g. professional bodies);</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. School Development Plan including details regarding to what extent the School is contributing to the Strategic Plan of the Faculty and of the Institute. This section should include targets and</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
School of Spatial Planning School Review Report

timelines in relation to stated objectives/goals;
17. Details regarding the extent to which the School is rationalising its programme offering, liaising with other Faculties to promote greater choice and flexibility for students/ staff and where appropriate, liaising with other Institutions;
18. Details regarding Scholarly Activity and Curricula Vitae of staff, to include details regarding Continuing Professional Development schemes for staff with an analysis of the use of such schemes within the School. This should include details regarding publications and successful funding proposals for research;
19. Research profile of the School – numbers of postgraduate research students & completion rates and publication records of research students/scholars while they were attached to/ registered in the School;
20. National and international links in the School;
21. Details re: strategy & actions of the School with regard to community involvement & social responsibility;
22. School Health and Safety policy and practice;
23. Recommendations arising from the Self Study.

5. **Key issues arising from the self-study**

The Panel had discussions with the staff and students that it met on the key issues emerging from its consideration of the self-study and the School’s own recommendations arising from the self-study. These key issues are captured under the main purposes of School Review:

5.1 **The School’s approach to programme design and development, having due regard to the influence of bodies representing students, employers and the sector**

5.1.1 **Programme development**

The report has already alluded to the School’s plans for the development of its programmes, mainly at Masters level. The Department of Environment and Planning currently runs four Masters programmes and considers that there is a strong market for programmes in, for example, urbanism and landscape studies, should the resources exist to support them. The Department of Spatial Information Sciences also has plans for one further MSc programme and is currently reviewing the content of its BSc in Geomatics as it considers the programme is somewhat overcrowded. It is considering creating a new stream through the programme and also the possibility of creating a new Higher Certificate programme in the area. It is true that strategically the School sees its opportunities for expansion in the postgraduate area, while retaining its undergraduate provision. It was noted that most of the Masters programmes, in the Department of Environment and Planning, are conversion programmes and graduates of the BSc Planning and Environmental Management programme would pursue taught Masters programmes elsewhere, although they might be encouraged back to the Department to follow an MPhil/PhD. The Department of Spatial Information Sciences have developed a Masters, the MSc in Spatial Information Management programme, and have identified Land Management as an area where another Masters programme might be developed.
The Panel was of the view that the School is very strong in its approach to programme design and development which is informed by its close relationship with industry and government. It supported the development of its suite of Masters programmes and the proposed programmes at Higher Certificate and degree level, and considered this to be in line with DIT policy in relation to access, transfer and progression. It did recognise that there were certain resourcing constraints (see section 5.5) which may not allow the School to sustain the growth envisaged. The Panel also believed that there is within the School scope to develop centres of excellence, for instance, in the area of geomatics where the School is currently the sole provider of programmes in Ireland.

5.1.2 CPD programmes

The School has already developed a number of strategic Continuing Professional Development CPD partnerships (Irish Planning Institute, National Construction and Demolition Waste Council, Environmental Protection Agency, Ordnance Survey Ireland) but recognises that there is significant potential for expansion in this area, whether through offering its MSc modules individually as CPDs or through developing programmes specifically tailored for companies/organizations. Again, growth in this area has been constrained through lack of resources, both in terms of accommodation and full-time staff. The Panel acknowledged these constraints, nevertheless it recommended that the School identify and develop opportunities in the CPD market, in the interests of promoting continuing education and establishing further links with industry and also as a means of income generation.

5.1.3 Modularisation and semesterisation and exploration of synergies

The School’s experience of modularisation and semesterisation so far was that the new structures did offer efficiencies through the sharing of modules but that programme content had to be delivered in a reduced contact time which presented challenges. The School had since 2000 structured its programmes into modules of 2 and 4 ECTS and that the new Institute-wide structure of 5 ECTS had in fact reduced the opportunities for sharing modules within the School. However, where programme delivery models allow, modules are shared across the MSc programmes, and in the School’s two undergraduate programmes, three common modules have been introduced into the first year.

The School was happy to work with other Schools within the Institute, for example, it was eagerly awaiting the development of Masters programmes within the Dublin School of Architecture as an opportunity for synergy and sharing of modules. It was also taking part in the President’s initiative to create synergy groups across the Institute. The Panel welcomed the School’s intentions in this regard as it considered that to date these possibilities had not been explored to their full potential. It recommended that the School
continue to investigate possible synergies and areas of collaboration both within the School and Faculty and beyond.

5.1.4 Student recruitment and retention

Statistics indicated that the demand for the BSc in Geomatics programme has been weak. The Programme Team for the BSc in Geomatics has worked to address this through a strong marketing campaign through communications with schools and guidance counselors to help improve understanding of the subject area. The Panel was pleased to note that this approach has had some success and it encouraged the team to continue this marketing drive. Student retention in both undergraduate programmes in the School particularly after first year has been of concern to the School which has addressed this by making both programmes more challenging in the first year by shared modules. A work placement module has now been introduced to the third year of the BSc in Geomatics and it is hoped that this will play an important role in student motivation and retention.

The Panel was very interested to hear about the School’s induction programme. The School considers that first year is crucial to students’ chances of success and that student induction plays an important role here. To that end it developed a two-day induction programme which included a student project involving group work and a feedback session. It has been very well received by students and as a result the School now proposes to organise a Faculty induction programme on the same basis.

The Panel was supportive of the initiatives taken by the School in relation to recruitment and retention. It recommended that the School continue to pay close attention to marketing its provision. It also recommended that the School continue to improve the quality of its marketing brochures, induction materials, Student Handbooks and other programme materials.

5.2 School’s Research Strategy

Research and scholarship in the School of Spatial Planning takes place in the context of the DIT Strategic Plan 2001-2015 and the DIT Strategy for Research and Scholarship 2005-2010 and is supported by the Research and Scholarship Committee of the Faculty of the Built Environment. All academic staff members are encouraged to engage in research activities including study for higher qualifications and/or supervision of research students. Also, a number of research clusters have been created where original research and scholarship takes place that combines the academic and professional expertise of group members. The School has adopted a research policy guidelines document to support research within the School.
The Panel explored how the School, given the already heavy workload on staff, could foster a research environment within the School. Different approaches emerged between the two departments. The Department of Spatial Information Sciences whose work is science and technology-based, was keen to promote research activity amongst its staff. Many of them had or were in the process of upgrading their academic qualifications and it had a considerable list of publications and conference papers in its portfolio, as well as a high profile in the relevant professional bodies. Staff in the Department of Environment and Planning were also in key positions in their professional bodies and engaged at a high level with industry and as many of them worked in professional practice they were at the cutting edge of practice. Both departments were keen to increase numbers of research students but did not have the capacity to supervise research students.

The Head of School expressed the concern about the tension within the DIT’s position regarding research, ie that on the one hand it wished to encourage an increase in its research activity, but it had not tackled the significant teaching load of lecturing staff. Currently the Institute was primarily a teaching Institute and therefore its commitment should be to the quality of the student experience. At the same time, it was clear that there was a significant body of research within the School, whether pure or applied research, which the Panel considered had not been fully represented within the self-study document.

The Panel acknowledged that there was a considerable programme of scholarly activity within the School but it recognised that the School’s Research Strategy was a work in progress. The Panel recommended that the School should prepare and implement a Research Strategy, in line with the Faculty and DIT research strategies, which should include the broad range of activities, applied and pure research, currently taking place. This strategy should also identify the resource constraints that will impact on this, the already significant pressure on its staff (see section 5.4) and the undercapacity of staff to supervise research students.

5.3 The Learning Environment

5.3.1 Physical accommodation

The self-study had indicated that the standard of teaching accommodation available to the School was inadequate and placed a major constraint on the School’s ambitions to expand its portfolio of programmes, particularly at Masters level. The Department of Spatial Information Sciences is based in the Bolton Street building and faces problems with a lack of appropriate space for programme delivery, particularly in relation to Problem Based Learning and group project work. The Department of Environment and Planning is based in the Zhivago building which the School views as substandard as a teaching facility and does not fulfil the role that the building was meant to provide. The self-study indicates that this was largely due to the abandonment of a plan to refit the building due to budget constraints
which were due to the fact that a planning appeal had been lodged against the change of use planning application from office use to education use. Given the importance of achieving the concentration of the student and staff population in the Bolton Street Complex and to end the situation where part of the staff and students were located in Rathmines House, a ‘Plan B’ was adopted in 2002 by management of the School which essentially was based on the use of the existing office accommodation.

The Panel, having heard the views of staff and students and having visited the School’s facilities and accommodation, was of the view that there was an urgent need for top class learning facilities in particular for MSc students where the Institute competes with other institutions which have excellent facilities. It considered that there was a danger that the Institute’s and School’s position and reputation would suffer if the current unacceptable provision was not improved. In particular, there were particular problems in relation to the Zhivago building, in terms of health and safety issues (ventilation, access to toilet facilities, use of space) and general lack of appropriate teaching and office space.

The Panel also considered that as the Institute and the School moved to new learning and teaching methods, for example, Problem Based Learning, certain kinds of space were required and that currently there was a shortage of appropriate spaces.

5.3.2 Equipment and IT

The Department of Spatial Information Sciences’ main resourcing challenge was in relation to its equipment: it relied heavily on expensive equipment and technology, for example the purchase of the necessary software and in particular the licences required were a particular burden. At the same time, it was often provided with data without charge from various sources (the Ordnance Survey of Ireland having been generous in this regard). The Panel recommended that the School, as far as possible, ensure that students have access to the latest equipment and technology during their programmes to ensure that emerging graduates are trained at the cutting edge of their disciplines.

The Panel noted that the appointment of a School Laboratory Technician had been a priority for a number of years, and it was pleased to hear that an appointment to this post had now been made.

5.3.3 Library

Students had the use of the library at Bolton Street and remote access through their student ID number to the electronic resources of the library. There is also wireless connectivity within the Bolton Street building. The Panel also heard reported concerns about the library as a place of study from students and staff, and in terms of the inappropriateness of space for
project work. The Panel recommended that the Faculty librarian be invited to sit in on School meetings where this issue was discussed, in order to be involved in finding solutions.

5.3.4 Field trips

In all programmes in the School, field trips both in Ireland and abroad, site visits and ‘away days’ form important components in the learning experience. Experience has suggested that the field trip mode of learning is quite effective and forms an important aspect of the learning experience in the school.

The compulsory European Field Trip was introduced as an element of the European Context module in the third year of the BSc in Planning and Environmental Management. The trip is based on a one week long journey through the Netherlands, generally using local public transport. The trip is a mixture of lectures, site visits and lots of walkabouts. The trip acts as a teaching device that extends far beyond the formal sessions. For example, staff discovered that for the areas covered in the programme (spatial planning and environmental management) the urban and green environment of the city forms the ‘laboratory’ for the students where experiments can be experienced in terms of traffic management, urban design, ecological urban planning and high density land use.

Third year students from the BSc in Geomatics programme have undertaken a European field trip each year for the last number of years to destinations such as Bratislava, Prague, Hamburg and Antwerp. Site visits and field trips to relevant government agencies and professional practice are also an essential part of the curriculum.

The MSc programmes also contain field trips, in particular the MSc in Sustainable Development and Regional and Local Development. These programmes contain a European field trip as well as field trips within Ireland. The MSc in Planning and Development programme contains site visits to construction projects as a full module within the programme. The School has the benefit of the Knocksink NEEC centre in Enniskerry for regular use by the students, particularly those who are studying the area of environmental management. The Centre is accessible by public transport and is used as a teaching facility during timetabled hours. The Panel was concerned about the uncertainty regarding the ongoing availability of this significant resource and felt that measures should be taken to secure a commitment to the ongoing availability of this resource, or relevant and appropriate alternative facilities found.

The Panel supported the field trips as an important learning tool, but it noted that these were proving expensive to finance by the School and were paid from the School’s non-pay budget. The Panel expressed a hope that these trips could continue to be supported financially.
5.4 Staffing including academic, administrative and technical

Apart from the Head of School and two Heads of Department, the School currently has 15 permanent whole-time lecturing staff and a number of pro-rate lecturers. In addition, there is a large number of casual lecturers appointed each academic year who teach parts or whole of modules while guest lecturers provide individual specialised inputs into modules. The School is lacking in the number of senior lecturing positions. This reduces the promotional opportunities for academic staff within the school. The numbers of Masters students in the School had placed a large burden on the School’s staff. While some sharing of modules across the School had made some savings, the pressure came from the large number of MSc dissertations to be supervised. The School has also been hampered by a number of staff vacancies and as a result of this the decision had been made in 2007 not to run the MSc in Regional and Local Development. The development of the proposed additional Masters programmes in the self-study is reliant on new staff recruitment. The Panel recommended that consideration should be given to how resources could be distributed across the two departments, to reflect the numbers of programmes and students in each department.

The reliance on part-time staff, particular in the Department of Environment and Planning, while it helped to maintain its cutting edge profile, had led to problems in relation to programme management and communication between staff and students. The Panel considered the reliance on part-time staff within the Department of Environment and Planning to be unsustainable. In addition, the Panel was of the opinion that the School should consider timetabling full-time staff across both full-time and part-time programmes.

The School reported a difficulty in relation to management structures: given the large number of modules within, in particular, the Department of Environment and Planning, with module coordinators reporting to the Head of Department, communication channels had become congested. The School had proposed and the Panel concurred that a new management and reporting structure should be put in place and in particular the appointment of Programme Chairs to coordinate the management of programmes. This person would play an important role in the transfer of information to students, particularly where a Head of Department was absent.

The Panel noted that the School currently had two School Administrators in a job-sharing arrangement. It recommended that there be an increase in the administrative and support staff to Schools, to alleviate some of the burden on academic staff who were already overstretched.
5.5 Resources

In view of the School’s concerns regarding a number of issues relating to resources, the Panel wished to make a recommendation that crossed over a number of the areas discussed above. It recognised that the School faced a number of challenges and that the School was under resourced in terms of space, staffing and facilities. The Panel supported the School’s plans for growth but considered that currently the School was not in a position to expand in this way and should consolidate its current activities and programmes. It recommended that the School prepare a Resource Plan to deal with, firstly, its current provision and set out what resources were required to support this, and then its plans for the future and the resource implications for these plans. This Plan should then be progressed through the Faculty Board to the Institute for discussion as a matter of urgency.

5.6 Staff development and research activities

The School adopts a supportive strategy towards staff development including the pursuit of degrees. This is in line with official Institute policy. However, it is noted that while the Institute adopts this policy, the financing falls to the school itself. The School has brought this anomaly to the attention of the Faculty Board. The Panel noted the staff development activity within the School, in terms of short course provision and the upgrading of qualifications, as well as a high level of involvement in professional bodies and a high public profile. It was of the view that the School was very clearly at the cutting edge in its three professional streams. However, the Panel considered that the School should give consideration regarding how best to manage staff time in relation to professional practice, public profile activities and other external activities so that these, important as they were, did not compromise the quality of the School’s core business.

The Panel noted the roll-out of Performance Management and Development Scheme. The School has suggested that while to date PMDS has worked well, additional resources to support and implement the arising personal development plans had not been forthcoming. The Panel advised the School that in association with existing School systems it should make best use of PMDS in terms of setting priorities for the School.

The Panel considered that the documentation it read did not do full justice to the research output and publications and the role that staff play in the professions. It recommended that a database of its activities and outputs would help in the formulation of a research strategy and to promote further its activities.

The Panel recommended that the School invest in keeping staff abreast of technical developments in their fields, as the Department of Spatial Information Sciences in particular was reliant on technology.
5.7 **The School’s quality assurance systems, including the effectiveness of taught programmes in meeting their stated objectives**

Quality monitoring within the School takes place as required by the Institute’s regulations, i.e. external examiners reports and Q6b forms are monitored by the Programme Chair and Committees and by the Heads of Department and Head of School. In addition to the procedure of student feedback through the Q6 form questionnaire, important feedback is achieved through the participation of students on the programme committees. The Panel was satisfied that there was evidence of completion of annual monitoring forms, the tracking of these forms and of actions taken as a result.

The School aimed to provide feedback to students on their assessed work but the teaching staff reported that the semesterised calendar caused some difficulties in this regard, and this was reflected by the students the Panel met. The Panel recommended that the School should give some consideration to devising other mechanisms for providing feedback to students on their assessments and should improve current communication channels with students, perhaps through the use of IT to develop a communication strategy.

The reliance on part-time staff has already been discussed and the issues that this raises. The Panel supported the School in its move towards the position where module coordinators were all whole-time or pro rata staff rather than part-time staff.

The Panel noted that most of the programmes within the School had recently been reviewed by the Institute. It was pleased to recommend continuing approval to Academic Council of the following programmes:

- BSc (Hons) in Geomatics
- BSc in Planning and Environmental Management, leading to the awards of BSc (Hons) in Spatial Planning and BSc (Hons) in Environmental Management
- MSc in Spatial Information Management
- MSc in Sustainable Development
- MSc in Community and Local Development (currently entitled MSc in Regional and Local Development)
- MSc in Planning and Development.

The School proposed some changes to the MSc in Spatial Planning programme (part-time) and the Panel approved these changes, recommending continuing approval of the MSc in Spatial Planning (part-time). This programme currently carries 100 ECTS and the revised programme 120 ECTS, although part-time students were able to gain exemptions from some of the modules. The School also proposed to run the programme as a full-time programme. Following some discussion, the
Panel agreed that the full-time route should mirror the part-time programme, in terms of learning outcomes, modules and assessment. The Panel recommended approval to Academic Council of this new route, subject to the condition that a new Programme Document in line with the Institute’s requirements and which details the full-time and part-time routes is forwarded to the Panel.

5.8 School’s Development Plan

The report has discussed above the School’s plans for growth and the resourcing issues that limit these. The Panel noted and expressed support for the School’s ambitions to grow but in light of discussion on resources felt that an increase in intake and the number of programmes was unrealistic.

The Panel was impressed with the School’s links with industry and hoped that this close relationship with industry would continue to maintain the School’s leading role into the future.

6. Conclusions

The Review Panel commended the School for its frank and open discussions with the Panel. It was most impressed by the standing of the School’s staff in their professional areas and beyond and their commitment to the students and the professions they represent. It believed that the taught programmes were effective in meeting their stated learning outcomes. The Panel recognised the major resource challenges which the School had faced in recent years and that in working towards resolving these issues the Panel’s report might be of help.

In conclusion, the Panel should like to thank the School and Faculty of the Built Environment for facilitating the School Review and the work of the Panel.