



Report of the Quality Review Group to the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences

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The UL Quality Review Process

The University of Limerick (UL) follows an established process for quality assurance (QA) and quality improvement (QI) in line with that originally developed jointly by the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB), the latter whose functions are now carried out by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). The review process involves an approximate seven-year cycle during which each unit works to improve the quality of its programmes and services and undergoes a rigorous self-evaluation prior to a quality review by internationally recognised experts in the relevant field.

The common framework adopted by the Irish universities for their QA/QI systems is consistent with both legislative requirements and international good practice. The process itself evolved as a result of the Universities Act, 1997, in which the responsibility for QA/QI was placed directly on the individual universities. The process now complies with the [Qualifications and Quality Assurance \(Education and Training\) Act 2012](#), as amended by the [Qualifications and Quality Assurance \(Education and Training\) \(Amendment\) Act 2019](#). The UL Quality Support Unit (QSU) website (www.ul.ie/quality) provides details on the process.

Academic units are reviewed against international standards as described in the document *Quality Review Process for Academic Units*, which is available on the [QSU website](#). The planned schedule of quality reviews for both academic and support units is available on the [QSU website](#).

The UL quality review process comprises the following three phases:

1. Pre-review phase, in which the unit under review conducts a self-evaluation exercise and writes a self-assessment report (SAR).
2. Review phase, in which a quality review group comprising external experts, both national and international, review the SAR, visit the unit, meet with stakeholders and produce a report (this report), which is made publicly available on the [QSU website](#).
3. Post-review phase, in which the unit considers the report and responds to the recommendations of the QRG, devises plans to implement them and reports implementation progress to the University Quality Committee and UL senior management.

The recommendations made by the quality review group (QRG) form the basis of a quality improvement plan (QIP) prepared by the QSU for the unit under review. Once the site visit is over, the unit sets about evaluating and implementing the recommendations, as appropriate.

Approximately seven to nine months after receiving the QIP template from the QSU, the head of unit provides a summary overview of progress to the university's Quality Committee. Committee members are afforded the opportunity to discuss and evaluate progress.

Approximately 18 months after receiving the QIP template, the head of unit, Provost and Deputy President, Vice President Research, Dean (where relevant) and Director of Quality meet to formally review progress and to agree on any remaining actions to be taken.

Summary Details of the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences

The [Faculty of Education and Health Sciences](#) (EHS, or 'Faculty') is one of four UL faculties. Based on a broad platform of physical education and sports science and education, EHS was established in 2008 to comply with UL's vision of expanding education and research activities across a wide spectrum of health-related disciplines. EHS has grown to become UL's second largest faculty. It comprises three departments – Nursing & Midwifery, Physical Education & Sport Sciences and Psychology – and three schools – Allied Health, Education and Medicine. Within those academic units, the consistent development of new academic programmes – undergraduate and taught postgraduate – and associated research endeavours have led to

significant growth in student and staff numbers. In the 13 years since its establishment, EHS has been led by three executive deans, who have served on the UL Executive Committee under three UL presidents and helped to deliver on three UL strategic plans, the latter of which (UL@50) is currently being finalised.

Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

The Quality Review Group (QRG) wishes to thank the University of Limerick (UL) and the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences (EHS) for their welcome, their hospitality and their openness in sharing their experiences and observations throughout the review. While done virtually because of Covid pandemic concerns, the review was expertly managed by the UL Quality Support Unit with every logistical contingency planned for and addressed as well as a series of comprehensive pre-briefings provided by their incredibly professional team.

The self-assessment report (SAR) was very comprehensive and well-developed, and it provided a very sound basis from which to conduct the review. It also clearly reflected the input and collaboration of stakeholders throughout EHS and was presented in a very constructive and open manner that allowed for critical reflection. Our meetings similarly included undergraduate and postgraduate students, faculty and staff from the three EHS departments – Nursing & Midwifery, Physical Education & Sport Sciences and Psychology – and its three schools – Education, Allied Health, and Medicine – as well as EHS leadership and external stakeholders. Their perspectives and honest assessments uniformly reflected a deep loyalty and commitment to EHS and to the broader mission of UL. It reflected a strong desire to both protect what they felt was working well and commitment towards improvement where needed. The strong cross-professional relationships and professional integrity of faculty and staff were evidenced throughout the organisation and need to be highlighted as a strength of EHS.

It is important to consider the impact the Covid pandemic has had on the faculty and mission of EHS, as well as the tremendous response by the entire UL community to it. As we are hopefully emerging from this worldwide pandemic, it becomes an opportune time to explore and examine the roles, relationships and structures that define the Faculty. Included in this is a review of its core functions within UL and how they may need to evolve post-pandemic. Similarly, it is critical to explore these dynamics within the larger framing of how EHS faculty seek to define themselves on a larger international stage as a leader in higher education while serving the needs of the Mid-West Region and of Ireland.

The University of Limerick is a relatively 'young' university, founded 50 years ago, and EHS is more recent still, having been established in 2008. This context can create both opportunities and challenges in addressing the new and emerging realities and challenges facing higher education. Of note, despite its relatively short history, UL and more specifically EHS have made a lasting imprint on both the research and education missions of the institution as well as on the health and well-being of their surrounding communities. That these are not lost in any forward-thinking effort is critical, especially as the University grows its international focus. Finally, UL and EHS have also undergone significant leadership changes over the past ten years that can also challenge longer-term strategic thinking and planning. Current leadership stability at both the EHS and University level were noted by the QRG as positive foundations from which to build. The QRG members believe that this stability is critical to the development of a collaborative and inclusive culture between EHS and the centre of the University.

Our meetings with students, faculty and staff uniformly reflected a very positive regard for and commitment to the University and specifically EHS. This measure of goodwill is difficult to achieve and EHS leadership should rightly be proud of all they have accomplished and equally protective of the efforts that

led to this. It was noteworthy how the faculty and staff have been able to grow the enterprise substantially since its inception, in terms of overall students enrolling and completing their studies within EHS, as well as in scope and breadth of academic offerings within the departments and schools. The research enterprise has also grown substantially despite what several noted to be a disadvantageous budgetary arrangement between UL and the EHS schools and departments. Several stakeholders identified similar concerns over how, without being allocated the necessary resources, they would be able to accommodate the projected increase in students enrolling while maintaining the high academic standards now synonymous with EHS.

The QRG has made several recommendations detailed below that address larger issues related to the relational dynamics, both financial and strategic, between UL and its EHS faculty to enhance synergies and effective planning. Similarly, we include more specific recommendations that cover several areas identified in our inquiries that include potential efficiencies and synergies across schools and departments. Many of these recommendations mirror those made in the SAR and underscore the value of that report.

Finally, it is important to note that these recommendations should all be viewed from a position of strength that builds on an already very strong foundation of accomplishment.

QRG Commendations and Recommendations

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

1.	The commitment of EHS faculty and staff, their enthusiasm about their roles and their strong focus on the student experience and delivering high-quality programmes.
2.	The strength of relationships with external partners that have enabled growth and sustainability.
3.	The continuous growth of core EHS efforts in a funding climate that does not appear to incentivise growth and development.
4.	The strong leadership of the Executive Dean of EHS and the effective teamwork with the heads of schools and departments.
5.	The adaptability of EHS to the Covid pandemic environment which reflects positively on administration, faculty, staff and students.
6.	The positive relationships with research supervisors as reported by postgraduate research (PGR) students.
7.	The strong commitment to public service professions among EHS faculty, staff and students, especially during the Covid pandemic, which is an asset to the region with positive impact.

8.	The wide range of opportunities for learning through practice via placement.
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Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

Level 1 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
1.	As a matter of urgency, with projected student enrolment growth, review the true costs of professional education and training within EHS and the funding streams to support these.	<p>Strategic growth appears contingent on increasing enrolment, but it is both logistically challenged by hiring processes and undercut by the current resource allocation model.</p> <p>Not conducting this review may jeopardise the quality of learning and teaching in EHS. Evidence presented to us was that current staffing and placement capacity are not adequate to support projected student growth. One option could be to revisit the model which may include a return to the weighted FTE approach.</p>
2.	Coordinate UL strategic planning and EHS strategic planning, especially during senior leadership transitions, to align and resource priorities.	Given the funding formula being used, it is critical that EHS informs and is informed by priorities within UL leadership planning. This becomes a challenge with senior leadership turnover.
3.	Regularise the organisational structure of academic units in EHS.	It is not clear to the QRG what the difference is between 'school' and 'department'.
4.	Examine the interpretation and application of the model used for workload and academic promotion, to include the range of activities that comprise the 40/40/20 teaching/research/service model.	<p>Concerns were raised in our meetings that this weighting model may diminish impact of high quality/high impact funded research relative to other professional elements and impede retention of high-performing faculty. Additionally, this may not be consistent with how other universities map/align professional activities to different academic tracks (research, teaching scholar, etc.)</p> <p>It is important to ensure that the workload model is fit for purpose and transparent. This has been an ongoing project and is vital to facilitate growth and diversity across the organisation. If staff at all levels</p>

		<p>are included in the development, it will promote ownership and facilitate activity across the portfolio.</p> <p>Staff are engaged in a range of activities which are encouraged but not recognised formally within workload planning and performance review. Consequently, activities such as community outreach and engagement and aspects of internationalisation and inclusion may be perceived as less important.</p>
5.	Equip student-facing colleagues with the skills to recognise and help students in distress, who may have underlying mental health concerns.	Primarily, UL health and counselling services provide expert help for students and signposting to these services within the Faculty is evident. However, on occasion colleagues may be faced with an immediate crisis or need to integrate support into the learning environment. Training, like <i>Mental Health First Aid</i> , should be offered to student-facing colleagues.
6.	Develop Faculty-level PGR student support and engagement systems and processes, including standardised progression assessments.	The PGR student experience is predicated on the quality of the relationship students have with their supervisor and how well their department or school implements existing systems and processes. There is no standardised approach.
7.	Adapt the learning and best practices from existing placement partnership frameworks to help those who don't have frameworks in place.	There is variation in how close and reciprocal placement partnerships are, with some very good practices currently in place. While some of this is related to statutory frameworks across disciplines, there is scope to tie in partners in a more joined-up manner.
8.	Explore ways to further professionalise and reduce turnover of practice education staff who support clinical placements or rotations.	Retention and development issues have been noted for those not in 'standard' academic positions. Retaining staff is a critical element to ensuring greater consistency and quality in the clinical practicums, but high turnover in this position poses a challenge to this capacity.
9.	Develop an EHS-wide estate strategy.	Capital developments are likely to be constrained in the short to medium term. Covid pandemic innovations may influence space utilisation, as will research developments. This will require some rethinking and re-prioritisation of space usage. This becomes critical with plans for growth in student enrolment.
10.	Clarify the role of the Health Research Institute (HRI) and its interactions with affiliated and unaffiliated researchers.	It is important to clarify the role of the HRI and the gaps around current supports for researchers who do not fall within the HRI remit.

Level 2 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
1.	Create a more viable non-staff budget.	There is a need for a staff development strategic plan that enables creativity and the development of new business.
2.	Work with senior UL management to develop a process for earlier release of programme timetables.	We endorse efforts to date in this topic area. Student and staff concerns related to planning need to be prioritised. For example, release of the timetable one week in advance of the start of semester is not helpful either for EHS students given their profile (mature students, professionals, etc.) or for staff.
3.	Facilitate cross-Faculty and interdisciplinary collaborations.	There was evidence of grassroots support for collaboration and suggestions that working between faculties was facilitated by the institution. Applying lessons learned from these successes could improve collaborations within the Faculty.
4.	Encourage and reward engagement with the Centre for Transformative Learning (CTL).	The courses, support and innovations provided by the CTL are appreciated by staff, but in a time-constrained work schedule availing of these is not prioritised.
5.	Develop consistent and standardised timeframes for the return of marked assessed coursework, which are clearly communicated to students.	Students do not always receive feedback in a timely way and are not sure when they will receive this, which hinders their ability to respond to feedback and feed this forward by applying it to subsequent assignments.
6.	Make module evaluation mandatory for all programmes.	Evaluation of modules facilitates improvement, enhancement and positive feedback for lecturers and is critical to professional development.
7.	Make postdoctoral career planning processes (such as the portfolio module) and viva-preparation resources available to all PGR students, including those taking the traditional route.	There are currently different experiences and supports for PGR students doing the structured PhD compared with those taking the standard route.

8.	Explore good practice and innovations across EHS around internationalisation and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in order to enhance the student and staff experience.	There were many examples of excellent practice within the schools and departments but a lack of opportunity to celebrate and share these initiatives. EHS highlights the importance of EDI in the SAR, and staff spoke about their engagement with EDI across the Faculty. As the importance of EDI grows for UL, it would be good to consider how best to acknowledge staff and student contributions towards ensuring equality, diversity and inclusion across EHS.
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Appendices

A Membership of the QRG

Prof. Thomas O’Toole	Deputy Assistant Undersecretary for Health – Clinical Services, Brown University, USA
Prof. Brendan McCormack	Head of the Divisions of Nursing, Occupational Therapy and Arts Therapies, Queen Margaret University, Scotland.
Prof. Paul Wakeling	Head of Department, Education, University of York, UK.
Dr. Joey Murphy	Lecturer, University of Bristol, UK.
Ms. Margaret Gleeson	Chief Director of Nursing and Midwifery, UL Hospitals Group, Limerick.
Ms. Ann Green	Honorary Teaching Fellow, Coventry University, UK.
Ms Ailish O’Farrell (Recording Secretary)	Technical Writer, Ireland.

B Membership of Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Quality Team

Name	Role
Prof. Colum Dunne	Chair EHS Quality Review Team
Nicola Kelly	Project Manager, Faculty of EHS
Ann Marie Kennedy	Accreditation and Quality Officer
Lynn O’Doherty	Executive Administrator
Dr. Kieran O’Sullivan	Senior Lecturer
Dr. Mark Campbell	Senior Lecturer
Dr. Catherine Norton	Lecturer
Dr. Ann-Marie Creaven	Lecturer
Dr. Alexandra Cremona	Lecturer
Dr. Dympna Tuohy	Lecturer
Mary Hackett	Department Administrator
Aoife Begley	Undergraduate Student
Padraic Rocliffe	Post Graduate Student

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Dr. Aishling Flaherty	Lecturer
Dr. Sandra O'Brien	Senior Technical Officer
Conor Clancy	Graduate Entry Student
Patsy Finn	Executive Administrator
Laura Howard	Senior Administrator, Research