Report of the Quality Review Group

to

Academic Registry

Review dates	21 to 24 November 2022
Issued by QSU	26th November
UL QSU Website	www.ul.ie/quality
Unit Website	https://www.ul.ie/academic-registry
QQI Website	www.qqi.ie

Approved for publication by the Executive Committee, 8 February 2023

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1   *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.

All units are reviewed against quality assurance standards as described in the tailored quality review guidelines, which is available on the QSU website. The planned schedule of quality reviews 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 and formally 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 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 18-24 months after receiving the QIP template, the head of unit, Provost/Deputy President and Director of Quality meet to formally review progress and to agree on any remaining actions to be taken.

2   *Summary Details of Academic Registry*

The Academic Registry Division (AR) was established in 2016 following a decision by Executive Committee to separate the functions associated with undergraduate student recruitment and student lifecycle management from the pastoral and support services offered by the Student Affairs Division, of which AR was a constituent unit at that time.

Following a review in 2018, AR was restructured in 2019. Four new departments were established – Customer Service; Operations; Business Support & Planning; and Quality, Resource Planning & Policy Compliance – as well as the Director's Office. See https://www.ul.ie/academic-registry/about-academic-registry for details. In the new structure, Operations consolidates all operational functions under one head of department; Business Support & Planning coordinates process and systems development and reduces the risk of the division working in silos; Customer Service manages communication and service provision; and Quality, Resource Planning & Policy Compliance leads, plans and implements the AR quality management system (QMS) on behalf of the division. Appendix 1.1 provides a detailed overview of the division's structure.

Objectives of the new structure were to:
- Address risks in creating, maintaining and managing student records in an environment that was prone to single points of failure because of a heavy reliance on key individuals and manual processes
- Develop capacity to support process change and reduce reliance on unsupported silos of expertise
- Improve the overall effectiveness of the division in providing high-quality services to students, UL staff and external customers (e.g., applicants, graduates).

The purpose and responsibilities of each department are specified in the division's key business processes.

AR plays a central role in UL in the following ways:
- Manages the business processes that drive the student lifecycle from initial course offer, enrolment and progression through to presenting the student to the University Exam Board for consideration for final award. In March 2021, a total of 17,210 students were registered on 362 academic programmes; 5,856 graduated and approximately 5,000 new students were enrolled in the past year (Higher Education Authority (HEA) census date).
- Manages and supports the student lifecycle at taught undergraduate (levels 6 to 8 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)) and taught postgraduate programmes (Level 9 NFQ) ranging from 6-ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) certificate programmes to 300-ECTS honours bachelor programmes at undergraduate level and Level 9 master awards at postgraduate level. At research level, AR works with Graduate and Professional Studies (GPS) to support research master and traditional and structured PhD programmes. The full range of awards offered by UL is available in the Awards Title Framework document.
- Manages UL's engagement with the Central Applications Office (CAO), the national body that processes all EU undergraduate applications on behalf of all the universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ireland. Successful CAO applicants account for 56% of UL's annual student intake. The CAO intake accounts for 80% of students on campus as reported by the final HEA returns 2022.
- Has overall responsibility for the quality of academic programme and student data in the student records system (SITS[1]). These data are essential to the HEA – university funding model, student fee income and grant allocation, and funding allocation to faculties.

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[1] Supplied by Tribal UK, the system was first implemented in UL in 1998 based on the academic model in place at that time.

- Fulfils a governance and management role in ensuring that UL's academic programme data and academic records and proposed changes accurately reflect the programmes of study approved by Academic Council.
- Oversees student data sharing and access requests to the SITS database to ensure GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) regulations are complied with and, where appropriate, data-sharing agreements are in place.

3   Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

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The Quality Review Group (QRG) wishes to thank the University of Limerick (UL) and Academic Registry (AR) staff for the welcome and support received throughout the review. In particular, the QRG greatly appreciated the energetic, open and constructive way AR staff engaged in discussions during the review. The self-assessment report (SAR) provided a useful account of the division's work, including an overview of the substantial number of strategic and operational projects the team has been engaged in delivering.

It was evident from the SAR and from discussions during the visit that AR is engaged in evaluating its performance using a range of evidence, including benchmarking, against policy and processes in other institutions inside and outside Ireland. This willingness to evaluate and to identify improvements and enhancements is noteworthy and emblematic of the culture of quality that exists in the team. It also means that many of the recommendations in this report are reinforcements of points the team has itself identified.

The QRG met with stakeholders including students and staff who were appreciative of the improvements brought about by AR, emphasising the can-do culture in the team. It was also apparent that there is scope for more systematic ways of engaging with staff and students, especially in communicating how the division has responded to the student voice. The AR team is aware of additional ways in which it would like to improve engagement with students, and the QRG is supportive of those, as in, for example, the urgency of finding private space for meeting with students who have complex and/or personal AR-related enquiries.

AR has been on a substantial programme of change and improvement, which continued apace throughout the pandemic. This has enabled the division to bring a range of strategic and operational risks inside the institution's risk appetite and, importantly, to improve many aspects of service delivery as experienced by students and internal stakeholders. As the AR team recognises, considerable work remains, the achievement of which will involve wider engagement across the University and for which there should be clear institutional oversight.

Future improvements delivered by AR must continue to be linked closely to the needs of the wider UL community and should align with strategic intentions to continue growing the undergraduate and postgraduate student population. Considerable confidence can be derived from the AR team's strong quality ethos and track record of delivering on the foundational activity which will underpin the next phase of strategic and operational development.

4 QRG Commendations and Recommendations

4.1 Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

1.	The strong sense of cohesion and positive culture across the team, led by the director, Pat Phelan, and the leadership team who are well-networked and respected across UL, with AR staff widely seen to be ready and willing to embrace change, with a genuine sense of concern for UL students and a clear desire to see ongoing service improvements.
2.	The awareness in AR both of what has been achieved over the past four years and what is yet to be achieved, which underpins the student experience and has increased stakeholder confidence in the work of AR.
3.	The clearly defined mission, aims and values of the division which all AR colleagues have bought into and work to realise.
4.	The opportunities available to all AR colleagues to inform the priorities, actions and future direction of travel of the division, for example via the quality improvement action plan (QIAP).
5.	The development of a clear strategic plan to map and automate key business processes in order to free up resources to provide in-person support for more complex queries, thereby reducing the reliance on manual interventions and addressing the risk of single points of failure.
6.	The development of a robust quality management system (QMS) which has contributed to a culture of quality and reduced risks via the development of detailed operational procedures.
7.	The customer service ethos and student focus among AR staff which is recognised by students and UL staff who engage directly with the service.
8.	The systematic collection and appropriate use of data that helps AR staff to evaluate their service and deliver a high-quality experience to others, for example through the use of the customer service dashboard.
9.	The emerging data governance model and the clear understanding of responsibilities and accountabilities for the quality and currency of data in the student information system (SITS).
10.	The developing approach to communications, including the use of attractive and easily understood infographics and the ability to convey appropriate information to stakeholders at key points of the academic year.

4.2 Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.2.1 Level 1 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
1.	As UL is at a critical point in its student population growth, develop at institution level an overarching approach and resourcing model to enable processes and systems to adapt to demands.	As UL continues to grow, there is an increasing need to balance flexibility of student choice and programme structures with operational considerations for AR (and other) services. An example of this is balancing student option choices with the need to release timetables earlier in the academic cycle.
2.	Work with senior management to develop a strategic approach to how AR processes, systems and resources will evolve to manage the increase in student numbers and to ensure momentum and focus are not lost.	AR should work with UL senior management to ensure that AR strategic initiatives are considered and prioritised appropriately within the context of other strategies yet to be defined, such as, for example, course design including the extent of flexibility, progression rules and delivery modes (face-to-face/online/blended). This will ensure that all key stakeholder voices are represented.
3.	Linked to the work on scheduling, develop a policy and a set of underpinning principles which are consistent with the outcomes of the institution-level work described in recommendation 1.	AR is preparing to embark on a strategic project to reform timetabling which is evidently a source of concern for students and staff. The growth in student numbers means that current custom and practice are no longer fit for purpose.

We believe that the University will need to find an effective compromise between its desire to offer students the widest possible course choice on the one hand and the limitations of staff and room availability on the other, in order to be able to deliver stable and personalised schedules to students and teaching staff in a timely manner. There will be particular benefit in considering this from the student perspective to ensure equivalence of opportunity for students alongside the needs of the various student groups, such as those with caring or other responsibilities outside the University. |
| 4. | As AR transitions out of the Tactical Stabilisation project, ensure effective governance structures are in place to oversee future developments, including retaining the SITS Steering Group. | The development of the new Digital Governance Committee is a positive step in promoting prioritisation for strategic projects and funding. As this new structure is embedded, the role of the SITS Steering Group in relation to both the Digital Governance Committee and Academic Council should be kept under review to ensure that governance remains effective. It was clear to the QRG that during Tactical Stabilisation the SITS |

		Steering Group has been invaluable in providing a clear governance structure for change. It served to 'stress test' AR proposals and provides visibility of issues to senior UL management.
5.	Develop an Academic Registry People Plan which provides internal career progression opportunities and which, through the Performance and Development Review System (PDRS), increases the emphasis on professional development beyond specific job-related knowledge and skills.	The new AR structure has been in place since 2019, and it is evident that this has been effective in delivering significant service enhancement. However, AR continues to experience challenges with high levels of staff turnover and managing staff resource to meet peak demands and deliver change. Now that the AR structure is embedded, the development of a People Plan which provides clearly defined career progression opportunities and utilises the PDRS process to identify professional development that supports progression may be effective in reducing turnover and supporting peak demands. Expanding the flexible workforce could also be considered so that appropriately experienced staff can be deployed in larger numbers at peak periods.
6.	At University level, develop an institutional approach to managing student communications and enquiries.	Currently student enquiries are passed between departments for resolution resulting in a disconnected and frustrating experience. There is a need to develop a single access point for both digital and in-person enquiries to provide an enhanced student experience. The role of AR in this is key, and the AR leadership team should collaborate with UL senior management to inform this development. There is a risk that AR becomes the main source of signposting to other areas of the University with this, potentially, leading to further inefficiencies. The student communications strategy needs to be set within a backdrop of rapid change, growth in student numbers and new strategic directions. Currently, communication in AR is being handled by a single member of staff, which creates a single point of vulnerability. Consideration on how to broaden this skill set across the AR team would be worthwhile.
7.	Provide a safe space for students to speak to staff about sensitive AR-related issues.	AR urgently needs appropriate local space for student consultation sessions, some of which require a degree of privacy. The current accommodation arrangements with respect to this are well below sector benchmark.
8.	Establish more structured ways of engaging students, such as a service-user	AR does have arrangements in place to gather student feedback and there has been a range of

	forum, to ensure that AR activities operate as intended to improve the student experience.	improvements in service that are recognised by students. Nonetheless, there would be considerable benefit in developing more systematic ways of engaging with students; this would ensure that students could see the impact of their engagement, enable a proactive response to the student population as a whole where it is clear that particular issues affect the student cohort more widely, and test the extent to which improvements made by AR do indeed resolve the issues from the student perspective.
9.	Establish mechanisms for gathering and acting on systematised feedback from academic and professional service departments through effective business partnering.	Currently, feedback from other departments seems to be gathered and distributed somewhat informally through various committees or other ad hoc routes. AR may, therefore, be missing the opportunity to seek feedback proactively from other parts of the University which engage directly with students and are collecting their own data on student challenges, some of which could be addressed by AR staff if they were aware of these views and experiences.
10.	Manage AR and stakeholder expectations around the capacity and resource available to progress strategic and ongoing operational improvements.	There is a need for good communication between AR and other parts of the University who rely on AR to develop shared systems/resources. In particular, it will be important to communicate which projects are being prioritised. Although there appears to be a growing appreciation of the complexity of AR services and processes, there may be some unrealistic expectations among students and academic staff around what is actually possible. Promoting how well AR is doing in comparison to similar institutions could be an easy win. Examples include the length of time it takes to introduce new courses and the response time to student queries.

4.2.2   Level 2 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
1.	Consider how the process maps may be shared more widely with other UL units to facilitate more effective end-to-end processing and highlight the linkages between different services.	A considerable amount of process mapping has been undertaken resulting in clearly documented working practices. These are currently only accessible to AR colleagues. There would be benefit in making these more widely available to ensure better understanding of AR functions in other parts of the University, as well

		as making more visible the ways in which processes link to, and align with, the activities of other service providers.
2.	As AR matures, ensure that the QMS approach is proportionate to meet future needs.	While the QMS and associated QIAP have provided opportunities to review past working guidelines, map existing processes and action changes and improvements, there is a potential risk of the system becoming too complex and its benefits reducing over time.
3.	Develop appropriate KPIs for all major functional areas.	There will be benefit in reviewing and developing the current KPIs to reflect the pace and scale of the transformation AR has undergone in recent years. Similarly, as future benchmarking activities allow AR to recognise further development opportunities, new KPIs will become relevant.

Appendix One

A   Membership of the QRG

Dr. Ailsa Crum, Chair	Director of Membership, Quality Enhancement & Standards, QAA, UK
Prof. Jon Yorke	Academic Registrar and Associate Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic, Curtin University, Australia
Victoria Fanning	Academic Registrar, Nottingham Trent University, UK
Dr. Robert Partridge	Executive Director of Student and Academic Services, University of Glasgow, Scotland
Alice Hynes	Former Academic Officer, Student Life. Student representative on the panel
Patricia Moriarty	Arts Officer, University of Limerick
Ailish O'Farrell	Technical Writing / Recording Secretary

B   Membership of Academic Registry Quality Team

Nuala Cullimore	Quality Team Lead
Karen Kemmy	Lead Auditor
Ursula Mullane	BS&P Representative
Andrew Flynn	Operations/Student Records Rep
Martina O'Halloran	Operations/Programme Rep
Kaye Morrissey	Operations/UnderGrad Recruitment and Admissions Rep
Danielle McNamara	Operations/Scheduling & Exams Rep
Maureen Tucker	Customer Service Rep