Report of the Quality Review Group Professional Support for Research

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UL QSU Website	www.ul.ie/quality
Divisional Websites	www.ul.ie/research
	www.ul.ie/HR
	www.ul.ie/corporatesecretary
	https://ulsites.ul.ie/finance/
QQI Website	www.qqi.ie

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Table of Contents

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 VPR, Provost and Deputy President and Director of Quality meet to formally review progress and to agree on any remaining actions to be taken.

Summary Details of Professional Support for Research at UL

UL has an exemplary record in fostering and attracting world-leading researchers, and has been successful in national and EU programmes, such as European Research Council (ERC), Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA), Science Foundation Ireland and Enterprise Ireland programmes and the Shared Ireland HEA North South Research Fund. UL's research performance has gone from strength to strength with €319 million in research funding secured since 2014. Under Horizon 2020 UL reached €38.5 million funding, which is a 92% increase (almost doubling) of our FP7 take.

The University hosts seven large externally funded research centres, of which three are National Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) centres, one is a doctoral training programme called the SFI Centre for Research

Training in Foundations of Data Science and two Enterprise Ireland technology centres as well as one funded by the HEA. We have hosted seven European Research Council awardees in the areas of psychology.

UL's research performance is the result of the incredible commitment and determination of our academic, research and support community. Within the context of this increased research performance, supports for research within UL operate on mix of a central and a devolved model. The supports within the scope of this review are centralised in the Office of the Vice President Research, Chief Finance and Performance Officer, Corporate Secretary and Human Resources divisions. Significant developments have been realised in recent years to support research at UL, including the establishment of a Post-Award team, Legal Services Unit, expansion of Research Finance team, establishment of Strategy & Policy team and initial investments in systems to support research together with developments in policy across health research, infrastructure, institutes & centres.

The University of Limerick Strategic Plan UL@50 covers the period 2019-2024. In light of the global pandemic and in response to our 2020 institutional quality review (Cinnte Report) this strategy was recalibrated in 2021/22. The development of UL's research strategy 2022-2027 in parallel to the recalibration of UL@50 enabled full alignment and integration of research into the heart of our organisation. Research excellence is a goal of the UL@50 strategy and support of this is integrated across all of our strategic goals.

In Q4 2022, the Vice President Research launched the University research strategy, Wisdom for Action Research Strategy 2022-2027 to the campus community. University Research Committee were the steering committee for the strategies development and oversaw a comprehensive consultation exercise to inform our direction. The vision, mission and eight core principles of the research strategy and outlined below.

Vision: University of Limerick contributes to the discovery of new knowledge for a better world.

University of Limerick is a research-led, energetic and enterprising institution with a proud record of innovation and excellence in education and scholarship. We value creativity, curiosity and excellence in our inclusive community which is committed to social good.

Mission: Our mission is to build a vibrant community where research excellence is valued, supported and central to all facets of our organisation.

At the core of this strategy are 8 key principles for research. Our principles underpin our four strategic goals and key actions central to our research vision for UL. At the heart of this strategy is a culture that supports our people to undertake the best research, to seek new directions, be innovative and if need be disruptive, and to collaborate in new and exciting ways to address the challenges of our time and those that will emerge in our future.

Values embodied in 8 research principles aligned to 4 goals
- Put research at the **heart** of UL
- Be **creative, innovative, supportive** and **responsive** in our approach to advancing research
- **Champion** and **celebrate** the pursuit of **research excellence**
- Embrace a spirit of **openness** and **discovery**
- Proactively **collaborate** to make a difference
- Build **sustainability** and **resilience** in our world
- Attract & nurture **research talent** to create our future leaders
- Be a leader for **equality, diversity & inclusivity**

Report of the Quality Review Group – Thematic Review - Professional Support for Research

This quality review marks the first undertaken with a thematic approach within the University of Limerick and potentially within the wider Irish HEI sector and will be significant in the realisation of our ambition as a research-led university.

The recommendations of quality reviews provide an informed and experienced external view which contributes best practice input to future enhancements. This innovative approach to quality review provides excellent opportunity for constructive feedback and integration of the quality review system with organisational strategy implementation which can support enhancements to realise far-reaching impacts for our University.

Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

Professional support for research in a university plays a crucial role in facilitating research activities, external funding applications, talent acquisition, collaborations, knowledge transfer and enhancement of the university's reputation.

The Office of the Vice President Research (OVPR) leads the support to researchers at University of Limerick. However, the full spectrum of research support is provided in collaboration with a number of professional units including the Finance Department, the Human Resources Division, the Corporate Secretary's Office, the Legal Services Unit, the Library and the Information Technology Division. Because the 'research project lifecycle' transacts multiple functions in the university, UL has made a wise and pragmatic decision to conduct a cross-functional review of professional support for research in the university. This will facilitate a systems-level perspective of the services provided to researchers and identify elements for further service enhancement. This quality review is timely and coincides both with UL's resolution to be a research-led university and the need to provide strategic focus on professional support for research functions, processes and procedures across UL.

The Quality Review Group (QRG) was very impressed with the clarity of the self-assessment report (SAR) and the progress made since the last quality review of the OVPR, then the Research Office, in 2016. The QRG was also impressed by the collaboration among different units in the university to provide professional research support to its researcher community. The reviewers met with members of the different UL units and functions that support research-related activity, as well as with stakeholders including researchers at various stages of their career and research managers from across the university.

Most of the discussions with the QRG were constructive and participants were aware of the UL strategic shift to becoming a research-led university. This speaks highly of the Vice President Research and the OVPR, who have not only supported UL's researchers but have also worked with the university's leadership team to articulate the value of a research-led university. Strategic focus on research sets UL on a trajectory to become a globally recognised university with enhanced reputation among its peer institutions.

There have been significant and commendable improvements in providing support for researchers across different functions over recent years. Parts of the process, including the Research Proposal Authorisation System (RPAS) and the recruitment packs, have been digitised. Despite the positive aspects of the overall research support system, however, some challenges were identified during the review. At the strategic level, the challenge for the institution is to embrace and communicate the concept of UL as a research-led university. At operational level, one of the significant challenges is the lack of processes to streamline the research project lifecycle. A system similar to RPAS is needed for the monitoring and follow-through of post-award activities. In addition, it would be ideal to bridge the pre-award and post-award systems. This would enable both the principal investigator (PI) and the professional support offices to view and monitor the stage and status of a research project at any given stage of its lifecycle. Where possible, systems should be interoperable to minimise effort on the part of the PI.

Research funding is becoming more challenging, and the funding agencies frequently change their rules and programmes. This creates dynamic challenges for researchers and support units. It was observed by the QRG that although all units are striving to support the researchers and the

research projects, two of the professional research support functions require specific attention and enhancement; these relate to the recruitment of researchers and the procurement of materials and equipment for research, which are often non-standard.

UL and the QRG acknowledge the constraints imposed by national policies and compliance requirements. However, it was felt that these processes seem to be particularly challenging at UL and should be addressed without delay. Research compliance is a shared responsibility of researchers and deans, and not only the concern of PIs or Research Support Services (RSS).

UL has made strides in the past number of years to diversify and increase its research income and portfolio. As this continues, there will be an inevitable increase in the volume of support required. In addition, a more diverse portfolio of research income will result in a more diverse regulatory landscape, which will need expertise to navigate. This expertise could be concentrated centrally while ensuring that local support hubs focus on more general research activities and niche needs at faculty level. Clear connections and communication between the centralised and decentralised research support functions should be established, based on specialisation and a mutual understanding of how the different levels contribute to seamless research support services.

The QRG view is that the deeply embedded focus in the UL organisational culture remains on teaching, while many still see research as an add-on. Communication of the strategy shift has been very successful at a conscious level, but processes have to see a further shift to become research-focused at all levels. It was noticed that resources needed for such a transition were not addressed by the central offices. Considering the ambition to attract more research-oriented staff and bring in more external funding, this is problematic. Even with a necessary simplification of procedures and more IT-based solutions, the resource aspects of the strategy should be taken into consideration.

Talent development for early-stage researchers should be planned, with well-defined criteria and a unified message communicated across UL. It is important to offer these researchers a clear understanding of their career prospects and improve their experience at the institution. There is a real need to formulate and communicate clear criteria for staff to get on tenure track across the university.

In terms of facilitating the research journey, a shift from a process-focused to a goal- and user-focused approach is needed. This should encompass a more proactive approach to PIs, with clearly communicated support roles based on researchers' needs. There should be enhanced direct interaction between units as opposed to having PIs own the process. Regular communication across functions would also help identify how processes could become more agile for all users.

The QRG commends the nascent signs of culture change in the university at all levels and feels confident that UL will continue this ambitious journey for the benefit of the university and all its stakeholders.

QRG Commendations and Recommendations

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

1.	The recognition that support for the research lifecycle is required across multiple units and functions.
2.	The establishment of the post-award support unit in OVPR to coordinate activities across different support units.
3.	The establishment of the internal Legal Services Unit.
4.	The pre-award support service divided by funder, which allows staff to develop specialist knowledge of funder requirements.
5.	The implementation of the online Research Proposal Authorisation System (RPAS), which facilitates the grant application and approvals process.
6.	The change in UL's focus to being research-led, which is timely and vital to the future and reputation of the university.
7.	The recognition by professional support staff and researchers alike of the importance of UL becoming a research-led university.
8.	The recognition of the need to plan and support research both at central and local levels.
9.	The development of the UL Policy Hub which includes the policies that guide the processes related to research.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

Level 1 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
1.	At Executive Committee level, devote time to discussing and developing a clear concept of what being research-led means for UL, and formulate and communicate guidelines on what this means for the many units that support research.	"*Research-led*" is perceived differently by members of the university community.
2.	Create a working group to develop and implement best practices across all units to support excellence in research and develop an organisational culture that will support a research-led university.	Establishing and embedding universal norms and practices will help to develop a research-oriented organisational culture. The working group should include Executive Committee and senior representatives of all the entities involved in research at UL who will take responsibility for development and implementation of best practices; researchers must be at the centre of this process.
3.	Review the recruitment process to support the delivery of the university's strategic research goal.	There is a delay between getting grants and their deployment. The short-term hiring process should be clear and straightforward for PIs. Be creative and proactive in communicating solutions to avoid bottlenecks and remove unnecessary steps from the recruitment process. This should be done using external benchmarking to ensure best practices for a research-led institution and prioritise speeding up the short-term recruitment process. Recruitment practices should be more attentive to discipline-specific academic cycles when planning for longer-term appointments.
4.	Review the purchase and procurement process to support the delivery of the university's strategic research goal.	Although it is governed by the national procurement policy, it appears that UL's procurement process is overly complicated and is, in fact, hindering research and not reflective of current cost structures of modern scientific research. Compliance must be applied within the lens of a research-led university as researchers often have bespoke (non-standard) needs. Therefore, it is important to keep the researchers' needs at the centre by keeping them actively involved in the review of the procurement process. The time it takes for the procurement process should be reduced significantly.

5.	Review progression and promotion policies and practices in relation to their consistency with a research-led university system.	The development of excellence in research requires long-term investments in individuals and projects. Talent development and retention of early-stage researchers should be planned, with clear criteria and a unified message communicated across the university. It is important to offer these researchers a clear understanding of their career prospects and improve their experience at the institution. Clear criteria to get on tenure track should be formulated and communicated across UL.
6.	At university level, review practices that involve short-term and often cyclical contracts for research faculty and strive to ensure multi-annual and, wherever possible, tenure track employment for all researchers, particularly those at early stages of their career.	All early-career researchers are vital to the success and reputation of UL as a research-led institution. Enable non-tenured research staff, such as LBBs and postdocs, to apply for grants as PIs where this is allowed by funding agencies, regardless of contract length and tenure status. As some short-term appointments are inevitable, UL should ensure that such faculty are assured of all research opportunities and are allocated workloads that are consistent with other similar career stage faculty in the university.
7.	Introduce research support KPIs for all the relevant units involved in research support.	KPIs should include the OVPR, Corporate Secretary, HR, Procurement, Buildings & Estates, Finance, Library and Information Systems, faculties, departments, research centres and any other relevant units.
8.	Allocate sufficient resources to all research support functions, recognising the goal of substantial growth in research activity beyond current levels.	It is not clear if strategic forward planning of resource needs is reflective of projected future growth. As part of future strategic planning, the units should consider enhancing cultural, financial and staff supports at devolved levels in order to facilitate excellence in research.
9.	Establish structured communication processes between all support units to ensure an effective completion of the research project lifecycle.	Digitisation is a support tool and does not necessarily facilitate the entire research project lifecycle. Effective communication between all units and people is fundamental to excellence in research.
10.	Ensure the interoperability of the different systems and IT tools that are in place and that are being considered to cover the entire grant journey from application to management.	There are several systems in place, including Agresso, RPAS and systems that manage, among other areas, ethics, contracts and recruitment. Separate systems require the same information to be provided several times throughout the grant application process and this is confusing and burdensome for those involved. The establishment of a post-award unit covers both project management and compliance issues, but the whole grant application-to-management process would be facilitated by the interoperability of all these different systems.

11.	Ensure that all policies and guidelines are developed in conjunction with relevant stakeholders and clearly communicated to target audiences. The user must be at the heart of this process.	Currently the PI is expected to be familiar with all policies. Professional support units should be fully aware of the relevant policies and support the researchers regarding these. For example, a PI should not have to go to several different offices to get signatures. The QRG understands that there are automated IT systems in use in other areas in the university that could be adapted to activities such as, for example, research contract signing.
12.	Considering that the research profile of candidates is fundamental to the recruitment and promotion of all faculty positions, work with senior management to ensure formal inclusion of research faculty and/or representatives of the OVPR on recruitment panels.	Considerable evidence indicates that research careers are cumulative and identification of strong researchers at all career stages, including early career, is vital to research excellence at UL. In order for UL to be a research-led university, it is essential to consider the quality of the faculty being hired, primarily based on their research potential.
13.	Develop a system of tri-annual benchmarking against international peer institutions with established reputations for excellence in research.	Identify a pool of excellent research universities against which to benchmark both norms and practices around research and research supports.
14.	Ensure that issues of research excellence are recognised in all disciplines via the Work Allocation Model.	None.
15.	Ensure support to researchers with non-traditional funding agencies, such as philanthropic organisations.	None.

Level 2 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
1.	Provide in-house training on formulating a research proposal.	Internally delivered training allows for relationship building between Research Support Services (RSS) and researchers, which facilitates the communication between them. Equally important, if researchers are given "homework" to develop one-pager project ideas, this builds a pipeline.
2.	Identify and communicate recruitment timings and procedures to researchers.	Find efficient ways to inform researchers on the expected timeframe for their recruitment/s. Also, add that information to training on formulating a research proposal to align expectations with reality in the planning phase.
3.	Offer and accommodate kick-off planning meetings at the start of the post-award stage, when requested.	Include a tracking mechanism to ensure both PIs and support officers can see the status of contracts.
4.	Recognise the need to support smaller research grant applications in the same way as larger ones.	Some researchers expressed concern that attention was targeted for the most part for large grants. In this phase where the post-award support unit has only recently been established, it is advisable to continue offering equal support for smaller grant applications. Such activity is vital to ensuring diversity of research activities across fields and is reflective of discipline-specific needs.
5.	Communicate the pre-award support for researchers across the university.	The call alert system seems to be well developed as is pre-award support after a researcher has identified a specific call. However, it is challenging to understand who to contact when there is only a project outline available and the researcher has not yet been able to identify a specific call.

Appendices

A Membership of the QRG

Prof Lokesh Joshi (Chair)	Stokes Professor of GlycoSciences, University of Galway, Ireland
Prof Ross Macmillan	Head of Department of Sociology, University of Limerick, Ireland
Mr Jan Andersen	Senior Executive Officer, University of Southern Denmark
Ms Ashling Hayes	Head of Research Services at Glucksman Library, University of Limerick, Ireland
Ms Nataša Jakominić Marot	Head of University Centre for Research and Innovation, University of Rijeka, Croatia
Ms Ailish O'Farrell (recording secretary)	Technical writer

B Membership of Quality Team

Dr Cathal Linnane Chair Cross-Divisional Self-Evaluation Team	Head, Post-Award & Compliance (Chair)
Yvonne Czajkowski	Contracts Solicitor, Legal Services Unit
Aoife Duke	Head, Human Resources Centre Services
Sandra Hammersley	Research Finance Manager
Christine Brennan Quality Team Co-Chair	Research Strategy & Policy Manager
Yvonne Kiely Quality Team Co-Chair	Senior Administrator, Research Support Services
Eileen O'Connor	Research Metrics and Reporting Officer, Research Support Services
Dr Barry Shanahan	Research Governance Officer, Research Strategy & Policy Team
Conor Morris	Case Manager, Technology Transfer Office
Lana Hannon	Administrator
Sean M Ryan	Information Analyst