



Report of the Quality Review Group to the Marketing and Communications Division

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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 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 18-24 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 Marketing and Communications**

Until 2014, UL had taken a devolved approach to marketing and communications, and aside from some centralised guidelines and templates, strategy was set at a local level. In 2014, UL commissioned a review of its approach to marketing, communications and external engagement. The findings and recommendations from the review (appendix 1.1) resulted in the appointment of a director in 2015 and brought together individuals and small functional areas from around the University (one person for marketing and two people for corporate communications) to form a centralised marketing and communications unit.

The [Marketing & Communications Division](#) (MarComms) was established in 2015 as a centralised support unit to deliver quality services across marketing, communications and the web. Facing ever-increasing and competing demands, the MarComms team was not large enough in terms of resources to meet the demands placed upon it. Furthermore, in 2019, the Director resigned to take up a new post overseas and was not replaced at that time because UL was reviewing the division's structure and reporting lines. The delay was compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

An internal review of MarComms was carried out in 2021 by the UL Director of Corporate Strategy. The report (appendix 1.2) recommended that the division be consolidated and properly resourced in line with best practice. The report also recommended that a devolved operational model of service delivery be applied on the basis that marketing and communications functions were either already established or being developed at local faculty and school levels. A new Director of Marketing, Communications and Public Affairs was recruited in late 2021 to head up the division and oversee the implementation of the report's recommendations.

MarComms is at an early stage of operationalising its new remit (i.e., a devolved model with a centralised support unit). Changes to the organisational structure, both within and outside the division, have been made on foot of the review. The division currently has 26 members of staff. As part of the devolved model and based on a client-agency approach, this number includes four Faculty Marketing and Communications officers (one for each faculty), who were recruited in May 2023 (and started in August 2023) to operate at faculty level while reporting directly to MarComms.

MarComms comprises the Office of the Director and four top-level functional units:

- Marketing & Campaigns
- External Communications
- Internal Communications
- Web

Each functional unit represents a specific area of expertise and is overseen by a head of unit. While UL Brand is considered to be a fifth area of expertise within the division, it comes under the remit of the Marketing & Campaigns unit.

In line with UL's quality management framework for support units, the work of the Office of the Director and each MarComms functional unit evolves around key business processes. This is the division's first formal review process, and because of this, the MarComms quality management system (QMS) was developed as recently as September 2022.

It is worth noting that there are many staff working in other areas of UL with marketing, communications or social media as part of their brief. While they do not have any formal ties to or reporting line into MarComms, the Monthly MarComms Meet-up was established primarily to provide this cohort with a forum for discussion and for receiving updates from the division and for sharing best practice and information. In further support of this cohort, Marcomms will develop and identify communities of practice to create a holistic community approach to marketing and communications across the University as per our strategic key project of establishing a central expertise hub and bespoke model for UL.

3 Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

The Quality Review Group (QRG) appreciated the conditions under which the review of Marketing & Communications (MarComms) was carried out. The QRG would like to thank MarComms for its welcome and the Quality Support Unit for its support both before and during the visit.

The QRG based its work on the self-assessment report (SAR) and the appendices provided by MarComms, as well as the additional material supplied in response to QRG requests. The SAR was very informative and honest in its appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of MarComms and provided a good basis for the discussion with staff and stakeholders. The process of developing the SAR was inclusive and MarComms staff identified several recommendations for enhancing their performance. The meetings during the visit were frank and informative. All UL and external participants contributed to the open and productive discussions.

UL staff members with whom the QRG met were uniform in expressing strong support for the work of MarComms and praised the quality of its leadership and staff. They commented positively on the responsiveness and expertise of the team and noted their commitment to, and passion for, their work.

Even though the current leadership and many MarComms staff members have been in their post for a relatively short time, the recent changes brought to the functioning of MarComms have been much appreciated by their stakeholders on and off campus. These changes include the creation of communities of practice across the university and the development of toolkits and guidelines. Stakeholders identified areas for improvement as a normal part of a development process rather than as structural issues inherent to MarComms.

Nevertheless, in the view of the QRG, two challenges require attention.

First, the current responsibilities assigned to MarComms cover internal and external communications, marketing, public affairs and alumni relations. The scope of responsibilities is very broad in the light of the available human and financial resources and presents a risk of staff burnout.

Second, UL has taken a devolved approach to marketing and communications. This model is in the process of being worked out. There is consensus that the distribution of responsibilities (e.g., between the faculties and MarComms) is still being defined and there is a great deal of good will to make the model work. Importantly, however, a devolved model implies distributing expertise across the university. UL will need to consider the practical implications of this model and how to make it work given the current resources.

Furthermore, UL is described as a decentralised institution. In the areas of interest to MarComms, several units in the university undertake advertising, campaigning or communicating with students. The scope and frequency of these activities need to be mapped out and appropriate oversight provided to ensure consistency. MarComms can only work efficiently if all the components of the university understand the need for coordination in these areas. This means that the central component of the devolved approach should be strengthened to provide appropriate oversight across UL and to support MarComms. Two mechanisms can help in this regard: (a) a clear strategy for UL to drive the branding, messaging and marketing, and (b) a reconsideration of the current reporting arrangements based on a benchmarking exercise. International best practices suggest that a vice president responsible for marketing, communications, public affairs and alumni would provide synergy across these four interconnected functions, solidify the position of MarComms in the university, allow the division to lead in this key area, and ensure that the appropriate conditions are present for the staff to work efficiently and to contribute to the further development of UL.

4 QRG Commendations and Recommendations

4.1 Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

1.	The clear drive, commitment and expertise of the MarComms team, especially as the division is still relatively new and evolving as a function. Stakeholders were highly complimentary of the work of the staff and the support the team provides to the many distinct areas of UL.
2.	The successful running of communities of practice and regular meetings across MarComms that are clearly well established and bring value to the wider MarComms community, offering two-way engagement and the sharing of best practice and information across teams. This includes the purposeful and ongoing creation and sharing of toolkits, guides and training to foster a 'one team' marketing approach across the division.
3.	The commitment of the team to this quality review and the openness and transparency with which they approached it, both in preparation and conversations, particularly as this is the first quality review for the division which is at an early stage of development.
4.	The team's recognition of the transformational importance of creating and launching a brand strategy that can drive progress.
5.	The team's expertise and commitment to quickly turning previously unsatisfied colleagues into celebrants of 360 turnarounds and advocates of continuing collaboration.
6.	The team's ambition and achievements, as evidenced by their applications for awards and showcasing of their work, not just in Ireland but also across the UK, where they have been successful in winning, among others, HEIST and CASE awards – bringing recognition to their team and putting UL 'on the map'.
7.	The team's dedication to continuous improvement as seen in its active quest for feedback opportunities.
8.	The numerous opportunities created by MarComms for UL staff to up-skill through workshops and other training.
9.	The use of student media officers, which is a creative and innovative way to involve the campus community and enhance the MarComms team.
10.	The use of a range of methods to establish benchmarks including partnerships with other institutions and membership of relevant organisations.

4.2 Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.2.1 Level 1 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
1.	At University level, appoint a vice president responsible for marketing, communications, public affairs and alumni which would provide synergy across these four interconnected functions, solidify the position of MarComms in UL, allow the division to lead in this key area, and ensure that the appropriate conditions are present for MarComms staff to work efficiently and contribute to the further development of UL.	<p>It is critical to ensure that the relevant expert is part of the Executive Committee to act as the anchor to the university narrative and reputation, enabling the ‘golden thread’ to run through wider strategies and plans.</p> <p>It was apparent to the QRG through various conversations and shared examples that MarComms does not have direct input at a senior management level to strategic decisions taken on behalf of the university. It is unusual in higher education (HE) organisations not to have senior MarComms representation on senior leadership/executive teams to provide advice and counsel at the initial stage of strategic conversations and to provide alignment of narrative across wider related functions such as student recruitment, student experience and alumni activities.</p>
2.	At University level, critically review the sequencing of key corporate activities to ensure full alignment of core narrative, vision and values.	Conversations have highlighted an out-of-step approach to developing key pieces. For example, work on a revised brand is underway, while a new UL strategy is not due to be completed immediately. This seems a little ‘cart before horse’ as the new strategy should ideally set the direction for the revised branding and also any subsequent corporate website work, which has also come up in conversations.
3.	Create and launch a brand strategy aligned to the next corporate UL strategy, fuelled by the most important drivers, including employability and future industry and business collaboration; social mobility and regional guardianship; and the campus and a diverse, inclusive community.	Whilst there is a brand development programme in place, there is a danger that the opportunity to differentiate UL in the market could be missed. The strategy must be forward-looking, augmented by the things the University needs to shout about in a fast-changing, competitive world. This means going beyond the straplines and focusing on the evidence, storytelling and iconic moves that everyone can get behind.
4.	At University level, ensure additional resourcing to enable a more strategic approach to both the public affairs remit and UL Alumni.	Both these key areas have been bolted into the existing MarComms team responsibilities, and there isn’t the additional resource to support them. Both are areas demanding major focus

		<p>and offer the opportunity to achieve significant return for UL in terms of national and global reputation.</p> <p>The members of the External Communications team are doing their best to support the public affairs remit, but clearly opportunities, especially to be proactive, are being missed. There is a risk that UL won't achieve the influence it needs for the future. Even if other universities are struggling in this area, UL could miss out on the important competitive advantage that proper resourcing could provide.</p>
5.	At University level, prioritise the provision of funding for the completion of the UL branding initiative and other transformational marketing and communications projects.	Many other projects and activities are dependent on the completion of the branding project, including the visual design of the website and documentation for brand governance, tone and guidelines.
6.	With senior UL management, re-evaluate the boundaries, scope and staffing levels of the MarComms team, considering the evolving devolved model and ensuring oversight from MarComms to drive a 'one team' strategy.	<p>The QRG picked up on several additional responsibilities that the Marcomms team, given their proactive nature, has accepted to take on. This needs to be closely managed and re-evaluated, particularly as regards potential wellbeing considerations where the workload of some colleagues may be excessive.</p> <p>Currently no-one oversees certain activities that can pop up anywhere across UL. One stakeholder described the situation as 'all spokes and not enough hub' which captures the situation well.</p> <p>The devolved model may also require additional or re-allocated resource (at either level) to set this up for success and ensure that the many areas of UL are getting the service and consistency needed.</p>
7.	Share, and celebrate, a simplified guide to 'how we all do this' to incorporate roles, responsibilities, workflow, toolkits and service level agreements (SLAs), and make it available in both roadshow and online formats.	Whilst the new forums and community approach are proving useful, there remains a need to share a clear picture of how the devolved model works and the role of MarComms in leading this. There is a danger of having too many support touchpoints and formal processes (such as SLAs), without having an overarching, engaging story of how it all fits together. Getting this right can encourage everyone to dig deeper into the detail whilst understanding the bigger picture and the benefit of all working together.

<p>8.</p>	<p>Identify opportunities for more synchronicity and collaboration with other marketing staff across all divisions to collaborate across UL, specifically on key corporate campaigns such as recruitment, research and reputation.</p>	<p>It is important that MarComms also be seen as a leader that gives oversight and guidance to all involved in MarComms activities across the university.</p> <p>Across faculties and divisions within the university there seems to be a lack of team cohesion with different units working in silos and unaware of marketing initiatives being implemented by others. This is also the case in respect of advertising campaigns.</p> <p>There is a need to strengthen collaboration on key campaigns and projects that are ultimately aligned to corporate reputation. Establishing a mechanism to look collectively across corporate campaigns would assist with the shared planning of these activities and ensure oversight across teams and, importantly, the development of a core narrative aligned to UL's vision, goals, values and unique selling points (USPs).</p>
<p>9.</p>	<p>Using campus and digital assets, make the engagement of staff, students and alumni a priority in the new brand launch, with a focus on deeper purpose and individual and societal impact stories that are emotive and encourage pride and advocacy.</p>	<p>The QRG picked up on a strong sense of pride and loyalty across UL and this needs to be captured and ultimately channelled to support the meeting of specific objectives in the future. Doing this right can be infectious and lead to a huge participation in story sharing that can be of major benefit, ultimately amplifying a small marketing team into an army of thousands worldwide.</p>
<p>10.</p>	<p>Review single points of failure/success, particularly in the areas of Internal Communications and Social Media.</p>	<p>Internal Communications and Social Media play a pivotal and very active role across the university. These activities are currently administered by one person in each case, which could be seen as a point of failure or potential for over-burden.</p>
<p>11.</p>	<p>Take the lead on a 'one team' planned strategy that focuses on the student journey from initial interest to onboarding (and potentially further), creating a joined-up, brand-consistent, user-first, data-led experience for future students.</p>	<p>There are currently too many silos that could undermine future success in student recruitment. UL has to start planning for a slicker, data-savvy approach that meets new trends in privacy and engagement and future-proofs the operation. This will take time, especially as the integration of a customer relationship management (CRM) system may be vital, but a plan should be put in place. This is a good example of the need for more central leadership and prioritisation that cuts across the silos and results in better collaboration and results. It will also provide a good platform for</p>

		the focus on personalisation and other key strategic moves.
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4.2.2 Level 2 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
1.	At University level, review the landscape of student communications and current roles and responsibilities, exploring opportunities to improve the student experience through revised student communication models.	<p>Notwithstanding that student communications does not sit with the central MarComms team, this review has highlighted that the student communications landscape is highly fragmented across UL. From a holistic student experience perspective, this is confusing and unhelpful. From a brand and reputational perspective, it is disjointed – giving different user experiences at different touchpoints, be that for a prospect, a current student or an alumnus.</p> <p>While not suggesting that central MarComms should simply assume responsibility for this area, the QRG considers that because the division’s staff are the professional experts in this field and the ‘guardians’ of the brand, reputation and comms for UL, the University should review this situation to identify opportunities for improvement.</p>
2.	Implement a rota for out-of-hours communications/media monitoring and response, ensuring that ‘crisis comms’ response protocols are understood by all relevant stakeholders.	<p>There is a small number of MarComms team members who are ‘always on’, 24/7, particularly in the context of out-of-hours monitoring and response. While to some degree this is the nature of the work, it is also important to maintain work-life balance and the ability to ‘switch off’.</p> <p>It would be beneficial to have a clear process for monitoring and response shared with relevant colleagues, such as staff in the Office of the President and the Office of the Provost & Deputy President, so that key contact points are known at any given time. This would be of benefit, both in terms of process clarity and management of individual expectations.</p>
3.	Explore and establish mechanics to support the shared planning and oversight of communications across the centre and the wider faculties and divisions.	<p>While communities of practice are effective, a common theme that emerged from discussions was of siloed working and lack of awareness of what was happening across wider communications teams. Initiation of something akin to a shared comms planning grid (for example) across all teams, which could be reviewed collectively in meetings, could help with this.</p>

4.	Measure the effectiveness of internal communication tools and processes.	The QRG learned that some stakeholders had challenges with the current systems in place for internal communications, in terms of the effectiveness of disseminating news to staff quickly enough in an engaging manner. Stakeholders also spoke of difficulty using the UL Connect platform.
5.	Take a critical look at available office space to facilitate greater collaboration.	<p>The SAR identified a need for more physical space for teams to work together and collaborate. A QRG tour of the current working spaces identified several office spaces, many with large corner-style desks and meeting tables, situated within individual offices.</p> <p>The division could look at a reconfiguration of this space.</p>
6.	Combine key statistics from several reports into a single, digestible 'dashboard' to bring greater visibility and clarity regarding MarComms work and impact.	<p>Conversations have established that various reports and statistics are gathered and shared on a regular basis across a range of stakeholders. It would be helpful to gather some key aspects of these into a single, simple format that encompasses the various facets of MarComms work and shows the impact this is having across internal comms, media/PR, social media and the web.</p> <p>This simplified report could be shared with senior stakeholders to aid in the understanding of the remit of the team, the breadth of their involvement and the impact and value-add they bring.</p>
7.	Expand the role of student media officers to include information gathering and content generation for departments, specifically student good news stories.	<p>This will help with the flow of information to improve a sense of connectivity with staff, students and departments.</p> <p>Sharing not only the big news but also the smaller stories – related, for example, to UL Sport, the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, and UL Global – all contributes to the overall tapestry of life at UL.</p>
8.	Provide oversight and guidance for departments dealing with agencies for marketing and communications activities.	Stakeholders expressed the need for more support in dealing with agencies to improve their understanding of such relationships and ensure consistency of the UL brand. It would be beneficial to utilise expert agency knowledge for marketing activities in a data-driven environment.
9.	Continue to work with the Finance Division to improve budget allocation and reporting.	The MarComms management team reviews spending and budget targets regularly, so being able to view the budget breakdown per cost centre will greatly assist with planning and efficiency.

Appendix One

A Membership of the QRG

Ms Andrée Sursock (Chair)	Senior Advisor, European University Association
Mr Jim Tudor	Director, Future Index
Ms Maura Horan	Head of Web, Trinity College Dublin
Ms Kim Graakjaer	Head of Bicentenary Planning and Delivery, University of Manchester
Ms Maeve Gilmore	Student Advisor, TU Dublin Student Union, former UL Welfare Officer
Ms Omobolanle (Bola) Hassan	Digital Marketing Officer, GPS, University of Limerick
Ms Ailish O'Farrell	Technical writer, Limerick (Recording secretary)

B Membership of Marketing & Communications Quality Team

Kerry Betts Senior Administrator	Quality team co-lead and SME MarComms Operations
Eoin Brady Head of Internal Communications	Quality team co-lead and SME Internal Comms
Sheena Doyle Head of External Communications	Quality team member and SME External Comms
Sharon Kelly Campaign Manager	Quality team member and SME Marketing
Mairead Loughran Web Officer	Quality team member and SME Web