# Report of the Quality Review Group

# to the

# Student Affairs Division

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| Review dates | 27th to 30th November 2023 |
| Issued by QSU | 4th December 2023 |
| UL QSU Website | www.ul.ie/quality |
| Unit Website | https://www.ul.ie/student-affairs |
| QQI Website | www.qqi.ie |

Approved for publication by the Quality Committee, 10th January 2024

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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, Associate Vice President Student Engagement and Director of Quality meet to formally review progress and to agree on any remaining actions to be taken.

## *2        Summary Details of Student Affairs*

UL's Student Affairs Division (SA, or "the division") comprises a multidisciplinary team of professional service providers who provide a wide range of supports and services to UL students and to the university's external communities, including prospective students. The mission of SA is to "provide practical, physical, emotional and academic support to empower students and the wider community to achieve their full potential" while its vision is "to be recognised for providing an accessible, professional, compassionate, dynamic and equitable service to enable students and the wider community to build their future and create a better world."

The work of SA is structured around the three core pillars of Student Health and Wellbeing, Access and Widening Participation, and Student Engagement and Development. Each pillar is associated with a number of units and the purpose and responsibilities of each unit are specified in the division's key business processes. Among the services and supports SA provides are student funding and financial advice, volunteering activities, student health, counselling and wellbeing services, disability and assistive technology supports, and student engagement initiatives. The broad organisational structure of the division has not significantly changed since the last quality review in 2014, however the work of the division has had a more cohesive focus since 2016, when services which are now delivered by Academic Registry were devolved into that autonomous division.

In 2019, two reviews were carried out on SA: one internal review on the entire division and one external, consultant-led review on the Student Health Centre and Counselling & Wellbeing Service. The internal review was driven by UL's ambition to implement a one-stop-shop model of service delivery. Between both reviews, almost 80 recommendations were made with respect to governance, staffing, investment in IT infrastructure, service delivery models and organisational structure. Limited implementation of recommendations took place at the time due to the onset of the Covid pandemic in 2020 and due to the "all hands on deck" approach needed to continue to address students' critical support needs during a period of crisis and instability. The SA Division has continued to grow since then and currently has 47 FTE staff and its work is supported by almost 140 contracted professional service staff, short-term, casual staff and peer support workers.

Student Affairs plays a central role in UL in the following ways:
- Advocating for equitable inclusion of students in student life and engagement, including for students from under-represented student groups or communities (e.g., socio-economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, students from the Traveller and Roma communities).
- Working in partnership with our professional support and academic colleagues to deliver relevant and timely supports and services to UL students.
- Creating environments in which students and communities feel like they truly belong and can thrive.
- Engaging in aspiration-raising initiatives with UL's local communities and education partners to facilitate access to the University for communities and student groups that traditionally have experienced lower levels of participation in higher education.
- Supporting UL's broader engagement with its local communities through facilitating volunteering opportunities, arts education and visitor engagement projects, and community-based clinical and coop placements.
- Advocating for a whole of institution approach to student health and wellbeing, and to access, participation and success.

The division's mission and strategy are built on UL@50, UL's strategic plan 2019–2024, with particular emphasis on Priority 1.1 of Goal 1, *Excellent Student Experience* and Priority 4.2 of Goal 4, *Community Engagement*. The division's strategy is also guided by relevant national plans and frameworks, such as the National Access Plan 2022-2028, the National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework and the National Volunteering Strategy 2021-2025.

## 3      Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

### 3.0     Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

The findings of the QRG are based on a detailed and reflective self-assessment report (SAR) from the Student Affairs Division (SA) and further written evidence provided in response to specific questions from the review group, followed by discussions with a wide range of staff from across the service and the University, current students and external stakeholders. Findings have also been informed by examples from other recent reviews of services, particularly where they overlap with the Student Affairs remit.

It was clear to the group that staff in the division are widely recognised across the University and beyond for their professional expertise, dedication to students and the care with which they engage with individual UL students and partners in the region, often working beyond expectations. Colleagues internally and externally value highly their personal connections and working relationships with staff across the division. The recommendations in this report are, therefore, concerned not with the values or expertise of the division, but with improving its strategic focus and operations, including connections between different parts of the service and with colleagues and functions across the University and beyond.

The University is operating in a challenging environment, affected by external factors such as the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on education and young people's mental health and wellbeing, and the rising cost of living. These factors influence the character of support needed by students and the University's ability to meet it. Student numbers are increasing in terms of both volume and complexity, with particular growth in the numbers of international students, students with disabilities, commuter students and students progressing from further education, all of whom require specific support. Relative to many other universities in Ireland, UL recruits a high proportion of students from the local region, with approaching half reported to be from a disadvantaged or marginally below-average socio-economic background. This profile of students adds to the pressure on the SA division, and it increases the risks to the University associated with its work. Student retention is an important dimension of this, but there are also issues in relation to food, student finance, transport and access to accommodation, all of which contribute to the challenges to students' mental health, wellbeing and sense of belonging.

The University has been responding to these challenges by increasing investment in student support across its academic and non-academic activities. It appears, however, to lack a common purpose, strategy and way of working that bring together the different interactions with students, which are driven by their needs rather than the services available to them. For this reason, the review group has identified the imperative for a senior academic lead who can champion student access, experience and success on the Executive. This role would include responsibility for developing a strategy for student support across the lifecycle and student-focused systems design. It would bring together oversight of the academic and professional support for students, ensuring a single and coherent route for leading and resourcing engagement with and responsiveness to students at the most senior level of the University.

The Student Affairs Division has experienced a period of discontinuity due to changes in leadership and staff. It comprises a wide range of functions with distinctive professional expertise and identities. There is an appetite for sharing experiences and learning between the different functions, and commendable practices - such as the Quality Team, the Reading Group, mentoring and quality management system (QMS) auditing - are already in place. However, the disparate nature of the functions and workload pressures are barriers to team cohesion and collaborative working across the division and the wider University. It was evident that there is a desire for a more integrated approach, but this requires enhanced leadership capacity and clearer strategic direction.

The appointment of a permanent director and the dedication and commitment of current staff provide a good platform for addressing these challenges.

# 4 QRG Commendations and Recommendations

## 4.1 Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

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| 1. | The open and honest approach to the quality review from staff in all functions across the Student Affairs (SA) division, colleagues across the University and senior management, and the quality of preparatory information provided both through the SAR and the response to follow-up questions. |
| 2. | The professional expertise of SA staff in all functions, their care, support and advice for students, and their positive working relationships with colleagues, which were widely recognised by students and staff. |
| 3. | The positive relationships SA has formed with external stakeholders, who clearly value their partnerships with UL, which have enabled learners who would not otherwise have gone to university to successfully access and progress through higher education. |
| 4. | AccessCampus, which is distinctive in offering activities delivered by UL staff that engage with learners in their own environment and empower UL student volunteers as role models. This is an exemplar of UL's work within the local community. |
| 5. | The Quality Team, which brings together representatives from each of the services within Student Affairs to share experiences, enhance practices and drive improvements. |
| 6. | The evidence of developing practice in relation to evaluation mechanisms, including impact measures for some of the services, notably Counselling & Wellbeing, the Student Health Centre and Student Volunteering. |
| 7. | The introduction of the Student Engagement & Support Officer role, which demonstrates a move towards professionalisation and targeting of student support towards those most at risk within the faculties by means of a hub-and-spoke model. |
| 8. | The recent appointment of a permanent Student Affairs Director. |
| 9. | The championing of student volunteering via the President's Volunteer Award and the new development whereby UL is leading the national student volunteering platform, studentvolunteer.ie. |
| 10. | The positive response to the Covid-19 pandemic, which demonstrated the agility and adaptability of the service to ensure that students received the best possible support. |
| 11. | The use of robust evidence, including the clinical load index and metrics on volume, complexity of disability registration and individual circumstances, to secure necessary investment in specialist resource to support students. |
| 12. | The commencement of work, in partnership with other professional service units, to develop a business case for a digital case management system for Student Affairs. |

| 13. | The initial roll-out of training to enhance the competence and confidence of student-facing staff in supporting students, as in, for example, responding to students in distress and universal design for learning (UDL). |
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| 14 | The initial work that has taken place to scope the creation of a hub in a single physical location for students to engage with the range of units that operate under the umbrella of Student Affairs. |

## *4.2*   Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

### 4.2.1   Level 1 recommendations

| No. | Recommendation | Commentary |
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| **Strategy and leadership** | | |
| 1. | Develop an institutional strategy for student access, experience and success, which is championed by a senior academic lead on the Executive and includes responsibility for inclusive practice and support for students and staff. | The priorities and areas of focus of Student Affairs should be more clearly defined, communicated and linked to the strategic mission and priorities of the institution. |
| | | The student access, experience and success strategy needs to extend access & widening participation (AWP) work to embrace success for students on course and through progression into high-value employment. This work requires robust insights on risks to student experience and success for different groups of students, informed by data on student characteristics and behaviours. |
| | | The Executive role should include responsibility for developing this strategy and oversight of student-focused systems design. It would bring together oversight of the academic and non-academic support for students, ensuring a single and coherent route for leading and resourcing engagement with and responsiveness to students at the most senior level of the University. |
| **Planning and resources** | | |
| 2. | Review the approach to the resourcing of Student Affairs through improved modelling of impact and demand based on recruitment and forecasting data, so that there is a clear understanding of the basis for this, covering strategy, income, activity and risk. | The demands on Student Affairs grow with the increased volume and complexity of student recruitment, targeted income for specific activities, and the University's expectations for the service. |
| | | The QRG was told that the Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM) in UL allocates a lower proportion of the resource received for AWP than in a number of other universities, and that there are shortfalls in the provision of assistance for some students facing difficulties. |
| | | The University should understand the trade-offs between volume and quality of student support and the risks arising from different levels of resourcing of the service, so that there is a clear and transparent basis for decision-making on this. |
| | | A regular report with data for the division would ensure that senior management are well informed. This report should cover service use and uptake, |

|   |   | fulfilment of service level agreements, satisfaction with services, and impact. Impact should incorporate any clinical outcomes, such as counselling service CORE-net data, but should aspire to include analysis of the correlation between service use and access, retention, degree outcomes and graduate destination. |
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| **Structures and service delivery** | | |
| 3. | Establish a single-entry point for student enquiries and support (a holistic "student hub") to cover not only Student Affairs but also provide a front-line point of contact for other student-facing services including, but not limited to, Academic Registry (AR), the Centre for Transformative Learning (CTL) and UL Global. This will need an integrated physical location, a customer service team which provides a triage service and a digital enquiry/case management/ appointment booking system. | Student Affairs and other support services are disparate and siloed. The review group was frequently informed that students and staff find it difficult to know where to get support, both in terms of physical location and online access. |
|   |   | Staff in Student Affairs do not feel part of a cohesive division, as they are based in various locations on campus. This means that a joined-up approach to student support is impaired. The disparate nature of the functions and workload pressures are barriers to team cohesion and collaborative working across the division and the wider University. |
|   |   | Clarity is needed on how the University addresses the full scope of support needed by international students. |
|   |   | The scope of services participating in this integrated student hub should expand in accordance with the needs of students and feedback from them. |
|   |   | The lack of personalisation of TopDesk responses and the time to get a response are problematic. A significant number of staff and students cited this as a problem and a hindrance to high-quality service provision. |
|   |   | This links closely to the recommendation to develop an integrated student hub model for all student services. |
|   |   | If TopDesk continues to be the student enquiry system, work at an Institutional level will be required to improve its functionality to meet the needs of all students and services. |
| 4. | Ensure that safeguarding checks are regularly reviewed and renewed in line with legal requirements. | Currently, the Director is informed by HR when checks have expired, but this is too late. This presents a risk to the University as checks should be renewed before the current ones expire to ensure that there are no gaps in safeguarding. |
| 5. | Support and enable members of the SA team to participate in relevant continuing professional development (CPD) and conferences to both share | The Provost stressed the desire to learn from best practice in relation to access & widening participation (AWP). Colleagues also expressed the imperative to extend this work to embrace student success, which |

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| | some of the innovative work being carried out across the service and learn from best practice from other higher education institutions (HEIs) and organisations, both nationally and internationally. | requires learning from other institutions and organisations. Staff currently have few opportunities to attend relevant conferences and learn how other HEIs and organisations are managing the challenges they are facing. |
| 6. | Strengthen aspects of service delivery to ensure provision is fit for purpose. In relation to this:<br><br>• Review the framework for out-of-hours support, referral and risk management.<br>• Ensure the fundamental policy suite is complete.<br>• Provide professional supervision for staff dealing with students in distress. | The out-of-hours support and referral framework is unclear. There is evidence of front-line staff working at weekends with lack of formal escalation routes through to senior colleagues with responsibility for overseeing risk.<br><br>The QRG was made aware that not all staff dealing with students in distress have access to paid professional supervision. |
| 7. | Introduce an integrated case management system for the service. This will require business support, development and data analysis capability. | No joined-up systems exist for case management and the recording of student engagements. It is therefore difficult for the service to obtain a full understanding and overview of a student's experience.<br><br>Many parts of the service are unable to identify meaningful data on, for example, uptake and service use, trends and presenting issues and onwards referrals. Several teams are still resorting to using Excel files and manual data analysis. There are risks of human error leading to incorrect data as a result.<br><br>It is difficult for the service to demonstrate accurately changes in student trends and patterns of need, which have an impact on a number of recommendations.<br><br>An opportunity exists for UL to become a leader in the field by integrating AWP data into a fit-for-purpose case management & reporting system (CMRS). This would cater for the intersectionality of student cases and numbers, with entry indicators that allow for effective "triage" and collaborative shared servicing. |
| **Evaluation and data** | | |
| 8. | Adopt an evidence-based approach to consider and review regularly the range of Student Affairs services to meet the needs of the changing student body – for example, the increase in numbers of international students, commuter students, students progressing from further | The QRG observed an over-reliance on counselling as a "silver bullet" to respond to student needs. Investment has been made in that service, but other services have not been resourced in the same way despite changes in the volume and demographics of students. The provision and range of support services should, therefore, be reviewed regularly in light of the changing student body. |

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| | education and students with different types of disabilities. | |
| 9. | Establish a small number of KPIs for Student Affairs in relation to the University's strategy for student access, experience and success, focused on the impact of the service for students and balancing quantitative measures with qualitative insights. | SA staff recognise the importance of data, but the delivery, impact and longitudinal nature of the services they provide cannot be evidenced solely by quantitative metrics. Inclusion of qualitative metrics will, though, require robust evaluation methods to gather reliable evidence (see recommendation 10 relating to evaluation). Work is currently being carried out across the University to understand gaps in the retention of students. This needs to be expanded to encompass the whole student lifecycle. There will then be a need to consider how to take an institutional approach to address any identified gaps. |
| 10. | Develop an engagement and evaluation plan for the service, which is underpinned by a theory of change for interventions across the service to enable them to be evaluated effectively and ensure that the desired outcomes are achieved. | There is no cohesive plan for gathering student and stakeholder feedback about the service. This should incorporate qualitative as well as quantitative data to enable a picture of impact to be gathered, along with data on engagement and service uptake. There is evidence of "survey fatigue" amongst students, so thought should be given to more innovative ways of gathering feedback. Delivery of this recommendation will contribute to the recommendation relating to KPIs. It will also ensure evaluation becomes part of the process, and not just a "nice to have". |
| **Communications and awareness raising** | | |
| 11. | Ensure that communications to students are streamlined across the University to avoid email overload, with targeting appropriate to specific cohorts and use of communication platforms that students use. | Students feel overwhelmed by the volume of communications that they receive from multiple sources across the University, which means that they often just delete emails and miss out on important information. Awareness of the service and what it can provide is limited, especially amongst students. Student Affairs has no strategic focus or planned, service-wide approach to communications. The division needs a communications capability, but this could be drawn from expertise across UL and needs to be coherent with the broader communications plan for students. The communication strategy should consider tailoring information according to specialisation and/or type of registration (by student cohort) so that students |

| | | receive support relevant to their specific learning needs. |
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| | | Both students and staff suggested that an app would be a good solution to this issue. |
| **Collaboration and engagement** | | |
| 12. | Expand the provision of training on fundamental topics including first responder boundaries, signposting and referral to student support services, disability awareness and cultural competency, and consider which elements should be mandatory for specific roles. | In order to fulfil duty of care and other legal requirements, there is a need to ensure that all staff in student-facing roles understand their responsibilities and the boundaries of their roles in providing support and referring students to the more specialist support provided by Student Affairs. There is no expectation that non-specialist student-facing staff should be experts in support or mental health issues, but they should be able to identify when a student needs support and be able to refer them swiftly and appropriately. All student-facing staff should also be expected to respond to students with compassion and empathy. |

### 4.2.2 Level 2 recommendations

| No. | Recommendation | Commentary |
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| **Structures and service delivery** | | |
| 1. | Make improvements to the quality enhancement process, to include:<br><br>• Collating all recommendations from the 2014 and 2019 reviews into one document and closing off or incorporating any outstanding recommendations into the current quality improvement plan (QIP).<br>• Completing the updating of the Quality Manual.<br>• Allocating administrative support to the Quality Team. | The QRG noted that there was a large number of recommendations from previous reviews, which may no longer be appropriate but could appear to be outstanding. |
| **Communications and awareness raising** | | |
| 2. | Review, in partnership with stakeholders, the name and branding of the Student Affairs Division so that it describes more clearly what the service offers to students, staff and external partners. | There is evidence that the division lacks a clear identity and brand. "Student Affairs" does not resonate with students and some stakeholders. This title reflects the organisation of the University rather than the needs of students and other stakeholders.<br><br>The QRG was told by Student Affairs staff: "We have a clear meaning, but we don't have an identity." For the division to communicate and deliver a meaningful student experience and appropriate support, its mission and strategy need to be clearer, better understood, and meaningful to core stakeholders and users of the service. |
| 3. | Consider the name and branding of AccessCampus in consultation with all relevant stakeholders and develop a plan to better promote its innovative work and impact. | The QRG recognised AccessCampus as an exemplar of access work and community engagement. The title "AccessCampus" does not adequately reflect its value and purpose for external stakeholders. Given that this is the University's longest-established outreach activity, it has the potential to contribute more substantially to the University's broader plans for a presence in the city. |
| **Collaboration and engagement** | | |
| 4. | Ensure coherence and collaboration between Student Affairs and UL Engage so there is a joined-up strategy | The extension of access work into student success requires different dimensions of community engagement to be brought together, extending from |

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| | and external stakeholders understand the role of each service. | outreach to student volunteering, placements and careers. |
| 5. | Working with colleagues across the university, develop a community of practice to manage the transversal themes of access & widening participation (AWP), community engagement, student success, internationalisation and digital transformation. | Access & widening participation are an institution-wide responsibility. As the access strategy extends into student success across the whole lifecycle, it becomes essential to engage a wide range of staff in this work. A community of practice could support this and position UL as a national leader in this area, which would be appropriate and desirable given its student demographics. |
| 6. | In collaboration with CTL and AR, create a coherent strategy for student induction to extend across the first semester, building on orientation and the First Seven Weeks model. | The QRG was told that there is information overload in orientation week, so students don't have time to learn about the SA services. Staff and students highlighted the First Seven Weeks model as good practice, but this needs to be extended to professional services.<br><br>This would give students the relevant information to draw on should they need to avail of SA services, and it should encompass all aspects of student life at UL. |
| 7. | Strengthen the information-sharing agreement and cross-referral pathways between UL Student Life (the student representative body) and Student Affairs. | Many students will access both Student Life and one or more of the services within Student Affairs. Whilst it is entirely appropriate and important that students should be able to access Student Life independently from UL/Student Affairs (for example, for advocacy support), there would be benefit in ensuring that procedures for cross-referral and a "team around a student" approach are robust and effective. |

## *Appendix One*

### *A        Membership of the QRG*

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| Prof. Christopher Millward (Chair) | Professor of Practice in Education, University of Birmingham |
| M Martin Webster | Deputy Director, National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) |
| Ms Jill Stevenson | Director of Student Services and Dean of Equality, Diversity & Inclusion, University of Stirling |
| Ben Kiely | Postgraduate Student, University of Limerick |
| Dr Orla Banks | Planning and Projects Manager, Office of the Provost, University of Limerick |
| Ailish O'Farrell | Technical Writer (Recording Secretary), Limerick |

### *B        Membership of SA Self-Evaluation Team*

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| **Director of Unit** | Rhona McCormack | |
| **Quality Team Leader** | Shirley Ryan | Mature Student Officer |
| **Self-Evaluation Team** | **Team member** | **Role in unit** |
| | Dr Lucy Smith | Head of Counselling and SET Team Leader |
| | Caroline Lane | Acting Head of Disability Services |
| | Rhona McCormack | Director |
| | Patricia Moriarty | Arts Officer |
| | Anne O'Connor | Head of Access & Widening Participation |