# Report of the Quality Review Group

# to the

# Cooperative Education and Careers Division

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| Review dates | 3rd to 5th December 2019 |
| Issued by QSU | 23 January 2020 |
| UL QSU Website | www.ul.ie/quality |
| Unit Website | https://www.ul.ie/cecd/ |
| QQI Website | www.qqi.ie |

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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. 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 recommendations of the QRG, devises plans to implement them and reports implementation progress to a Governing Authority subcommittee 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 six months after receiving the QIP template from the QSU, the head of unit provides a summary overview of progress to the university's Governing Authority Strategic Planning and Quality Assurance (GASPQA) sub-committee. GASPQA members are afforded the opportunity to discuss and evaluate progress.

Approximately 12 months after receiving the QIP template, the head of unit, Vice President Academic Affairs & Student Engagement, Dean (where relevant) and Director of Quality meet to formally review progress and to agree on any remaining actions to be taken.

## *2*      *Summary details of unit under review*

The mission of the Cooperative Education & Careers Division (CECD) is to support students in developing their employability i.e. the skills, understandings, knowledge, attitudes and achievements that will make them more likely to gain sustainable employment (including self-employment) and to be successful in their future careers, to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. Specifically, we support students in developing their graduate capital viz., their human capital (formal skills and knowledge); social capital (networking and relationship-building with employers and awareness-building around career opportunities); identity capital (developing a pre-professional identity and narrating their employability 'story') and psychological capital (building career resilience, contingency planning and expectation management). It facilitates (as opposed to 'guarantees') the employability development of UL students, as an integral component of both their academic programme and their student experience. The Division's vision is to be recognised, internally and externally, as a rich source of expertise in the domains of student employability, work-integrated learning and employer engagement. Underpinning our vision are five strategic priorities viz., to pursue operational excellence, optimise industry engagement, enhance the student experience, embed employability and integrate a global dimension to employability activities.

CECD is responsible for leading, developing and delivering three key programmes: Cooperative Education (Coop), School Placement (SP) and Careers. By way of backdrop, the Coop programme was launched in the same year as the establishment of the University and quickly became a key and recognisable platform for employability. The Division took over responsibility for the SP programme following the merger between UL and Thomond College of Education in the 1990s. A dedicated Careers service was established in 2001. CECD operates a centralised placement model whereby the division is responsible for securing Coop opportunities for the students. Over 2,000 undergraduates are placed annually. These 6-8-month placements are a formal, integral, compulsory and academically accredited element of students' degree programmes and account for 60 academic credits. With students being placed from 56 degree programmes across business, science, information technology (IT), engineering, arts, humanities, social sciences and the performing arts, the disciplinary spread of the Coop programme is extensive. Sectoral coverage includes aerospace, automotive, IT, pharmachem, medtech, equine, sport, media, a broad range of financial services, construction, public/civil, international development, voluntary, education and environmental sectors. In terms of scale, Coop is the largest undergraduate placement programme nationally and one of the largest in Europe. It also has one of the largest placement programmes for arts, humanities and social science students in Europe.

Under the SP programme, approximately 700 students are placed within UL's network of 722 post-primary schools annually. Students enrolled in the undergraduate and professional master's education (PME) degrees complete two school placements. Unlike many Irish HEIs, where education students must find their own placements, CECD is responsible for securing school placements for all education students. The SP component is a Professional Accredited Related Element (PARE), which students must complete in order to meet the national Teaching Council's accreditation requirements. Similar to Coop, SP is a formal, integral, compulsory and academically accredited element of education students' degrees and accounts for 18 to 30 credits.

The Careers Service supports over 3,000 students annually in developing and articulating their graduate capital and in exploring, and making informed choices about, their future careers. Our focus is on equipping students for their future careers, rather than simply securing their first graduate job. This career journey begins in students' first year and is delivered through a mix of embedded modules (up to level 9) and a suite of careers/employability offerings including seminars, presentations, careers fairs, workshops, 1-1 interventions, publications and a graduate vacancy service. The Careers service prides itself on its extensive engagement with industry and business partners with whom it collaborates to provide a vibrant, relevant offering to students.

In terms of an overarching timeline, the Division views its services across the student employability continuum, beginning with initiatives with second-level schools and continuing after students graduate.

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

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

The QRG found the self-assessment report (SAR) of the Cooperative Education & Careers Division (CECD) to be a detailed and clear account of the division's activities and a thoughtful analysis of its current environment, context and the challenges it faces. All members of the division had contributed to the compilation of the SAR. The report was supported by a wide range of relevant evidence and we are grateful for the helpful and timely way in which the division responded to our requests for additional documentation.

The SAR formed a very helpful and informative basis for our discussions with CECD staff, whom we found to be very professional, committed, helpful, honest and open. The QRG also met with a range of CECD stakeholders and service users; all spoke highly of the professionalism of the staff, and we heard many endorsements of the high quality of service provided, along with positive suggestions for improvements.

CECD staff demonstrate a clear and consistent commitment to addressing the needs of their users and stakeholders now and into the future. Staff have a strong focus on proactively delivering career and cooperative education services to users across the university in a timely manner, in a way that offers a consistently high standard but is also personalised depending on the individual needs of the stakeholders.

There is an admirable commitment to delivering on client needs while remaining cognisant of the division's role within the broader university; this reflects a rich history in the delivery of programmes and services that have had, and continue to have, a very positive impact on the UL brand for past, present and prospective students alike. The QRG recognises the operational requirements of CECD both to meet current demands and enhance its service provision to meet the demands placed on the division by the new UL strategic plan, ul@50, and government policy.

UL is currently regarded as a leader of cooperative education in Europe, with most undergraduate students undertaking a work placement of 6-9 months' duration. Along with the high employment rate of its graduates, Coop is a key factor in the institution's attractiveness to students and employers alike and is critical to the overall UL marketing strategy. The majority of work placements, including teaching practice for education students, are organised and managed through CECD. Undergraduate numbers are increasing and will continue to do so, and the external competition for placements will intensify as other universities become more involved in similar activity due in part to Government recognition of its value.

The leadership that the Careers unit has shown across UL and nationally in developing innovative programmes, building a community of practice and leadership development is commendable. This could be the basis for a similar national strategy for cooperative education and work-integrated learning in Ireland.

The QRG wishes to encourage the division to publicise this impressive record much more widely and to investigate ways in which it might use the significant data associated with the placement programme for research purposes. This in turn will help the division identify and plan for the future growth trajectory. Success to date has been sustained by the streamlining of processes and the increased use of technology. This needs to be continued and in the case of IT systems must be urgently prioritised.

CECD has introduced innovative ways to enhance the student and employer experience and, as a result, has extended its influence and value beyond the campus to the broader benefit of the quality that UL offers.

Our detailed recommendations in the following sections will, we hope, provide some useful pointers for areas of enhanced development of CECD and its stakeholders into the future.

# 4 QRG Commendations and Recommendations

## 4.1 Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

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| 1. | The acknowledged leadership position of CECD in cooperative education and careers in Ireland and Europe. |
| 2. | The division's reputation, industry relationships and operational excellence, which provide a strong internal asset and branding tool for UL to leverage in order to attain its strategic vision. |
| 3. | CECD's achievements as leader in the Irish HEI (higher education institution) sector in student placement rates, employment outcomes for graduates, and awards, which contribute significantly to UL's reputation and recognition by government and stakeholders including prospective and current students, graduates and employers. |
| 4. | The committed CECD team with its strong leadership and demonstrated responsiveness to a changing context. |
| 5. | The division's strong, proactive management of industry and community relationships which is highly valued by stakeholders and benefits UL. |
| 6. | CECD's admirable data-driven approach to planning and quality improvement. |
| 7. | The division's excellent communication and relationship management with internal stakeholders. |
| 8. | The strong focus and commitment of CECD staff to equity of access and support for all students and employers. |
| 9. | CECD's strong focus on maintaining a personal relationship with each employer and on responding to employer needs, which has given the Coop programme a unique advantage over competing institutions. |
| 10. | The division's demonstrated success in managing one of the largest student placement programmes in Europe, placing 2,000 students across business, IT, science, engineering, arts, humanities and social science. |
| 11. | The successful implementation of the Mastering Your Employability (MYE) module across multiple programmes. |
| 12. | The efficiency of CECD staff in equitably facilitating employers to select from large numbers of CVs, and in arranging and accommodating Coop interviews. |
| 13. | The development and growth of the Association for Higher Education Careers Services (AHECS) and the training provided to new leaders annually. |
| 14. | CECD's engagement with faculty in relation to workplace site visits and Coop report marking. |
| 15. | The clear and admirable engagement of CECD staff with the continuous improvement of the Quality Management System (QMS) following five internal audits reviews since 2009. |
| 16. | The introduction of innovative approaches to work practices within CECD, to facilitate greater engagement, streamline communication and enhance productivity. |

| 17. | The significant commitment and proactivity demonstrated by CECD staff to a positive student experience, including:<br><br>• Initiating the writing of an employability statement which was approved by Academic Council and adopted in practice<br>• Delivery of the MYE module by Careers staff to 13 master's programmes. |
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| 18. | The recognition by CECD of the changing needs of students and its proactive collaboration with wider internal stakeholders. This is demonstrated by the introduction of CECD's policy document on resilience training and the counselling services needed by Coop students, which has been rolled out by the division and adopted by UL Counselling Services and the International Office. |
| 19. | The innovative and proactive leadership of CECD staff in the wider education community, which is clearly demonstrated by the development of targeted, nationally recognised publications, designed to support second-level students, their parents and guardians, and career guidance counsellors. |
| 20. | The role of CECD in supporting the success of students with different abilities. |
| 21. | The role of student teacher placement officers in successfully introducing streamlined processes to support both school and student. |

## *4.2    Recommendations*

The QRG recommends the following:

### 4.2.1    Level 1 recommendations

| No. | Recommendation | Brief Justification |
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| 1. | Align CECD strategic priorities with the UL strategic plan. | Current strategic focus on employability aligns very well with UL's future strategic vision for entrepreneurship, innovation, global outlook and readiness for the future of work. |
| 2. | Work with senior management to develop a shared understanding of vision and responsibility for preparing students for the new world of work. | A strategic view and cohesive plan is required to prepare students for the changing world of work. |
| 3. | Work with senior management to identify resources that will contribute to innovative programme alignment within the UL strategic plan. | Current Coop, SP and careers programmes provide a very strong foundation for adding innovative pedagogy and alternative models of work-integrated learning (WIL). |
| 4. | Engage with the UL strategic enrolment plan. | Given how critical the Coop programme is to student recruitment and retention, CECD should be an integral part of any strategic enrolment plan in the university. |
| 5. | Maintain a leadership position in Ireland and Europe in Coop and careers services. | CECD's reputation in Coop and careers should be continually reinforced to provide an excellent experience for all stakeholders, thereby supporting UL's brand position. |
| 6. | Work with senior management to identify resources to develop further leadership in work-integrated learning (WIL). | This will enable UL to meet national, industry and student needs in the changing nature of the world of work. |
| 7. | Strengthen strategic alignment between CECD and the academic units through proactive engagement with:<br>• The academic transformation initiative<br>• Vice-President's Management Group<br>• Academic Council<br>• Deans<br>• Management Council | Alignment with academic programmes is crucial to the successful implementation and quality of the Coop, careers and student placement programmes and any future WIL and careers initiatives. |

| 8. | Work with senior management to explore different and expanded resourcing models for CECD. | CECD resources are currently stretched with no capacity for the anticipated expansion due to an increase in student numbers and changing curricular/co-curricular programme needs. |
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| 9. | Engage proactively with the Academic Programme Review Committee (APRC) to ensure CECD input to programme development, review and accreditation. | A holistic approach to programme development, including enhanced communication with CECD, is required to ensure the employability of students and graduates is considered in programme development, review and accreditation. |
| 10. | Work with senior management to develop a business plan to facilitate scaling up the Coop programme. | The current model appears to be operating at maximum output. A larger intake of students could put severe pressure on administrative staff. |
| 11. | Explore options for the revision of the 'first-offer' rule with input from students and employers. | Consideration should be given to a revision of the 'first-offer' rule, which would improve employer and student satisfaction with the system while recognising the limitation of resources. |
| 12. | Work with senior management to ensure the involvement of CECD in Erasmus planning. | Stakeholders reported significant issues around the sequencing of Erasmus and Coop placement, which is inhibiting participation by both employers and students. |
| 13. | Work with senior management to change the current situation so that academic units rather than CECD assume responsibility for the programme planning of unplaced students. | Academic advising and programme planning are the responsibility of the course director and not of CECD. |
| 14. | Work with senior management to ensure faculty and course directors are responsible for timely Coop site visits conducted according to clearly defined guidelines. | Inconsistencies in the approach to site visits and interactions lead to confusion for students and employers and a risk to the quality of the programme and the brand reputation of the institution. |
| 15. | Work with senior management to investigate the possibility of ensuring that feedback, where appropriate, is provided to students and the employers. | Both students and employers commented on the lack of feedback from the site visit and the Coop report. There are current inconsistencies in practice. |
| 16. | Enforce the student code of conduct including attendance at workshops by all students in preparation for Coop placement. | The reputation of UL is at risk and the quality of the student learning experience is compromised when some students |

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| | | participate in the Coop programme without proper preparation. |
| 17. | Explore the possibility of developing online components for Coop preparation and careers service delivery. | Some online components could ensure enhanced preparation of students for placement, expand the opportunity for participation of students, free up CECD capacity and prepare for growth in student numbers. |
| 18. | Work with senior management for the urgent installation of an enterprise-wide information management system to handle the Coop placement process, employer engagement, Coop reports, and student and employer feedback and communications. This system should be able to accommodate any other WIL programmes, such as degree apprenticeships and industry-related projects, that UL might be planning. | An effective, centrally supported enterprise system will assist in the development of a secure and GDPR-compliant information environment. The five IT systems in use are not integrated, operate independently and are unsupported centrally. Too much staff time is being spent on low-level administrative tasks handling processes that can be managed with sustainable technology. This limits staff capacity to innovate. |
| 19. | Publish the CECD Customer Charter on the divisional website, so that it is clearly visible to Coop, careers and teaching practice students. | The customer charter is a very informative document with sections such as "What we will do for you" and "Help us help you", but students do not know it exists. |
| 20. | Work within the UL policy management framework to develop the following CECD processes:<br>• Student placement policy<br>• Student placement risk assessment guide<br>• Risk assessment for work-based placements<br>• Procedure for the preparation of student going on placement<br>• Procedure for the management of critical incidents while on student placement | There is a need for processes that outline how to prepare students on what to do in the event of a difficulty on placement or a critical incident. Students currently do not have clear guidance on what to do in these situations. |
| 21. | Develop a submission to the VPAASE for additional office, interview and workshop space. | All CECD staff mentioned constraints with space and how labour-intensive it is to have to chase available rooms with central booking. Additionally, this provides a poor experience for employers when on campus |

| | | and constrains CECD's ability to provide adequate services to students. |
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| 22. | Formally create a process to ensure communication and collaboration between Disability Support Services, CECD, the faculties and other appropriate services. | Timely communication of information is required to ensure adequate support is provided to students with a disability. |
| 23. | Introduce electronic processes across CECD, to include, for example, tutor site visit forms, and Coop reports. | Current processes are labour-intensive, space-intensive, have security vulnerabilities and limit the data analytics capacity for planning. |

### 4.2.2 Level 2 recommendations

| No. | Recommendation | Brief Justification |
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| 1. | Strengthen information exchanges and dissemination of best practice through the Cooperative Education & Careers Committee to improve faculty participation in Coop. | Enhancing the dissemination of good practice will improve the quality of Coop programmes and the student learning experience. |
| 2. | Develop an online portal for engagement between employer, student and CECD staff. | A common portal for interfacing would reduce excessive email traffic. It could be used to arrange interview times, student feedback and the recruitment decision. This portal should be integrated within the information management system. |
| 3. | Display the CECD Quality Ethos prominently in the open plan office and on the CECD website. | CECD do so much more than they say they do and need to share their commitment to quality with the campus community. |
| 4. | Consider making the QMS available to customers. | Students and employers would know about the procedures available and how CECD can help them have the best possible experience. |

## *Appendices*

### *A    Membership of the QRG*

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| Mr. Charlie Dolan (Chair) | HR and Educational Consultant, Cork, Ireland |
| Dr. Norah McRae | Associate Provost, Co-operative and Experiential Education, University of Waterloo, Canada |
| Ms. Judie Kay | Director, Careers and Employability, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University, Australia |
| Mr. Liam Moloney | Student Representative, Tipperary, Ireland |
| Ms. Cliona Donnellan | Senior Executive Administrator, Buildings & Estates Division, University of Limerick, Ireland |
| Ms. Ailish O'Farrell (Recording Secretary) | Technical Writer, Limerick, Ireland |

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

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|---|---|
| Gavin Connell | Maria Neville |
| Niamh Crowe | Niamh O'Sullivan |
| Colm Cunniffe | Marina Power |
| Jenny Flynn | Patrice Twomey |
| Brendan Lally | Dara Venner |
| Treasa Landers | |