Report of the Quality Review Group

to

Buildings & Estates

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UL QSU Website	www.ul.ie/quality
Unit Website	https://www.ul.ie/buildings/
QQI Website	www.qqi.ie

Table of Contents

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 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 18-24 months after receiving the QIP template, the head of unit, Provost/Deputy President, Chief Corporate Officer and Director of Quality meet to formally review progress and to agree on any remaining actions to be taken.

2   Summary Details of Buildings & Estates

Buildings and Estates (B&E) is a customer-driven department that aspires to providing an excellent service to the UL campus and wider community. B&E's mission is to support the university in achieving its goals; its vision is to provide outstanding physical facilities for the pursuit of academic, cultural and physical activities; its ethos is to sustain and seek to continually improve the quality of the services it provides to the campus community.

B&E comprises 43 full-time UL direct staff, 45 full-time contract maintenance staff, 55 full- and part-time security staff and 58 full- and part-time cleaning staff. In addition to the full-time contract staff, B&E hires specialist contractors to maintain items such as safety systems and other mechanical and electrical systems.

B&E is responsible for, amongst other things, new buildings and works projects, maintaining the campus buildings fabric and associated building plant, maintaining all campus grounds, cleaning, waste management, portering, traffic and parking management, space planning and management, the safety of the built environment, security and energy management. B&E's operational budget represents about 6% of UL's total operational spend. Over the last decade, B&E's spend on capital projects, which varies depending on activity, has averaged €19.6m per year. UL's 253,000m^2 of built space, which B&E insures, is valued in excess of €800m.

3   Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

3.0   Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

The Quality Review Group (QRG) wishes to thank the University of Limerick (UL) and the Buildings & Estates Division (B&E) for their support and hospitality during our visit. The B&E staff, led by director Robert Reidy, were most helpful and participated enthusiastically in the review, and the stakeholder representatives we met were open and constructive in their comments. We especially wish to record our appreciation of the outstanding support and guidance provided by Sinead O'Sullivan, Kim O'Mahony and the Quality Support Unit, without which our work would not have been possible.

The QRG found the B&E self-assessment report (SAR) to be a very comprehensive and professional document, showing evidence of commitment to the UL quality process over a long period and a keen awareness of the need to monitor and account for the division's performance. We wish to record our appreciation of the excellence of the SAR and of the effort that clearly went into preparing it.

B&E is challenged by the funding difficulties shared by most universities; one of the unfortunate consequences of this is to force a concentration on immediate needs, sometimes to the detriment of long-term planning and the development of an integrated strategy. At the same time, it must be noted that the successful delivery of the core academic mission of the University depends to a significant extent on successful creation and management of a suitable physical environment.

The new UL strategic plan, *UL@50 Strategic Plan 2019-2024,* published in November 2019, is an ambitious and commendable plan for expansion of the University. It includes targets for new and advanced modes of learning and learning spaces and an increase of 25 per cent in the total student body within five years, with enhanced levels of diversity. The clear intention is to continue this rate of expansion in the following five-year period. In a situation where the physical capacity of UL facilities is already stretched, it is absolutely essential that the knowledge and expertise residing in B&E be used to the utmost at the highest level of planning if these ambitious targets are to be met.

The QRG found that B&E provides an excellent operational service within its resources. In the context of the University's strategic plan, however, we are concerned that the division is under-resourced, particularly in niche specialisms such as project management and space management. In addition, the division is in urgent need of a Computer Aided Facilities Management (CAFM) system, which will require additional expert resource for its successful implementation.

Our report makes recommendations derived from the material provided and our discussions during the visit. These are aimed at further strengthening an already excellent division and helping it to fully support the strategic needs of the University.

4   QRG Commendations and Recommendations

4.1   Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

1.	The delivery of the B&E strategic plan, *Building a Sustainable Future, 2017-2021,* and the subsequent annual reports demonstrating progress against this plan.
2.	The delivery, as evidenced by stakeholder feedback, of B&E's mission to support the University in achieving its goals through the delivery of services - particularly reactive maintenance services - maintenance of the campus grounds and capital project delivery as defined in the capital development plan.
3.	The division's commitment to and delivery of the environmental sustainability agenda and Green Campus and its active collaboration with the UL Environmental Society.
4.	B&E's membership of the Association of Directors of Estates (AUDE), which enables the division to connect with sector best practice, particularly around benchmarking the performance of the estate.
5.	The delivery of the Framework for Physical Development as a strategic planning document for the evolution of the campus into the future.
6.	The clear recognition by B&E of risks posed by specific resource gaps for the division's capability and capacity to support the University's strategic plan.
7.	The reconstitution of the Space Management Committee to aid strategic decision making for the property portfolio.
8.	The acceptance by B&E that UL requires investment in a Computer Aided Facilities Management (CAFM) system which, when operational, will provide qualitative and quantitative data to support strategic decision making for the physical environment of the institution.
9.	The division's focus on its customers, through a wide variety of customer feedback collection mechanisms, the B&E customer charter and the efforts of the division to provide clarity on key service procedures.
10.	The obvious commitment within B&E to improving service and customer satisfaction through the QMS procedures and long-term focus on quality management by all of the B&E team.
11.	The division's active use of the Quarterly Business Review process as a means of ensuring full staff engagement.

12.	The high levels of engagement across the team, including the contracted staff, to supporting and developing the QMS.
13.	The ongoing work of the division to review and improve the Health & Safety (H&S) Management System and H&S culture within B&E.

4.2 Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.2.1 Level 1 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
1.	Commission an external expert provider to deliver a condition survey of the UL estate.	A condition survey would inform the development and outcomes of an estate strategy that in turn would support the vision and aspirational aspects of the Framework for Physical Development. The condition surveying of the estate should be undertaken by professionally qualified building surveyors.
2.	Develop a systematic and programmatic approach to the capital funding of the existing estate for all programmes of work, minor and major.	Evidence-based programmes of work, based on the outcome of the condition survey and the estate strategy, would enable UL to ensure that its expanding physical estate is adequately maintained into the future.
3.	Review current procedures and arrangements for the funding, delivery and prioritisation of minor works and small projects, adopting an annual planning and prioritisation approach.	Current arrangements are tactical in their nature and therefore inefficient in their deployment and response. Projects are not prioritised systematically and do not form part of an annual UL planning process. The opportunity cost of opex versus capex could be considerable.
4.	Review the newly established governance structure associated with oversight of the planning and development of the physical estate, to ensure that it delivers the expected level of effectiveness.	An appropriate governance structure is necessary to ensure that the UL strategic plan is not constrained by any limitation on the ability to deliver sufficient space and facilities. The newly established structures must be reviewed soon after activation, to ensure that they meet the needs of all stakeholders.
5.	Consider forming a dedicated team to deliver the planned significant city campus development.	Having a dedicated capability will be necessary to ensure that this significant development is adequately resourced and set up for success and does not have an adverse impact on current, already stretched B&E resources.
6.	Work with senior management to ensure that the knowledge and expertise of B&E are fully reflected in decisions by the Executive on strategic asset management aligned to the academic strategy.	The strategic vision of the B&E Division is grounded in intimate knowledge and considerable expertise. This vision must be matched with the core academic mission of the University and resourced appropriately.
7.	Invest in a Computer Aided Facilities Management (CAFM) system.	The UL estate has grown significantly and continues to expand. The current asset management system is not fit for purpose to support the management of a modern and expanding estate. A CAFM system will

		enable strategic planning based on measured efficiency, effectiveness and feedback.
8.	As a matter of urgency, consider the appointment of two assistant directors for project management and estates operations.	The Director of B&E role is considered to be a high risk, requiring special support, due to the onerous and diverse workload undertaken and limited scope for delegation and support.
9.	Work with senior management to address skill gaps identified during the review, in particular: • An additional internal project manager • An Environmental Manager to support separation of sustainability from energy management • A Senior Space Manager whose responsibilities will include CAFM • A CAFM Admin Manager/ Asset Manager • A CAFM project/implementation manager • A Health and Safety Manager	These resources are required to support the ambitious academic strategy set out in the UL strategic plan. The space planning function is a key service to the University and it is considered that the existing Space Manager post is insufficient to meet the demands of the institution as it continues to grow. Space is an expensive resource and should be considered in a strategic context by the institution. The management of space and facilities requires CAFM, which will entail procedural change for B&E. Impending major projects and statutory obligations on sustainability require strengthening of both of these areas.
10.	Work with the University to ensure that the B&E webpage has prominent visibility on the UL website to improve communication of B&E key functions and services.	The current location of the B&E webpage does not give the division appropriate visibility for satisfactory customer engagement.
11.	Develop and maintain a communication procedure to increase transparency around planning, expectation and delivery of any ongoing minor work, possibly through a CAFM system.	To increase customer satisfaction, the QRG feels that it is imperative that customers be informed and involved through each stage of the minor works process to ensure managed expectations of delivery of service.
12.	Establish a dedicated communication stream for the UL community regarding ongoing capital projects on campus.	It is important that the university community understand any ongoing capital projects, especially projects that might affect the daily business and movements of students and staff.
13.	Explore the use of flexible service delivery contracts that would enable the draw-down of minor works projects at short notice.	This would drive efficiency in the tendering and delivery of minor works.

4.2.2   Level 2 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
14.	Ensure that key stakeholders understand and share ownership of the capital programme development, governance and oversight.	While the recently created structure appears fully fit for purpose, some stakeholder feedback suggests that wider communication and academic involvement is needed.
15.	Review the current key performance indicators (KPIs) for the estate to ensure compliance with best practice.	There is a need to distinguish between the output of B&E and the strategic outcomes for the UL estate. Both need KPIs. Therefore, it is recommended that the division adopt AUDE's KPIs for Efficiency, Quality, Value and Sustainability to support strategic planning and resource allocation.
16.	Adopt a carbon-neutral target as a specific goal of the Framework for Physical Development.	Adopting such a target will act as a driver of strategic focus for environmental sustainability improvements on the campus and is a key target for many universities internationally.
17.	Explore the option of capitalising the cost of the project management team.	This accounting treatment is commonly used in the higher education sector.
18.	At University level, review the process for commercial management of property.	Traditionally, the Buildings & Estates Division would lead on leases, rents, business rates, acquisitions and disposals of land and property on behalf of the institution, thus maintaining their comprehensive overview of asset management.
19.	Utilise technological opportunities for enhanced communication, including: • Circulation of a soft copy of the B&E annual report to the UL community • Use of visual displays around campus • News items on the B&E webpage • Quarterly email updates on key projects/activities	Enhanced communication will give the UL community the opportunity to engage with and understand the functions, services and achievements of the B&E division.
20.	Investigate the adoption of an enterprise solution for a B&E service desk via a digital front door.	Help desk automation through the adoption of the system currently employed by ITD would deliver a common and systematic approach to service requests, actions, monitoring and reporting. This solution is recommended only if it is not included in the CAFM system or if it is likely to take several years to deliver.
21.	Commence a project to develop an estate terrier – a single repository of vital estate data.	As the estate expands and becomes more complex, there is a need to introduce a systematic process for the holding of real estate data such as title, planning status, freehold and leasehold property status, restrictions, covenants, rent and rates.

22.	Continually update the quality improvement plan (QIP) with all action items to provide effective tracking of the handling of identified opportunities/issues.	The QIP is reviewed quarterly at Quarterly Business Review (QBR) meetings. Making it a continually updated live document would provide updates on completed or current activities. Effective tracking of initiatives and solutions avoids the recurrence of identified problems.
23.	On receipt of a service request, share with the requesters the respective processes and categorisation relevant to their request, and update this information until the issue is closed.	Improving communication with clients would ensure that stakeholders have the correct understanding of the service that B&E provides.

Appendices

A   Membership of the QRG

Mr. Tony Buckley (Chair)	Business Consultant, Cork, Ireland
Mr Trevor Humphreys	Director of Campus Management, The University of Western Australia, Australia
Mr. David Loudon	Director of Estates and Facilities, Durham University, UK
Ms. Ciara Jo Hanlon	Student Representative
Mr. Corey Downes	Head, HR Operations, Human Resources Division, University of Limerick
Ailish O'Farrell	Technical Writer

B   Membership of B&E Quality Team

Robert Reidy (Director)	Tony Considine
Marian Hartigan	Chris Fogarty (Quality Team Leader)
Eoin Meagher	Eric Crowe
Pat McMahon	Gerard Manning
Gerald Hallinan	Ian O'Donoghue
Eilis Gaffney	Kelly O'Connor
Sean Collins	Cliona Donnellan
Brian Considine	Jane Murphy
John O'Sullivan	Carmel Kirwan
Kieran Tuite	Amanda Lee
James McDonnell	Karen Fraher
Donncha Corrigan	