



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

O L L S C O I L L U I M N I G H

Quality Review of the **Department of History**

The University of Limerick (UL), in common with the other *Irish Universities*, follows an established process for Quality Assurance (QA) and Quality Improvement (QI). This involves a seven-year cycle during which all Departments work to improve the quality of their programmes and services, undergo a rigorous self-evaluation prior to a quality review by internationally recognised experts in the field.

The process itself has evolved as a result of the Universities Act, 1997 in which the responsibility for QA/QI was placed directly with the individual universities. The UL Quality Support Unit (QSU) web site provides an elaboration of this process and the state of progress.

The broader picture is described in the publication *A Framework for Quality in Irish Universities* which can be downloaded from the IUQB web site: <http://www.iuqb.ie/>

Issued by QSU	18 th Feb 2013
Review Date	11 th – 14 th February 2013
Quality Review Group	Appendix A
UL-QSU Web Site	www.quality.ul.ie
Web Site	www.history.ul.ie
QQI Web Site	www.qqi.ie

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1.0 Background

1.1 Legislative Framework

The University of Limerick, in common with all the universities in the Republic of Ireland, falls within the Universities Act, 1997. This Act specifies the responsibilities of universities in Ireland for Quality Improvement and Quality Assurance. Section 12 stipulates that, 'The objects of a university shall include - ... to promote the highest standards in, and quality of, teaching and research'.

Section 35 (1) of the Act further requires that each university Governing Authority 'shall...require the university to establish procedures for quality assurance aimed at improving the quality of education and related services provided by the university'. The Act provides a framework for the universities to develop their quality processes. Section 35 requires each university to review the quality of the work of all faculty, academic Departments and service (including administrative) Departments on a ten-year cycle. In particular 'The procedures shall include ... assessment by those, including students, availing of the teaching, research and other services provided by the university'.

Although each university is free to develop its own procedures in fulfilling its obligations under the Act, close co-operation has been achieved through the co-ordinating role of the Irish Universities Association Quality Committee, (IUQAC). Accordingly, the universities have developed a framework comprising a set of common principles and operating guidelines for quality improvement and quality assurance. These principles and guidelines have been integrated into each of the universities procedures, which ensure coherence through the university system, while maintaining the autonomy of each university and its individual institutional culture.

More detail is available at www.quality.ul.ie/The_Act.htm and www.iuqb.ie

1.2 The Irish Universities Quality Board

The Governing Authorities of the seven Irish universities established the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) in February 2003. This board comprises representatives of the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities (CHIU) and a number of external members.

The aims of the IUQB are:

- To increase the level of inter-university cooperation in developing Quality Assurance processes
- To represent the Irish universities nationally and internationally on issues relating to quality assurance and quality improvement
- To articulate, on behalf of the Governing Authorities of the universities, the resource implications of recommendations for quality improvement.

The IUQB subsumed the roles and functions formerly carried out by the IUQSC (Irish Universities Quality Steering Committee) and has since been subsumed into Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). More detail is available at www.qqi.ie

1.3 The Quality Review Process

The common framework adopted by the Irish universities for their Quality Assurance/Quality Improvement systems consistent with both the legislative requirement of the Universities Act 1997 and international practice comprise the following stages:

1. Preparation of a self-assessment report by the unit taking into account feedback from students and customers.
2. Quality (Peer) Review involving external experts, both nationally and internationally, who have visited the Department, met the students and studied the Self-Assessment.
3. Quality Review Report, made publicly available by the Governing Authority of the university, incorporating the reactions and quality improvement plans of the Division and University.
4. Continuing improvement through implementation within the resources available to the university.

More detail is available at www.quality.ul.ie

1.4 Management of Quality in the University

The Vice President Academic and Registrar has overall responsibility for implementation of Quality Assurance/Quality Improvement policy and implementation at the University of Limerick. Implementation is carried out by the Director of Quality.

The planned schedule of Quality Review of both academic and support departments was commenced in the year 2000, with the first full cycle of units within the University being reviewed within a seven-year cycle.

Academic departments are reviewed against international standards as described in the document "A Guide to the Quality Review Process for Academic Departments", which is available on the UL website at www.quality.ul.ie .

In 2006, the university decided to implement a bespoke quality management system (QMS) and developed a suitable template with the assistance of external quality experts. This system is described in the document "Quality Management Systems – Standard Framework for Support Departments".

More detail is available at www.quality.ul.ie

2.0 The Department of History

History has been part of undergraduate courses in UL since 1972, part of taught postgraduate courses since 1987 and a focus of postgraduate research since 1994. History was part of the Department of European Integration and Administration and then the Department of Government and Society. In May 2002, the Department of History was established and is one of six academic divisions in the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. The Department of History currently comprises seven full time academics, one 10 month contract, one teaching assistantship, eight part time lecturers, eight tutors and one full time administrator (job-share).

Faculty teach in the BA in History, Politics, Sociology and Social Studies (HPSSS), BA in English and History, BA Joint Honours and BA Arts (Evening). History is offered as an elective option on several other degrees programmes, the BA European Studies, BA Law and European Studies and the BA Irish Music and Dance. The Department also offers the MA in Local History (in existence since 1997), the MA in History of Art and Architecture (2001), the MA in History (2003) and the MA History of Family (2005). History is also offered at sub-degree level in the Certificate in Local History, the Certificate in the History of Art and Design, the Certificate in Oral Heritage Studies and Certificate in History of Family. There are twenty- six students pursuing PhDs and four research MA students.

The Department has strategic relationships with the Department of History, Mary Immaculate College, the Department of Philosophy, Mary Immaculate College, the Department of History, National University of Ireland, Galway. Other external relationships are with the cultural institutions and groups such as the Hunt Museum, Limerick city, Foynes Museum and the Irish Georgian Society. The Department's Outreach Programme includes the delivery of certificate level programmes and training in oral history to Duhallow Community Group, North Tipperary Leader Partnership and Dublin City Library.

The Department has an active research culture. Its research strategy is based on the individual researcher and the collaborative research cluster. Research themes cover Irish, German, Spanish and US history with a focus on political, diplomatic, diaspora, medical history and cultural themes.

3.0 The Follow-up Process

The Quality Review process occurs on an approximately seven-year cycle at the University of Limerick. An average of five academic Departments are reviewed annually. Once the Peer Review Group report is finalised, the Department concerned immediately sets about planning its response to the issues raised therein.

The self-evaluation process is intended to be a reflective exercise in which a Department/Division should identify many of its strengths and weaknesses and develop plans to strengthen and grow as appropriate. Quite often, the Peer Review Group (PRG) will reinforce these issues and may identify areas of concern that were overlooked. In many cases, the PRG will also highlight the strengths of the Department and encourage faculty and staff to take advantage of these.

After the department and the university have been given time to respond to the issues raised; the Peer Review Group's report will be made available to the wider community through the University's web site. Normally, the report is available within the University less than four weeks after the PRG visit. Responses and plans for action are incorporated into the report and are subject to the approval of the University's Governing Authority Strategic Planning and Quality Assurance Committee. Presentation to the committee usually follows within six months of the PRG visit. The Governing Authority will publish the Peer Review report, including reactions and plans, following approval.

It is expected that a review of progress in implementing recommendations and investigating issues raised would occur quarterly for the two years following the Peer Review Visit. Progress Reports will be published as deemed appropriate.

Date	Action
Date of review	Department is issued with Peer Review Group report and required to prepare reactions and plans for Quality Improvement as appropriate. The report is circulated to all members of Management Committee for comment.
Date of review	PRG Report, incorporating reactions, is presented to UL Executive Committee for discussion, as appropriate.
+ 2/3 months	Reactions and plans incorporated into the Quality Improvement Action Plan and circulated to GA Strategic Planning and Quality Assurance committee. PRG Report with Responses and Quality Improvement Action Plan are tabled at GA-SPQAC meeting for discussion.
+ 1 year	Director, Dean, Vice President Academic & Registrar and Director of Quality discuss progress with resolution of recommendations and outstanding items are referred to Executive Committee, Academic Council and/or Governing Authority as appropriate.

4.0 Preliminary Comments of the Peer Review Group (PRG)

The Department of History engaged fully with the peer review process. The self-assessment report (SAR) was the product of a process involving all academic staff and gave a detailed and clear description of the department and its concerns. Staff who met with the PRG were willing to engage in discussion and were enthusiastic about the department and its potential.

Despite its relatively small size, the department is contributing to a wide range of university objectives. It supports modules for each level of the Faculty of Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences (AHSS) undergraduate offer, a cluster of specialised taught MA programmes and a significant number of research students. Offering good support and a personalised experience to these students is a key concern of staff and is much appreciated by the students themselves. All academic staff are research active and the group has successfully attracted considerable research funding. Evening programmes and the accreditation of local initiatives attract mature students, and undergraduate modules in history and the provision of a summer school have proved particularly attractive to junior study-abroad students from the USA (some of whom return to follow MA programmes).

Whilst staff are clearly prepared to put in the extra effort and time required to support these activities, the PRG is concerned that workloads are high and that there is little or no spare capacity for reflection and very little to pick up further initiatives. There is thus an immediate need for the department to consider ways in which current activities can be carried out more efficiently without sacrificing quality.

The PRG's discussions highlighted a number of distinctive features of the department's work, both in terms of subject specialisation not readily available elsewhere in Ireland and in research development, teaching, learning and student support initiatives. The department needs to assert such distinctiveness much more forcibly and become more actively outward-looking. The resulting vision should underpin plans for future growth and development and influence the search for additional resources.

5.0 The Report of the Peer Review Group

5.1 Mission

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.1.1 The mission statement which embodies values central to the department.

- 5.1.2 Successful collaborations with other academic institutions.

- 5.1.3 The focus on developing undergraduate and postgraduate offerings with directly transferable skills and on identifying potential employment sectors.

- 5.1.4 The department's success in exceeding postgraduate enrolment targets.

- 5.1.5 The recruitment of mature students through certificate courses.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.1.6 Re-examine and refine the History mission to reflect more fully the distinctiveness and connectedness of the department's activities.

- 5.1.7 Formulate and communicate a clear vision for the next five years including any planned improvements.

- 5.1.8 Continue to develop existing collaborations with other academic institutions and explore the potential to create viable partnerships with appropriate institutions with a view to strengthening the department's resources.

- 5.1.9 Discuss with colleagues from cultural institutions, particularly in the region, how the department might best develop mutually beneficial relationships.

5.2 Design and Content of Curriculum

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.2.1 The encouraging and supportive student-centred philosophy that underpins the design and content of the curriculum.

- 5.2.2 The efforts of the department to provide flexible access and engagement points to a wide student profile.

- 5.2.3 Evidence of high levels of student satisfaction with the curriculum.

- 5.2.4 Content and approaches that build on emerging research strengths.

- 5.2.5 Modules and programmes which offer approaches not readily available in other institutions.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.2.6 Seek to engage more in shaping student Co-op choices.

- 5.2.7 Consider initiating a programme development plan for a BA History in the light of departmental resources and distinctiveness, and stakeholder and market needs.

- 5.2.8 Continue to strengthen engagement with Limerick and the Mid-Western Region to reflect the local and global elements of teaching and research.

- 5.2.9 Develop a clear set of curriculum objectives and identify likely resource implications.

5.3 Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.3.1 The commitment by the department to quality assurance principles in teaching and learning, and staff knowledge of a range of QA documents and sources relevant to history.

- 5.3.2 The impressive range of programmes and modules sustained by a relatively small staff.

- 5.3.3 The openness of the department to new technologies applied to history teaching and learning.

- 5.3.4 The professionalism and passion for research-led teaching reflected consistently in feedback from student focus groups.

- 5.3.5 The deployment of the tutorial system on a fortnightly basis in year 1 with its potential to engage, support and retain students and underpin the embedding of key skills.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.3.6 Broaden the range of quality assurance documents to include recognised international subject benchmarking for third-level history programmes, to ensure breadth and depth of history offerings and reflect international standards.

- 5.3.7 Work with the university's Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) to develop a more robust implementation of student evaluation of teaching (SET) to provide a universal and consistent measure of teaching quality with an effective feedback cycle for continuous improvement.

- 5.3.8 Undertake a review of the number, range and variety of learning and assessment tasks to ensure parity of workload against internal and external benchmarks and facilitate innovation and adventurousness.

- 5.3.9 Explore with CTL opportunities for more effective use of Sulis, Grademark and Turnitin to archive essays and provide secure, online feedback to students, particularly special needs students.

- 5.3.10 Provide training opportunities for staff to update skills as appropriate.

5.4 Facilities and Learning Resources

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

5.4.1 The wide range of facilities and services available to the department.

5.4.2 The excellent study facilities provided for postgraduate students.

5.4.3 The access of the department to significant archival collections.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

5.4.4 Work closely with the Faculty to address *collectively* issues regarding scheduling, room allocation and library access.

5.4.5 Identify a room for permanent use suitable for seminars and meetings and fitted out for the teaching of visual-based material.

5.4.6 Ensure that key resources are maintained (or are available at Mary Immaculate College – MIC) in the most appropriate form.

5.4.7 Ensure closer consultation between the library and the department on journal policy.

5.4.8 Explore creative ways of making materials in special collections more readily accessible.

5.5 Staff

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.5.1 The strong qualifications, skills and output of the academic staff in the department.

- 5.5.2 The significant amount of work achieved by the department with the relatively small team at its disposal.

- 5.5.3 The impressive level of administrative support provided to the department by the department administrators.

- 5.5.4 The development of a system, led by a named coordinator, to train and support tutorial assistants.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.5.5 Utilise any new posts to consolidate existing teaching and research strengths spatially, temporally or thematically.

- 5.5.6 Review teaching and learning practices and administrative processes to secure efficiency gains that will ensure the most effective use of staff time and free up space for research activity.

- 5.5.7 At University level, ensure the publication of clear criteria and evidential requirements for future promotion rounds and recognise and value specific disciplinary career trajectories.

- 5.5.8 Support the PDRS by research audits with a medium-term research plan reviewed annually.

- 5.5.9 Keep under review the requirements for administrative support.

5.6 Student Guidance & Support

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.6.1 The accessibility of staff and their active engagement with students.

- 5.6.2 The good lines of communication with Student Affairs and the International Education Division, with robust procedures in place to meet the requirements of students with particular needs.

- 5.6.3 The active engagement of staff in their role as academic advisers for history students.

- 5.6.4 The delivery of a new module to assist students preparing for external study and work placement.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.6.5 Evaluate the possibility of introducing a personal tutor system as an additional support for research postgraduate students, which could operate at Faculty level.

- 5.6.6 Given existing resources, consider how staff might engage more with part-time students.

- 5.6.7 Support the History Society in seeking funding to secure the future of the journal, *History Studies*.

5.7 Research Activity

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

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|-------|--|
| 5.7.1 | The very impressive research income total secured within the review period. |
| 5.7.2 | The strong postgraduate research culture, including the <i>History Studies</i> journal. |
| 5.7.3 | The evidence of innovative research translation such as the development of the mobile phone app. |
| 5.7.4 | A number of high-quality individual research outputs, external partnerships and indicators of esteem. |
| 5.7.5 | The engagement with the Institute for the Study of Knowledge in Society and the ongoing Centre for Historical Research collaboration with MIC. |

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- | | |
|--------|--|
| 5.7.6 | Vigorously pursue publication with world-class publishers and journals by emphasising the innovative approaches and broader themes inherent in History staff research. |
| 5.7.7 | Build international partnerships to seek joint funding through non-Irish national funding bodies as well as EU FP7/8 programmes, and explore interdisciplinary projects with Science, Technology, Engineering & Medicine (STEM) and social science partners. |
| 5.7.8 | Continue to deploy the new research student progression regulations to speed up completions and ensure staff and students are aware of training needs and opportunities. |
| 5.7.9 | Carry out a new benchmarking review and/or external review of current research quality to establish the most appropriate outlets for individual and departmental research activity. |
| 5.7.10 | Assess current individual and departmental research esteem, networks and visibility and explore ways to extend external involvement by faculty. |
| 5.7.11 | Seek to be part of a clearly identifiable research cluster, possibly on a multi-institutional basis, to give focus to research activity and act as an external face for departmental research activity. |

5.8 Department Organisation and Management

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.8.1 The clarity and flexibility of the management structure and evidence of the engagement of staff.

- 5.8.2 The dynamism of the Head of Department and her commitment to effective communication with staff, the Faculty and the University.

- 5.8.3 The innovative use of a newsletter, the department website and Facebook to promote History events and activities.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.8.4 Actively pursue a closer relationship with appropriate internal partners within the Faculty to build critical mass, share administrative load and enhance core business in research, teaching and community liaison.

- 5.8.5 Strengthen collaboration with external academic partners, such as MIC, NUIG and UCD.

- 5.8.6 Review the administrative burden of the HoD and academic staff to achieve productivity and efficiency while maintaining necessary contact and profile with senior management and key stakeholders.

- 5.8.7 Develop a SharePoint portal to provide a more effective repository for the department's administrative, teaching and research activities.

5.9 Quality Improvement Plan

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.9.1 The provision of an initial quality improvement plan based on issues identified in the SAR.
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Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.9.2 Incorporate the recommendations of the PRG into the quality improvement plan.
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- 5.9.3 Pay particular attention to points first raised in the PRG report of 2005 and repeated in this report.
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- 5.9.4 Include clear milestones and measurable objectives into each element of the plan.
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- 5.9.5 Ensure that the responsibility for the implementation of the plan is shared among staff.
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Appendices

A Membership of the Peer Review Group:

Prof. Gaynor Taylor	Quality Consultant, Retired, France. (chairperson)
Dr Hugh Maguire	Director, Hunt Museum, Limerick
Ms Fionnuala Croke	Director, Chester Beatty Library, Dublin
Prof. Hilary Carey	University of Newcastle, NSW, Australia
Prof. Barry Doyle	University of Huddersfield, UK
Ms Ailish O'Farrell	Technical writer, Limerick. (secretary)

B Membership of the Department Quality Team:

Dr Bernadette Whelan	Head of Department
Professor Anthony McElligott	
Dr Ruan O'Donnell	
Dr Alistair Malcolm	
Dr David Fleming	

C Contact

The Peer Review Group were given the opportunity over three days to talk to the department Quality Team both formally and informally. Meetings with staff, postgraduate & undergraduate students and others were scheduled as group sessions. The Review Group was given the opportunity to meet all staff during a visit to the facilities of the department and this was most helpful.

All the meetings provided extremely useful additional information to support the SAR.

END OF REPORT