



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Quality Review of the **Department of Sociology**

The University of Limerick (UL), follows an established process for Quality Assurance (QA) and Quality Improvement (QI) in line with that developed jointly by IUA and IUQB. 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 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/>

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Quality Review Group	Appendix A
UL-QSU Web Site	www.quality.ul.ie
Web Site	www.ul.ie/sociology
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, fell within the Universities Act, 1997 until recently. This Act specified 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 required 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.

In late 2012 the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 superseded the Universities Act 1997 in respect of quality assurance matters in the universities and the IUQB was subsumed into the new Quality and Qualifications Ireland agency. There will be a consultative process during 2013 and it will be some time before changes to QA and QI practice are reflected in the universities.

1.2 The IUQB / QQI

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 were:

- 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 good 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 Sociology

The Department of Sociology was created in 2002, as the main disciplinary groups in the former Department of Government and Society became departments in their own right. Sociology has been taught in UL since the early days of the institution. The department now has eleven full-time academic staff and has responsibility for programmes in gender, culture and society as well as sociology.

Sociology is taught to students in a wide range of programmes, both as a core subject and as a minor. Students major in sociology in the BA in History, Politics, Sociology and Social Studies, the BA in Economics and Sociology, the BA in Psychology and Sociology and the BA Joint Honours. The department runs three successful MA programmes: the MA in Sociology–Applied Social Research, the MA in Gender, Culture and Society and the MA in Sociology–Youth, Community and Social Regeneration. For the past five years, the department has hosted (in cooperation with the Department of Politics and Public Administration) the UL Winter School in Social Science Research Methods, aimed at PhD students and researchers from all Irish third-level institutions and attracting over 150 participants from all over Europe.

The department has a very active research culture, in a range of theoretical and methodological traditions and a variety of substantive areas. The department prides itself on its strength in qualitative and quantitative research methods. Staff publish research in many formats, including in international peer-reviewed journals, edited collections, monographs and commissioned research reports. Much of the research undertaken falls within the broad and overlapping areas of gender, regeneration and community, health, media, family formation and structure, migration, the economy and pedagogical practice. The research culture also evidences itself in regular seminar series and public lectures featuring prominent sociologists, in conferences and workshops, as well as in a number of active study groups led by research students and post-docs.

The department has a long-standing involvement with the local community, with which it engages via both research and support of community development initiatives. The recent development of the MA in Sociology–Youth, Community and Social Regeneration grows directly from this involvement.

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 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	Head of Dept, 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 Peer Review Group (PRG) appreciates the welcome extended to it by the University of Limerick (UL) and, in particular, Professor Paul McCutcheon's introduction to UL and his identification of the current context of our task.

The PRG also wishes to thank the Department of Sociology for its hospitality and cooperation throughout the review process.

The department is commended for its thorough self-assessment report (SAR), the provision of requested supplementary information and the frank and informative participation in the several meetings of the PRG with the departmental Quality Team.

The PRG noted the progress of the department since its last quality review and its continued commitment to providing an enhanced student experience, in addition to high-quality research, the pursuit of internationalisation and active engagement with the community.

The PRG was impressed by the department's vibrant and impressive research culture which produces a respectable output of scholarly publications and forward-looking research initiatives.

Despite the pressures imposed by the research agenda and considerable administrative loads, the PRG noted the dedication of the staff to providing a superior undergraduate and postgraduate experience.

The PRG was impressed by the collegial solidarity of the department in the face of financial stringency and the challenges posed by UL's reliance on particular metrics as indicators of departmental viability and scholarly productivity.

The PRG acknowledges the potential of this department to contribute to an understanding of the context and causes of current economic, political and social challenges and to identifying imaginative responses to these.

5.0 The Report of the Peer Review Group

5.1 Mission

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.1.1 The Department of Sociology mission statement which is complementary to the overall mission of UL and that of the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS). The four elements of the mission statement reflect the valuable role of the department and of sociology in achieving the overall aims of UL. These elements are:
- Providing training in conceptual frameworks for the critical analysis of society
 - Fostering skills in producing reliable evidence
 - Shaping actions and policies through research and engagement
 - Developing new and alternative visions for the future.
-
- 5.1.2 The impressive range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and their interdisciplinary dimension, which are in accordance with the goals of the department and contribute to the profile and relevance of the discipline of sociology within and without the university.
-
- 5.1.3 The excellent departmental research strategy for its potential role in furthering the mission of the department.
-
- 5.1.4 The ongoing commitment to engagement with the community and to recording the type and extent of the connections with the community, which is integral to the department's mission and to the achievement of the overall mission of UL.
-
- 5.1.5 The proposal to introduce a single-honours BA in Sociology, noting in particular the potential in this to foster the development of sociology as a discipline.
-
- 5.1.6 The consideration of a new MA in Sociology to broaden the student choice of existing MA modules.
-
- 5.1.7 The pursuit of a more substantial AHSS marketing/communications budget for departmental promotion activities.
-

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.1.8 Rearticulate the goals of the department to reflect more fully its distinctiveness, assert its achievements and highlight the role of sociology within the overall UL context.
-
- 5.1.9 Liaise with other departments in AHSS to promote the profile of the department in particular and of AHSS in general more broadly within UL.
-
- 5.1.10 State the department's goal of greater internationalisation in more specific terms to identify the constituent elements – teaching, research, student recruitment and any others – and to facilitate monitoring.
-
- 5.1.11 Undertake, in collaboration with the community, a rigorous assessment of what has been achieved to date in relation to community engagement, with a view to informing the development of a strategic framework for future engagement with communities.
-
- 5.1.12 At UL level, recognise the importance of the department's commitment to community involvement by introducing appropriate metrics.
-
- 5.1.13 At UL level, ensure appropriate resourcing of the department's ongoing commitment to community involvement.
-
- 5.1.14 Explore the benefits of improving student feedback mechanisms in order to monitor the quality of the student experience.
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5.2 Design and Content of Curriculum

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

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|-------|--|
| 5.2.1 | The breadth of programme offerings and the broad service of the department to UL. |
| 5.2.2 | The balance of theoretical and applied learning (in line with the UL mission). |
| 5.2.3 | The inclusion of more theory components in the curriculum since the last departmental quality review. |
| 5.2.4 | The flexibility of the MA programmes which facilitates students with external commitments such as those in employment or with caring responsibilities. |
| 5.2.5 | The introduction of new modules to reflect the research interests of staff members. |
| 5.2.6 | The MA in Sociology: Youth, Community and Social Regeneration which has the potential to meet the needs of the local community and of others further afield. |

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- | | |
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| 5.2.7 | In the proposed departmental re-examination of module prerequisites, address specifically the impact of these on undergraduate theory and methods modules. |
| 5.2.8 | Ensure that the proposed single-honours BA in Sociology includes prerequisites to ensure that students are all working at the appropriate academic level within each module. |
| 5.2.9 | Evaluate the merits of a fourth MA in Sociology. |
| 5.2.10 | Strengthen the focus on IT, communications and presentation skills across all programmes. |

5.3 Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.3.1 The dedication of teaching staff to meeting student needs, as evidenced by the very high regard in which students hold staff and their enthusiasm for sociology after exposure to the area.
-
- 5.3.2 The department's clear aspiration to a high standard of teaching and learning evidenced by:
- The number of contact hours available to students
 - The use of academic staff as student advisors
 - The efforts of staff to support students with disabilities
 - The use of external experts as guest speakers in modules
 - The use of relevant technologies in the classroom
 - The high SET scores achieved by the department in student evaluations
 - The use of faculty publications in teaching
 - The proactive role of the department in addressing plagiarism.
-

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.3.3 Pursue the proposal to develop a policy for awarding marks for tutorial participation.
-
- 5.3.4 Explore the possibility of competing for Faculty Teaching Board funding to integrate the participation of visiting speakers into module delivery.
-
- 5.3.5 At UL level, update the university plagiarism policy and consider the recommendations arising from the department's review of its own plagiarism policy.
-
- 5.3.6 At UL level, extend the timescale between the end of exams and the grading deadline to facilitate the quality assessment of students.
-
- 5.3.7 At UL level, engage with the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) to revert to in-class SET surveys to improve the response rate and ensure greater validity of the measure.
-
- 5.3.8 Engage with the Quality Support Unit (QSU) to inform the content of student exit surveys.
-
- 5.3.9 At UL level, end the practice of personalised timetables which has an impact on the ability of both students and department to plan for the semester within an appropriate timescale.
-
- 5.3.10 Review the current delivery mode of programme modules to ensure that it blends the most appropriate use of technology with an interactive pedagogy model that best meets the needs of students.
-
- 5.3.11 Support the establishment of initiatives such as the MA in Gender, Culture and Society @UL Postgraduate Forum, which is instrumental in fostering a healthy and collaborative research culture.
-

5.4 Facilities and Learning Resources

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

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| 5.4.1 | The relocation of the department's offices in adjoining spaces on one floor, which provides opportunities for greater formal and informal communication between department staff. |
| 5.4.2 | The provision of dedicated facilities for postgraduate students – meeting/seminar room; dedicated desk, PC and printing facilities for PhD students; and PC lab for MA students. |
| 5.4.3 | The expansion of library services, with extended opening hours and increased access to online resources. |
| 5.4.4 | The availability of a dedicated faculty librarian for AHSS and the provision of workshops on library services. |
| 5.4.5 | The availability of IT resources such as Wi-Fi and Sulis. |
| 5.4.6 | The availability of SPSS site licences. |

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

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| 5.4.7 | At UL level, end, as a matter of urgency, the use of classrooms and lecture rooms that are too small for the size of the class and which present pedagogical concerns as well as an immediate health and safety risk, with potential legal implications. |
| 5.4.8 | At UL level, end the practice of issuing personalised timetables as this adversely affects the department's ability to reserve meeting and seminar rooms and UL's ability to allocate appropriately sized rooms within a reasonable timeframe. |
| 5.4.9 | Ensure that lab-based tutorials are scheduled in rooms that are appropriate for teaching. |
| 5.4.10 | Explore with ITD the immediate implementation of an after-hours IT and AV on-call support service. |
| 5.4.11 | Engage on an ongoing basis with the library staff to review, assess and address the changing needs of staff and students in terms of usage patterns and library holdings. |
| 5.4.12 | At UL level, address the need to allocate resources for library acquisitions to support new and developing sociology programmes as well as PhD-level research. |
| 5.4.13 | Prioritise the department's proposal to explore the options for purchasing licences for alternative analysis software packages. |

5.5 Staff

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

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| 5.5.1 | The initiation of the student journal <i>Socheolas</i> , which is a very innovative and energy-boosting idea. |
| 5.5.2 | The alignment between the research interests and teaching responsibilities of staff. |
| 5.5.3 | The impressive range of teaching and research areas that are being covered by staff. |
| 5.5.4 | The obvious sense of collegial solidarity within Sociology, which is essential for the efficient functioning of the department. |
| 5.5.5 | The organisation of the UL Winter School in Social Science Research Methods in collaboration with the Department of Politics and Public Administration, which raises the profile of the department and UL internationally as a centre of expertise in methodology. |
| 5.5.6 | The department's leading role in highlighting the concerns around the outcome of the recent promotion process. |

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- | | |
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| 5.5.7 | As a matter of urgency, at UL level, consider the implications of the latest promotion process on the morale of staff and the future of the department. |
| 5.5.8 | At UL level, provide resources towards support staff to reduce the growing administrative burden on academic staff as this has negative implications on teaching and research output. |
| 5.5.9 | Pursue the proposal to recruit more postdoctoral fellows as this plays a vital part in maintaining and strengthening the research culture within the department. |
| 5.5.10 | Continue to develop the systematic mentoring process to ensure thorough integration of academic staff within the department. |
| 5.5.11 | Engage with CTL and HR to achieve greater effectiveness of staff training on the use of new technologies – possibly through more one-to-one and small-group sessions. |
| 5.5.12 | Encourage the provision of sabbatical and/or research leave as a means of enhancing the quality of research, teaching and morale within the department. |

5.6 Student Guidance & Support

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.6.1 The wide range of supports available at UL, including both mainstream supports such as career guidance and specific supports such as those for students with a disability.
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- 5.6.2 The academic advisor system which, in addition to providing support on academic issues, can also help to coordinate student interaction with the wider supports available.
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- 5.6.3 The First Seven Weeks orientation programme which appears to be effective in helping students to adjust to university life and to the environment and requirements of the department.
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- 5.6.4 The department's recommendations that the cutbacks to the Maths Learning Centre be reversed, that the Regional Writing Centre be better resourced and that no further cutbacks be made to the university's student support services, as such cutbacks have an adverse impact on the quality of the student experience.
-

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.6.5 Develop a policy relating to documentation, protocols and notifications from the Disability Support Services office to ensure adequate support for students with disabilities, and seek to have this policy implemented on a faculty-wide basis to ensure consistency of support for these students across AHSS.
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- 5.6.6 Liaise with Student Affairs (SA) to ensure user-friendliness and accessibility of the SA website and to create better linkage to the departmental website, especially in relation to non-traditional students.
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- 5.6.7 At UL level, introduce self-advocacy programmes for students with a disability in order to equip them to maximise their student experience.
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- 5.6.8 At UL level, ensure that evening students are included in the academic advisory system.
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- 5.6.9 Develop an early-warning system to identify students who are falling behind academically so that they can be offered the appropriate support.
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- 5.6.10 AT UL level, ensure that a person with responsibility for the academic advisor system in SA be appointed as a matter of urgency.
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5.7 Research Activity

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

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| 5.7.1 | The impressive level of research activity, the department's rich and vibrant research culture and the volume of publications produced. |
| 5.7.2 | The broad dissemination of research beyond the academic community. |
| 5.7.3 | The emphasis on, and recognition of, the value of research derived from diverse methodologies and theoretical traditions. |
| 5.7.4 | The recognition that excellent research requires autonomy. |
| 5.7.5 | The emphasis on hosting specific research events, which is a very positive and invigorating aspect of the department's activities. |
| 5.7.6 | The use of the online working paper series for its potential development of departmental awareness of colleagues' research. |

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- | | |
|--------|---|
| 5.7.7 | Regardless of the strong emphasis on publishing in ISI journals, continue to publish and disseminate research through other channels. |
| 5.7.8 | At UL level, formally recognise the value of research that is not measured by ISI matrices. |
| 5.7.9 | Pursue a broader approach to securing research funds beyond the large-scale funding opportunities that require time-consuming applications and can be unsuccessful. |
| 5.7.10 | At UL level, support the recruitment of additional sociology post-doctoral students, including international students. |
| 5.7.11 | Explore the possibilities of developing and enhancing research communities within the department. |

5.8 Department Organisation and Management

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.8.1 The commitment of the department to working in a professional, co-operative, respectful and democratic environment.

- 5.8.2 The commitment to ensuring good communication and sharing of information through the hosting of weekly departmental meetings and the introduction of the SharePoint portal.

- 5.8.3 The decision to hold a teaching planning meeting in the spring semester.

- 5.8.4 The commitment to ongoing evaluation, learning and quality improvement.

- 5.8.5 The introduction of the workload allocation model as an internal instrument to enable the department to manage its workload appropriately.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.8.6 Continue the population of the SharePoint portal with relevant documentation.

- 5.8.7 Schedule the first teaching planning meeting as a matter of immediate priority.

- 5.8.8 Further explore how and when course directorships are rotated to ensure that this is done in a way that best meets the needs of the department and the staff.

- 5.8.9 Monitor the impact of cuts in its funding on the department's ability to achieve its strategic objectives.

5.9 Quality Improvement Plan

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

5.9.1 The very well thought-out and ambitious nature of the plan, which covers the department's priorities for enhancing its scholarly, pedagogic and social contributions.

5.9.2 The clarity of the proposed actions, which are linked to the relevant objectives, identify responsible decision makers and suggest timelines.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

5.9.3 As the majority of the planned improvements are scheduled for the coming academic year, consider whether this may be too ambitious.

5.9.4 Where the department's recommendations rely on action outside the department, engage with other units to ensure the department's recommendations are addressed within the designated timeframe.

Appendices

A Membership of the Peer Review Group:

Prof Brian Osborne (chair)	Queen's University of Kingston, Ontario, CA
Prof Patricia Cormack	St. Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, CA
Dr Carmel Duggan	WRC – Social & Economic Consultants, Dublin
Ms Helen Fitzgerald	PAUL Partnership, Limerick
Ms Ailish O'Farrell	Technical writer, Limerick. (secretary)
Dr Anders Petersen	Aalborg University, Denmark

B Membership of the Department Quality Team:

Dr Brendan Halpin, Chair of quality team	Dr Orla McDonnell
Dr Eoin Devereux, Head of Department	Dr Lee Monaghan
Dr Breda Gray	Prof Pat O'Connor
Dr Carmel Hannan	Ms Mary O'Donoghue
Dr Amanda Haynes	Dr Martin Power
Dr Carmen Kuhling	

C Contact

The Peer Review Group was 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