



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Quality Review of the **Department of Economics**

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/>

Issued by QSU	Stage 4 , 21 st February 2014
Review Date	4 th - 6 th February 2014
Quality Review Group	Appendix A
UL-QSU Web Site	www.quality.ul.ie
Web Site	www.ul.ie/business/departments/economics
QQI Web Site	www.qqi.ie
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Table of Contents

1.0	Background	3
1.1	Legislative Framework.....	3
1.2	The IUQB / QQI	3
1.3	The Quality Review Process.....	4
1.4	Management of Quality in the University.....	4
2.0	The Department of Economics	5
3.0	The Follow-up Process.....	6
4.0	Preliminary Comments of the Peer Review Group (PRG).....	7
5.1	Mission	8
5.2	Design and Content of Curriculum	9
5.3	Teaching, Learning and Assessment.....	10
5.4	Facilities and Learning Resources	11
5.5	Staff	12
5.6	Student Guidance & Support	13
5.7	Research Activity	14
5.8	Department Organisation and Management	15
5.9	Quality Improvement Plan.....	16
	Appendices	17
A	Membership of the Peer Review Group:	17
B	Membership of the Department Quality Team:	17
C	Contact.....	17

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, (IUAQC). 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 is a consultative process during 2013/14 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 Economics

The Department of Economics was established in 1994 following a restructuring of the College of Business. The department currently comprises 11 full-time academics, one contracted academic, two teaching assistants and a full-time administrator. The main disciplines and research interests within the department include macroeconomics, enterprise development and policy, European and international economics, industrial economics and policy, monetary economics, public sector economics, public policy evaluation and tourism economics and policy. The department is home to the Euro-Asia Centre, the National Centre for Tourism Policy Studies and the Privatisation and Public Private Partnerships (P4) research group.

In the 2012/13 academic year the department delivered 54 modules across all programmes. The Department of Economics offers two taught postgraduate programmes – the MA in International Tourism (since 1998) and the MSc in Economic Analysis (since 2012). The department co-owns two undergraduate programmes – the BA Economics & Sociology and the BSc Economics & Mathematical Sciences – and contributes significantly to other taught programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. One of the department's main teaching commitments is to the Economics & Finance major option stream on the Bachelor of Business Studies (BBS) programme: the number of students taking this option represents the department's single biggest core teaching cohort.

The Department of Economics is relatively small by UL standards. Nonetheless, the department strives to make a significant contribution to UL's mission as outlined in the current university strategic plan. Members of staff are encouraged to adopt a philosophy of being helpful to students, being innovative in teaching and setting evermore ambitious research objectives.

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
Feb 2014	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.
Feb 2014	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 the university and his identification of the context of our current task within the mission of UL.

The PRG wishes to thank the Department of Economics for its hospitality and cooperation throughout the review process. The department is commended for its thorough self-assessment report (SAR). The PRG appreciated the department's provision of requested supplementary information and the frank and informative participation of staff members in their several meetings with the PRG.

The department's continued pursuit of excellence in the context of the continuing economic and financial pressures on the Irish university sector is impressive. The PRG noted the department's progress since its last quality review in 2005 and its continued commitment to quality in research and teaching and to providing a positive learning environment for students.

The PRG benefited from the clear explanation of the role of the department within the KBS.

The department's growing research record and its commitment to improving its publication output and external visibility are to be commended. The PRG was impressed by the collegial solidarity of the department in the face of financial stringency and staffing pressures.

The PRG understands the current rationale and progress of the development of a departmental strategic plan in the context of the KBS strategic plan for 2013-16 and this PRG visit and report.

5.0 The Report of the Peer Review Group

5.1 Mission

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.1.1 The series of ambitious goals set by the department to maximise its ability to compete on an international stage.

- 5.1.2 The provision of economics teaching to a wide array of students across a variety of disciplines in the university.

- 5.1.3 The new marketing efforts undertaken by the department which are already bringing results in terms of student applications.

- 5.1.4 The recently introduced MSc in Economic Analysis, which bolsters the department's graduate output and profile while increasing the department's ability to deliver qualified economists to focused parts of the labour force.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.1.5 Introduce an undergraduate BBS with Economics degree that includes an adequate mathematical/econometric content, to run in parallel with the rest of the BBS suite of degrees.

- 5.1.6 Review as a priority the existing BA in Economics & Sociology and BA in Economics & Mathematical Sciences degrees and their value.

- 5.1.7 Prioritise the placement of economics students in targeted co-op placements with an economics focus.

- 5.1.8 Capitalise on the department's skill set to raise the department's research profile at a national and international level.

5.2 Design and Content of Curriculum

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.2.1 The well-designed content and structure of the economics component of the full portfolio of BBS undergraduate degrees (semesters 1-3).
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- 5.2.2 The well-designed content and structure of the BBS Economics & Finance Major Option (semesters 4-8).
-
- 5.2.3 The successful introduction of the MSc in Economic Analysis, with high-quality content in both core and applied economics that is appropriate for the advanced study of economics at the postgraduate level.
-

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.2.4 In partnership with the Dean, conduct a major review of the full range of undergraduate economics degree offerings, including the current BBS Economics & Finance Major Option, the BA in Economics & Mathematical Sciences and the BA in Economics & Sociology, with the end-product being a medium-term (e.g., 3-5 years) plan for the department's portfolio of undergraduate economics degrees.
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- 5.2.5 Augment the portfolio of degrees with a BBS with Economics degree that is additional to the existing BBS portfolio (including the Economics & Finance Major Option) but has a significantly higher mathematical economics and econometrics content in Years 1 & 2 that is compulsory for BBS with Economics as well as for Economics joint degree students.
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- 5.2.6 Consider setting a higher mathematics entry qualification for BBS with Economics and the two Economics joint degrees (but *not* for the BBS Economics & Finance Major Option).
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- 5.2.7 At the KBS level, review as a priority the content and delivery of the modules provided by the Department of Mathematics & Statistics to the BBS portfolio of degrees.
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5.3 Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.3.1 The positive and genuinely innovative approaches to teaching and learning within the department. Particularly noteworthy are the following: the use of field trips, the dissertation preparation process and the emphasis on internationalisation in content and experience.

- 5.3.2 The dedication of staff and their commitment to quality teaching and learning.

- 5.3.3 The innovative use of social media in feedback, teaching and learning.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.3.4 Devise ways to raise the internal profile of the departmental research centres and research activity in relation to teaching and learning at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

- 5.3.5 Consider formalising and expanding industry involvement in all relevant sectors by developing a departmental industry advisory group.

- 5.3.6 Bolster the department's visibility, graduate and research outputs through targeted co-op placements and the linking of placement experience with final year project (FYP) topics, with the aim of increasing opportunities for graduates to find employment in the economics field in the public and private sectors.

- 5.3.7 At the KBS level, use the expertise of external examiners to ensure consistency between KBS and national degree classifications.

5.4 Facilities and Learning Resources

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.4.1 The generally excellent facilities and learning resources, as evidenced by the extremely high rates of satisfaction expressed in student surveys.
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Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.4.2 Investigate the systematic use of Camtasia/voice-over-slides video recording where it may be appropriate in the existing Economics curriculum (e.g., in postgraduate modules with substantial numbers of international students).
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- 5.4.3 At university level, extend e-learning facilities that would allow routine recording of lecture delivery and video conferencing (e.g., high-quality microphones, video cameras and tablets to allow slide annotation and high-quality recordings of real-time diagrammatic expositions).
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- 5.4.4 Improve wireless access (notably in the Schuman Building).
-
- 5.4.5 At the KBS level, explore the possibility of extending opening hours in the KBS building that would allow increased access by students and staff.
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5.5 Staff

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.5.1 The high level of motivation of staff members and their strong commitment to both teaching and research.

- 5.5.2 The external connectivity built up by some staff members both through working as externs and representing the department on various boards and organisations and in the media.

- 5.5.3 The forward thinking of staff in relation to the development of a new MSc programme and the modification of module content based on a sound needs assessment.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.5.4 Appoint a professor of economics whose research focus clearly aligns with the goals of the department.

- 5.5.5 As a matter of urgency, prioritise the recruitment of extra human resources (teaching assistants and lecturers).

5.6 Student Guidance & Support

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.6.1 The adviser system, which represents a tried and tested method that has worked to the benefit of students in the past.

- 5.6.2 The progress being made towards a more comprehensive support system for international students.

- 5.6.3 The positive feedback from postgraduate students regarding access to and guidance from staff.

- 5.6.4 The initiatives being undertaken by the department to address gaps in the mathematics skills of incoming postgraduate students.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.6.5 Obtain more support from central resources to assist the department in its endeavours to integrate particular cohorts of international students at postgraduate level.

- 5.6.6 Increase ways of promoting thematic discussion between staff, post-graduates and undergraduates through measures such as an economics society.

5.7 Research Activity

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.7.1 The increasing level of research income and activity in the department which has contributed to raising the profile of the institution.

- 5.7.2 The research emphasis on applied economics and policy.

- 5.7.3 The engagement of external clients and the acquisition and development of specialist library collections.

- 5.7.4 The growing research and publication output of staff.

- 5.7.5 The recent inclusion of teaching buy-outs in externally funded research projects.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.7.6 Develop an annual research plan that builds on, expands and markets the department's expertise in public policy.

- 5.7.7 Strengthen the integration of research into undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.

- 5.7.8 Consider the involvement of more departmental and university staff in the research and output of the research centres.

- 5.7.9 When submitting applications for externally funded research grants, include as a matter of course funding for teaching buy-outs and/or reduction of administrative duties.

- 5.7.10 Review the definition of 'research-active staff' in light of the need to prioritise publications and grant income.

5.8 Department Organisation and Management

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

5.8.1 The level of collegiality demonstrated by staff.

5.8.2 The implementation of the PDRS system.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

5.8.3 Develop a five-year internal financial strategy which explores a range of scenarios, both positive and negative, concerning departmental funding, support for various programmes and the resource needs associated with these.

5.8.4 Review the workload balance between research activity, teaching and administration in order to enhance the research publication and citation output of the department.

5.8.5 Anticipating future growth in PhD numbers, assess the implications of the co-location of PhD students and staff.

5.8.6 Continue to monitor and review the issue of marking and grading within the department.

5.9 Quality Improvement Plan

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.9.1 The important first steps taken by the department to develop a quality improvement plan (QIP).

- 5.9.2 The progress made by the department in developing a 'quality culture' among both staff and students.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.9.3 Further develop the QIP to include the recommendations arising from this review.

- 5.9.4 Prioritise key issues within the QIP, set and revise certain targets (e.g., bring forward the target dates for the joint BA major reviews) and allocate resources appropriately.

- 5.9.5 Ensure that the priorities of the departmental QIP align with those of the KBS and UL.

Appendices

A Membership of the Peer Review Group:

Mr. Charles Dolan	Formerly HR, Eli Lilly. Ireland.
Ms. Gillian Edgeworth	Unicredit Bank, London.
Prof. John Lennon	Glasgow School for Business & Society, Glasgow Caledonian University.
Ms. Ailish O'Farrell	Recording Secretary, Co Limerick
Prof. Brian Osborne	(Chair) Quality Consultant, Queen's University of Kingston, Ontario
Prof. Mark Schaffer	Professor of Economics, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh

B Membership of the Department Quality Team:

Mr. Declan Dineen	Lecturer, Quality Team Leader
Prof. Jim Deegan	Head of Department
Ms. Grainne O'Connell	Department Administrator
All Economics faculty	Members of Quality Team

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