



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Quality Review of the **School of Architecture, UL**

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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Peer Review Group	Appendix A
UL-QSU Web Site	www.ul.ie/quality
Department Web Site	www.saul.ie
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 School of Architecture, UL.....	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.....	11
5.4	Facilities and Learning Resources	12
5.5	Staff	13
5.6	Student Guidance & Support	14
5.7	Research Activity	15
5.8	Department Organisation and Management	16
5.9	Quality Improvement Plan.....	17
Appendices		18
A	Membership of the Peer Review Group:.....	18
B	Membership of the Department Quality Team:	18
C	Contact	18

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 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.ul.ie/quality

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.ul.ie/quality.

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.ul.ie/quality

2.0 The School of Architecture, UL

Founded in 2005¹, the [School of Architecture at the University of Limerick](#) (SAUL) is a constituent department of the [Faculty of Science and Engineering](#). SAUL delivers a Bachelor of Architecture (B.Arch) and two research programmes, a Master of Architecture and a PhD in Architecture. SAUL comprises four full-time and 15 part-time academic staff members, three full-time administrative staff members, one adjunct professor and two researchers.

SAUL's primary goal is to provide the profession of architecture with reflective and critical practitioners who are competent and able to ensure the profession's contribution to and shaping of society. The mission of SAUL is to teach architecture as a practice integrated with art and engineering within a strong philosophical, technological, cultural and historical context and to become a leader in thought on environmental issues. This is mainly achieved through the delivery of the B.Arch, an innovative, accredited five-year professional degree programme. In addition, SAUL's mission is to provide a place within UL where freedom of thought and critical reflection is held in the highest esteem, where innovative teaching and learning remains a priority, and where the work of the students and faculty together drive the future.

See also www.saul.ie

¹ Text provided by SAUL

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
	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.
	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) appreciated the warmth of the welcome extended to it by the University of Limerick (UL) and thanks the School of Architecture (SAUL) for preparing the self-assessment report (SAR). However, the documented evidence presented resulted in the school understating its achievements and thus markedly underselling itself.

Architecture is taught with vision and passion at UL, as was confirmed by the students and staff with whom the members of the PRG interacted. SAUL produces highly motivated graduates and is very successful in engaging with the local communities in the city and region.

SAUL is well supported by the university, and the enthusiasm of staff and students is apparent immediately on entering the Design Studio through which almost all of the teaching is delivered.

The manner in which SAUL operates is predicated on a belief that it is unique amongst UL academic departments to an extent which makes it difficult to operate within the conventional university management and administration processes. However, the PRG view is that the school should be able to operate with equal success within the existing university structures without undue constraint.

During the visit, we particularly valued the open and constructive engagement of SAUL staff and other university officers in contributing to the evidence base for this report.

5.0 The Report of the Peer Review Group

5.1 Mission

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

5.1.1 The commitment, drive and intent of the extremely talented SAUL staff to push the development and boundaries of architectural education.

5.1.2 The strong emphasis on studio-based teaching within the school which is reinforced by the exemplary allocation of physical space to each student.

5.1.3 The strong sense of community and support within the school, coupled with close working relationships between students, academics, technicians, administrative staff and external stakeholders.

5.1.4 The use of portfolios within the student recruitment and retention strategy.

5.1.5 SAUL's outreach programmes, such as the Intelligence Unit (IU) and Fab Lab, which bring live accessible resources from the university to the broader community, local authorities and industry.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

5.1.6 In a language that is understood and valued outside the world of architecture, articulate clearly what is distinctive about SAUL and its identity both within the university and in communicating the programme to a wider audience.

5.1.7 Develop better alignment with the university structures in which SAUL operates.

5.1.8 Further develop interdisciplinary elements in the work of the school which would have the benefit of building relationships with other areas of UL outside of the faculty.

5.2 Design and Content of Curriculum

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.2.1 The approach which has been employed in building the curriculum around the studio. The development of a vibrant and effective studio culture is a considerable achievement which brings numerous benefits in terms of peer-to-peer learning, student satisfaction and successful project-based education.
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- 5.2.2 The establishment of a rich and outward-looking architectural culture through the augmentation of the core curriculum by means of initiatives such as lunchtime seminars, evening lectures, exhibitions, symposia, study trips, exchange schemes and various other events and activities which engage the students in the local community and in wider architectural debate.
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- 5.2.3 The use and nature of the electives in years 4 and 5 of the BArch.
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- 5.2.4 The flexibility that has been built into the curriculum which allows studio projects in particular to exploit emerging issues or opportunities which may present themselves in any given year. This characteristic of the programme enables a responsive curriculum which can also accommodate the exploration of student-led agendas through studio projects.
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Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.2.5 Consider the integration of co-op placement within the structure of the BArch programme, thereby aligning the BArch curriculum with other UL programmes. This would formalise periods in the workplace within the academic programme whilst developing the curriculum in a manner consistent with the school's stated mission.
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- 5.2.6 Explore how the proposed MArch aligns with the revised EU Professional Qualifications Directive (PQD) requirements and how the time requirements will be met for the proposed MArch pathway for non-cognate degree-holders. This innovative programme structure could provide a unique pathway within the EU to registration as an architect. Early consultation with the competent authority is encouraged.
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- 5.2.7 Explore the possibility of allowing the introduction of an exit award after three or four years for those students who may choose not to complete the five years of the full BArch programme. Without such an option the BArch appears to offer less flexibility than equivalent qualifications offered in Europe and in particular by those competitor programmes offered elsewhere in Ireland.
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5.2.8 Work with the relevant agencies to resolve the issue of student funding for later entrants into the BArch programme in the context of what is offered by competitor programmes in Ireland.

5.2.9 Further explore the potential benefits of establishing common first-year modules in design within the Faculty of Science & Engineering for the undergraduate programmes in Architecture, Civil Engineering and Product Design & Technology.

5.3 Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.3.1 The staff's commitment and expertise in design studio learning and teaching, which is also beginning to be shared with other disciplines in the university.

- 5.3.2 The Digital Technology/Fabrication elective module and its influence on the direction of the school.

- 5.3.3 The SAUL study trips, which create international collaborations and exchanges.

- 5.3.4 The adoption of peer-to-peer learning and self-assessment, which support students' critical reflection and the development of their judgment and responsibility for their own work.

- 5.3.5 The collegiate collaboration between staff and students, which empowers students to find their own distinctive approach.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.3.6 Review the use of external examiners to ensure it is consistent with university regulations.

- 5.3.7 Consider summative assessment processes that will allow students to understand more fully how they have performed in the aggregate components of a module.

- 5.3.8 Research and develop a clear pedagogical strategy which is informed by and contributes to international best practice.

5.4 Facilities and Learning Resources

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.4.1 The Fab Lab as a resource for the School of Architecture and the public face of UL.

- 5.4.2 The design and procurement of the exemplary studio environment, including designated individual workspace.

- 5.4.3 The construction of cutting-edge digital fabrication tools through a low-cost, self-build route with proactive student involvement.

- 5.4.4 The use of the studio by the school as a living design laboratory.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.4.5 Explore the further development of the Fab Lab initiative in the context of UL's Strategic Plan 2011-2015.

- 5.4.6 Engage with the UL Safety Officer to review the health and safety procedures of the workshop, studio and Outreach initiatives.

- 5.4.7 Explore the availability of university workshops in other departments through integration with and usage of the UL central scheduling facility.

- 5.4.8 Acquire an ordnance survey mapping licence through the library as is done elsewhere.

- 5.4.9 Adopt strategies to expand and develop the library architecture collection.

5.5 Staff

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.5.1 The exceptional, collegiate team of full- and part-time staff which comprises a diverse, talented and dedicated pool of practitioner educators with international outlook and experience.
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Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.5.2 As a matter of urgency, work with HR to review the existing staff contracts.
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- 5.5.3 Explore how the workload allocation model might be adapted to provide a more useful tool in terms of both the equitable management of the overall workload and in providing staff with a framework for managing their own time appropriately in the context of the school's expectations.
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- 5.5.4 Engage with HR to continue the dialogue on the promotion process and ensure that the outcomes are clearly communicated to all academic staff.
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- 5.5.5 In light of the considerable workload of the school administrator, review the need for additional staff requirements to ensure that administrative support expectations are sustainable.
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5.6 Student Guidance & Support

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.6.1 The retention rates which result from the approaches employed, including student application portfolios, workshops and ambassadors.

- 5.6.2 The strong sense of community and support within the school, coupled with the close working relationships between students, academics and administrative staff.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.6.3 Consider mechanisms by which students could be better integrated within the wider student body.

- 5.6.4 Enhance the induction of students to improve their understanding of the design studio culture and the feedback/assessment mechanisms employed.

5.7 Research Activity

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.7.1 The annual summer Intelligence Unit (IU), which provides a rich context for cross-disciplinary work and collaborations with local government and industry.

- 5.7.2 The current efforts of SAUL staff in working with colleagues from the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance and other practice-based research areas to draw up appropriate metrics for their research outputs.

- 5.7.3 The position paper on research, which sets out a logical series of initial steps to develop research.

- 5.7.4 SAUL's active involvement in national and international research networks.

- 5.7.5 The success of the school in attracting significant levels of research/consultancy funding.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.7.6 In respect of all research activities, draw up a dissemination, peer-review and funding plan.

- 5.7.7 At university level, form a working group to explore and understand the full nature and potential of architectural research and how best to support and promote it through central university resources.

- 5.7.8 Continue to build research alliances both within and beyond the university.

- 5.7.9 Further exploit the potential of the IU to link teaching, practice, consultancy and research.

5.8 Department Organisation and Management

Commendations

There are no commendations in this section.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

5.8.1 Clarify and formalise a management structure.

5.8.2 Prepare a clear, concise management plan for the future of the school, to include succession planning and risk management.

5.8.3 At UL level, consider renaming the Faculty of Science & Engineering to include the word 'Design'.

5.9 Quality Improvement Plan

Commendations

There are no commendations in this section.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

5.9.1 Revise the current quality improvement plan to prioritise actions, better define responsibilities and specify timelines for all actions.

5.9.2 Identify and communicate the added-value features of the school to the university.

Appendices

A Membership of the Peer Review Group:

Mr. Alan Connolly	Dathanna Architecture (Alumni)
Ms. Maria Kiernan	Partner, Kearney & Kiernan Architects
Prof. Ruth Morrow	Professor of Architecture, Queen's University Belfast
Ms. Ailish O'Farrell	Independent Technical Writer (PRG Recording Secretary)
Dr. David Whan	Quality Consultant, UK (PRG Chair)
Prof. Alexander Wright	Head of Architecture, University of Bath

B Membership of the Department Quality Team:

Professor Merritt Bucholz	Head of Department
Peter Carroll	Course Director and Lecturer
Grainne Hassett	Senior Lecturer
Dr. Anna Ryan	Lecturer

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.