



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Quality Review of the **Department of Politics and Public Administration**

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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UL-QSU Web Site	www.ul.ie/quality
Department Web Site	www.ul.ie/ppa/
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.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 Department of Politics and Public Administration

The Department of Politics and Public Administration endeavours to advance and enable internationally recognised scholarship and learning in politics and public administration in a working environment that is egalitarian, collegial, and fair. The Department is representative of a broad range of interests and areas within the discipline of political science, including European, African, Russian and post-Soviet politics as well as Irish politics and public policy. In addition to the diversity of area specialisms, the Department offers a variety of disciplinary approaches, including political theory, international relations, international political economy, comparative politics, public policy analysis, critical theory and quantitative methods.

The Department of Politics and Public Administration has 12 academic staff, one teaching assistant, one full-time administrator and a researcher/project coordinator for a three-year funded HEA/Irish Aid research project. In academic year 2013/14, there were 27 PhD students, one MA research student and 17 taught MA students across five PPA programmes and approximately 300 undergraduates studying politics and public administration on several AHSS programmes. The undergraduate programmes for which the Department is responsible are the multidisciplinary BA in Politics and Public Administration and the single-honours BA in Politics and International Relations. The following postgraduate taught programmes are offered by the Department: MA in Politics, MA in European Politics and Governance, Graduate Diploma in Peace and Development, MA in Peace and Development Studies (full time/part time) and MA in International Studies. The Department also offers a Structured PhD in Politics.

PPA's research strengths are in the areas of Irish politics and public administration, international relations, comparative politics and development and political theory. In 2013 the Department published 1 book, 24 refereed journal articles (including 12 in ISI listed journals), 5 chapters in edited books, 11 international conference papers and 3 papers from national conferences.

See also www.ul.ie/ppa

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 warm welcome it received from the University of Limerick (UL) and wishes to thank the Department of Politics and Public Administration and the Quality Support Unit for their hospitality and cooperation throughout the review process. The Department has produced a thorough and well-presented self-assessment document which identifies many of its strengths and some of its concerns. There have been frank and informative meetings with members of the departmental quality team and other staff, and these meetings as well as discussions with various stakeholders have facilitated the work of the PRG.

The Department of Politics and Public Administration (PPA), established in 2003, is one of six departments in the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) at UL. It underwent its first quality review in 2006 and, since then, has grown in terms of its student and staff numbers and its level of research activity. The Department has ownership of two undergraduate degree programmes in the AHSS portfolio, the BA in Politics & International Relations and the BA in Politics & Public Administration, and it contributes significantly to a number of other programmes. PPA has a range of taught postgraduate programmes and has increased its number of PhD students significantly since the 2006 review. For its size, the level and quality of departmental research output is substantial.

The Department is arguably at a crucial point in its development within UL, particularly with the prospect of the impending common-entry Humanities undergraduate programme. There is a pressing need for consolidation and for development of an overall plan for the Department based on decisions which must be made in relation to the relative priority of the elements of PPA's wide range of activities overall.

The PRG, in developing the commendations and recommendations listed below, wishes to offer some suggestions as to how PPA might proceed.

Within the overall strategic plan, there are two obvious main strands – research and teaching - each of which requires its own subordinate strategy. The Department has a broad range of research specialisms, and this facilitates extensive synergies with teaching and has made possible the building up of a large postgraduate research community. Within the current portfolio of research interests, however, there are a number of distinctive strengths and clusters of research interests which should be highlighted in a clearer narrative that identifies some core research themes. This would help raise the visibility of the Department's research impact and its innovative approach to engaged research, and provide a clearer sense of its distinctive identity as a department of Politics and Public Administration. Identifying its distinctive strengths and specifying research clusters would also facilitate the development of the Department's research strategy.

The challenges for teaching in the Department centre mainly on the recruitment and retention of engaged undergraduates. The Department needs to focus on actions that maximise the quality of incoming students, in large part by enhancing the awareness and understanding of PPA at second level in the region, which is the primary source of students. Retention of undergraduates and satisfactory progression to postgraduate study, which are also Faculty and University issues, are dependent on carefully chosen and consistently implemented strategies of support, monitoring, guidance and excellent teaching methods.

In addition to its significant contributions to research and teaching within UL, PPA has been the progenitor of several major policies and processes that have been adopted by the University as a whole. Recognising the contributions made by PPA to the University, UL senior management should engage with the Department in considering this PRG report and in developing a strategic plan, including a quality improvement plan, which allows PPA to capitalise on its existing strengths and achievements for the continued benefit of the University and its stakeholders.

5.0 The Report of the Peer Review Group

5.1 Mission

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

5.1.1 The strong commitment to achieving and maintaining a very high standard of contribution to Ireland, the University and the Faculty.

5.1.2 The very high level of staff commitment to the Department and its stated goals, particularly the quality and quantity of research and the contribution to local communities.

5.1.3 The contribution to the University through the development of administrative and other systems and initiatives.

5.1.4 The provision of politics and public administration teaching to a wide array of programmes in the Faculty.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

5.1.5 Prepare a medium-term strategic plan that includes vision, targets, resource requirements, outputs and planned outcomes, for agreement with the University.

5.1.6 Build on the proven success of outreach initiatives to communities in the Mid-West region, and enhance them further through new initiatives such as the UL Practicum.

5.1.7 Work to develop links with second-level schools and to enhance existing linkages with external bodies.

5.1.8 Develop further innovative strategies to address those student retention issues that may be influenced by the Department and the Faculty, in conjunction with relevant areas of the University.

5.2 Design and Content of Curriculum

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.2.1 The impressive range of modules offered in the different degree programmes.

- 5.2.2 The good balance between introductory and specialised modules.

- 5.2.3 The Co-op placement, as both a learning opportunity and a way to make the programmes connect with professional practice.

- 5.2.4 The adaptation of the degrees and their curricula to reflect the core strengths of the Department and the changing needs of graduates, while preserving academic integrity.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.2.5 At Faculty level, enhance the practice of sharing modules to facilitate the expansion (or at least the maintenance) of the multidisciplinary modules in the BA in Politics and Public Administration. To enhance multidisciplinary in the BA in Politics and International Relations, one could, for example, explore the possibility of introducing international public law into the programme.

- 5.2.6 Strengthen links with business, administration, civic and public sectors in the development of the curriculum and reflect the connected nature of the University by establishing an advisory board with stakeholders and reflexive practitioners.

- 5.2.7 Capitalise on relevant Co-op experiences to enrich the practical learning elements of the programme.

- 5.2.8 Link the design of the curriculum to prioritised research strategy goals to enhance synergies between research and teaching.

5.3 Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.3.1 The clear evidence of a very strong sense of commitment to high-quality teaching and to engagement with the student learning process.

- 5.3.2 Teaching that embodies a commitment to reflexive, interactive and deep learning, including problem-based learning.

- 5.3.3 The strong link between teaching and research which is much appreciated by students.

- 5.3.4 The departmental focus on teaching a range of critical skills that help prepare students for the job market.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.3.5 Develop proactive and consistently implemented strategies for improving retention rates, including more formal procedures for monitoring attendance at all lectures and seminars.

- 5.3.6 Exploit more fully the functionality of SULIS through regular and focused staff training packages aimed at ensuring that all staff make full use of this valuable tool.

- 5.3.7 Building on the First Seven Weeks and the training for the final year project (FYP), develop an integrated teaching and learning strategy for the curriculum aimed at ensuring that study and research skills, as well as other transferable skills, are fully integrated, with clear progression through all years of study.

- 5.3.8 At University level, as a matter of urgency, replace the student advisor system by a personal mentor system whereby, insofar as is possible, advisees are allocated to staff who are expected to teach them at some stage in their degree programme, and use this to ensure a much more proactive and formal process of mentoring through all years of study.

5.4 Facilities and Learning Resources

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

5.4.1 The advanced facilities and learning resources within PPA for postgraduate research students which are positive in terms of organisation, IT resources, location and proximity to department staff, resulting in the development of a sense of collegiality and team spirit.

5.4.2 The engagement of PPA with the possible development of modular electronic resources for both the Department and international depository networks to promote the research and publications being produced by PPA staff and research students.

5.4.3 The use by PPA of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) assessment of the UL library to self-evaluate the departmental library catalogue, and the Department's ongoing work to improve the collection based on this evaluation.

5.4.4 The lead role that PPA is taking in calling for institutional commitment to providing access to new and relevant software such as Stata, NVivo and Qualtrics.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

5.4.5 As a matter of urgency, engage with the UL space management committee to acquire or adapt a dedicated space for PPA to use for non-traditional teaching activities and meetings.

5.4.6 Work with the faculty librarian to address the challenge of maintaining pace with changes in the library catalogue serving the discipline. The lack of depth and significant outdated in a number of areas within the library resources is of particular concern.

5.4.7 Engage with the faculty librarian to achieve optimal use of all available resources including interlibrary loans.

5.4.8 Recognise the importance of the website and appropriate social media and the absolute necessity to regularly update both profiles and functionality.

5.5 Staff

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.5.1 The focus on rigorous recruitment processes and the determination by the Department to obtain the best-qualified staff.
-
- 5.5.2 The very high individual work output and the willingness of PPA staff to engage with administrative tasks and make other significant contributions for the benefit of the Faculty.
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- 5.5.3 The efforts, through the workload allocation model, to achieve an equitable distribution of effective workload between staff members.
-
- 5.5.4 The active planning of, and support for, individual professional development.
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- 5.5.5 The Department's appreciation of the importance of administration, and its praise for existing administrative staff.
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Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.5.6 At University, level consider an increase in the proportion of senior PPA academic staff, if necessary by providing accelerated progression routes to redress 'flattening' in staff grades.
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- 5.5.7 Seek an additional junior staff resource to permit necessary engagement of senior staff with the Practicum which offers important opportunities for the Department.
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- 5.5.8 Aim to convert the teaching assistant position in European Politics into a full-time tenure track post with a view to building up PPA graduate offerings in European Politics and expanding the capacity for research supervision in this area.
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- 5.5.9 Carry out a regular review of the range and diversity of PPA activity to ensure adequate senior staff time for strategic priorities, planning and management.
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5.6 Student Guidance & Support

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.6.1 The existence of the Regional Writing Centre to support students to achieve the required standard in academic writing, and the valuable role of Disability Support Services in providing intensive writing supports for students with a disability, both of which services should be maintained.
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- 5.6.2 The active and engaged role which the Careers Service plays with students in PPA and the commendable collegiality between PPA staff and the Careers Service.
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- 5.6.3 The range and diversity of student supports, particularly the provision of extra counselling support and the introduction of the Stepped Care programme and the First Seven Weeks initiative.
-
- 5.6.4 The readiness of PPA course directors to act as academic advisors for students in the Department when gaps emerged in the advisor system.
-

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.6.5 At University and/or Faculty level, ensure that a wider range of skills training avenues is provided to students in the areas of communications and information technology.
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- 5.6.6 Work towards a more equitable distribution of student advisees amongst staff in PPA, in order to make more sustainable the delivery of effective student-staff engagement.
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- 5.6.7 At University level, ensure that the Co-op Office assists the Department in ensuring that the range of placements and the student experience of Co-op are better integrated with the modules taken by students in PPA programmes. PPA students should be visited by a PPA member of staff while on placement.
-
- 5.6.8 Increase the support systems for new students on taught postgraduate programmes. Consideration should be given to the need for mentoring, diversification of study skills and a broader induction programme similar to the First Seven Weeks programme.
-

5.7 Research Activity

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.7.1 The pioneering PPA research in terms of both impact and engaged research, which demonstrates commitment to the University's mission to be connected to and serve the Mid-West region.
-
- 5.7.2 The consideration by PPA of the advantages of refining the mission statement to emphasise distinctive elements of the Department's strategic direction.
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- 5.7.3 The Department's substantial PhD research community that is adequately resourced in terms of space and location, and that appears to enjoy a productive working relationship with departmental staff.
-
- 5.7.4 The creative use of resources to provide research leave for staff on the basis of one semester every six years.
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Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.7.5 In creating the Department's strategic plan, develop a narrative to frame the PPA research profile, providing clarity on its strategic priorities and longer-term objectives.
-
- 5.7.6 Identify focused research clusters that include both research staff and PhD students.
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- 5.7.7 Critically analyse the contribution and future potential of the Centre for Peace and Development Studies, given the turnover of staff (particularly at the senior level) and limited funding opportunities.
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- 5.7.8 Frame the PPA research strategy with a focus on the contribution research makes to enhancing the quality and reputation of teaching in the Department.
-
- 5.7.9 Consolidate the teaching and research provision so as to sustain graduate recruitment and build up research capacity.
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5.8 Department Organisation and Management

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

5.8.1 The clearly organised management structure with its transparent articulation of responsibilities and fair division of managerial workload across different committees and individual staff members. This appears to be conducive to the commitment of staff to reaching the Department's objectives and to ensuring the quality of process in teaching and research.

5.8.2 The range and application of supportive management procedures and documents which provide information on objectives and instructions on due process and follow-up.

5.8.3 The Department Handbook which is an exemplary management support tool, clearly outlining responsibilities and procedures for both the managers and the managed.

5.8.4 The application of the workload allocation model with a view to achieving equitable workloads and rewards.

5.8.5 The successful embedding of a quality culture into day-to-day operations.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

5.8.6 Build stronger horizontal coordination within thematic research clusters with a view to building research and teaching synergies.

5.8.7 Engage full-time PhD students more strongly in the activities, publications and teaching work related to research clusters.

5.8.8 Strengthen the strategic research plan with thematic research narratives, identifying major research lines and profiles, as well as areas of high impact research.

5.8.9 Strengthen outward coordination and liaison activities with stakeholders outside the University to increase the visibility of research impact.

5.8.10 Seek adaptation of the University resource allocation model to fully reflect cross-university contributions made by the Department.

5.9 Quality Improvement Plan

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

5.9.1 The evident commitment of the Department to excellence across the major domains of academic activity – research, teaching and administration – while striving also to be an excellent ‘corporate citizen’, ensuring that its priorities map onto the University’s strategic plan in a meaningful way.

5.9.2 The development of a series of well-considered actions across the full range of the Department’s activities.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

5.9.3 Restate the elements of the quality improvement plan (QIP) as more readily measurable actions with associated ‘owners’ and timelines to completion.

5.9.4 Refocus the QIP to reflect more of the key strategic issues discussed during the PRG site visit in relation to the teaching, research and administrative activities of the Department, and link it to an overall strategic plan for PPA.

5.9.5 Work with UL senior management to consider this PRG report and to develop a QIP within the strategic plan which will allow the Department to capitalise on its existing strengths and achievements for the continued benefit of the University and its stakeholders.

Appendices

A Membership of the Peer Review Group:

Prof. Nigel Steele	Emeritus Prof of Mathematics, Coventry University (Chairperson)
Prof. David Croke	Director of Quality Enhancement, RCSI
Prof. Adrian Hyde-Price	Professor of International Politics, Gothenburg University, Sweden
Prof. Marleen Brans	Professor of Public Administration & Policy, KU Leuven, Belgium
Mr. Tony Buckley	Assistant Secretary, South West Region, Revenue
Ms. Emma Murphy,	CEO, Amaweale International, Dublin
Ms. Ailish O'Farrell	Technical Writer, Limerick (Recording Secretary)

B Membership of the Department Quality Team:

Bernadette Connaughton	Department Head (Quality Team Leader)
Maura Adshead	Course Director, Structured PhD
Tracey Gleeson	Department Administrator
Frank Häge	Course Director, MA European Politics & Governance
Chris McInerney	Course Director, Politics & Public Administration
Neil Robinson	Professor of Comparative Politics

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.