UNIVERSITY *of* LIMERICK

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

Report of the Quality Review Group

to

The School of Culture and Communication

Review dates	7th to 9th March 2017
Issued by QSU	23rd March 2017
Quality Review Group (QRG)	Appendix A
UL QSU website	www.ul.ie/quality
Division website	http://www.ulsites.ul.ie/cc/
QQI website	www.qqi.ie

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1   The UL Quality Review Process

The University of Limerick (UL) follows an established process for quality assurance (QA) and quality improvement (QI) in line with that originally developed jointly by the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB), the latter whose functions are now carried out by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). The review process involves an approximate seven-year cycle during which each unit works to improve the quality of its programmes and services and undergoes a rigorous self-evaluation prior to a quality review by internationally recognised experts in the relevant field.

The common framework adopted by the Irish universities for their QA/QI systems is consistent with both legislative requirements and international good practice. The process itself evolved as a result of the Universities Act, 1997, in which the responsibility for QA/QI was placed directly on the individual universities. The process now complies with the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012. The UL Quality Support Unit (QSU) website (www.ul.ie/quality) provides details on the process.

Academic units are reviewed in line with *A Guide to the Quality Review Process for Academic Departments*, which is available on the QSU website. The planned schedule of quality reviews for both academic and support units is available on the QSU website.

The UL quality review process comprises the following three phases:
1. Pre-review phase, in which the unit under review conducts a self-evaluation exercise and writes a self-assessment report (SAR).
2. Review phase, in which a quality review group comprising external experts, both national and international, review the SAR, visit the unit, meet with stakeholders and produce a report (this report), which is made publicly available on the QSU website.
3. Post-review phase, in which the unit considers the recommendations of the QRG, devises plans to implement them and reports implementation progress to a Governing Authority subcommittee and UL senior management.

The recommendations made by the quality review group (QRG) form the basis of a quality improvement plan (QIP) prepared by the QSU for the unit under review. Once the site visit is over, the unit sets about evaluating and implementing the recommendations, as appropriate.

Approximately six months after receiving the QIP template from the QSU, the head of unit provides a summary overview of progress to the university's Governing Authority Strategic Planning and Quality Assurance (GASPQA) sub-committee. GASPQA members are afforded the opportunity to discuss and evaluate progress.

Approximately 12 months after receiving the QIP template, the head of unit, Vice President Academic & Registrar and Director of Quality meet to formally review progress and to agree on any remaining actions to be taken.

2   The School of Culture and Communication

The School of Culture and Communication is one of six academic units within the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. The School comprises five units: English, Léann na Gaeilge (Irish Language and Literature), Journalism, Technical Communication and Instructional Design (TCID) and Aonad na Gaeilge (Irish Language Centre). The School was created in 2014 following a restructuring of the School of Languages, Literature, Culture and Communication.

The School employs 35 academic staff, 3 PhD teaching fellows, and 18 hourly-paid staff at eight different teaching grades, including lecturers, teaching assistants and university teachers. Two administrators are employed in the main office, and a marketing officer/executive administrator and project coordinator work in Aonad na Gaeilge.

The School is a community of writers, scholars and teachers. It includes literary and cultural critics, creative writers, journalists, experts in digital technology, linguists and theorists. In all they do, whether analysing a text, exploring language, understanding media or finding the story that needs to be told in a novel or in the news, they believe that using language well is one of the best means to be fully human in a complex world.

While the School is multidisciplinary by design, its five constituent units share a focus in their teaching and research on language and communication. English focuses on Irish, American and Anglophone world literature and cultural studies, along with creative writing. Léann na Gaeilge covers a wide range of themes in language, literature and society from the early modern period until the present. In Journalism, research examines journalism practice and the increasingly important societal role of journalism and mass media. Academic staff in TCID work in a number of related disciplines, including technical communication, instructional design and e-learning. Aonad na Gaeilge provides a range of services and programmes to develop the use of Irish throughout the University and wider community. Since 2011, the School's research output has included 16 books, 14 edited books, 69 chapters in books, 74 articles in peer-reviewed journals, and 76 other publications.

As of the academic year 2016/17, 17 PhD students, 118 taught MA students and approximately 1,850 undergraduates study on programmes to which the School contributes. The School currently offers streams or modules on 11 programmes at undergraduate level; when UL's new Bachelor of Arts degree in conjunction with Mary Immaculate College launches in 2017/18, this number will stand at 7. The School owns five taught postgraduate programmes: MA in Creative Writing, MA/Graduate Diploma in English, MA/Graduate Diploma in Journalism, MA in Technical Communication and E-Learning and Graduate Certificate in Technical Writing. Aonad na Gaeilge offers the Teastas/Dioplóma sa Ghaeilge: An Ghaeilge sa Saol Comhaimseartha. From 2012 to 2016, the number of postgraduate students enrolling on the School's taught programmes increased from 51 to 87.

The School supports the goals outlined in Broadening Horizons, UL's strategic plan for 2015-2019. The School's structure gives potential for a unique kind of academic collaboration and synergy. It enhances campus life through many arts, music, literature, media and Irish-language events, and it supports the development of Limerick's social and cultural development through initiatives such as the newspaper *The Limerick Voice* and the literary journal *The Ogham Stone*

3   Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

The Quality Review Group (QRG) wishes to thank the University and the School of Culture and Communication (C&C) for their welcome and their hospitality. In particular, we wish to commend the friendly and professional way in which staff of the School engaged in our discussions over the course of the review.

The QRG found the School's self-assessment report (SAR) to be a clear account of the School's activities and a thoughtful analysis of its current environment and context. All members of the School had contributed to the compilation of the SAR. The report was supported by a wide range of relevant evidence and we are grateful for the helpful and timely way in which the School responded to our requests for additional documentation. The SAR formed a very helpful basis for our engagement with the School.

The QRG met with a sample of undergraduate and postgraduate students from the School; all spoke highly of the professionalism of staff, the support provided to learners, and the very positive relationships between staff and students within the School. We also met a selection of employers who spoke very positively about their experience of students on Co-op placements and other project work.

The School was formed fairly recently and its constituent subject areas are still largely focused on the specific context of their own teaching and research priorities. We think there is great scope for potential synergies within the School in appropriate areas of teaching and research collaboration, and we would encourage the School to explore these opportunities.

The QRG feels that the School is providing a wide range of high-quality teaching and research activity, which is a credit to the University and which makes a major contribution to the University's wider reputation. However, this is only being achieved through high staff workloads and significant reliance on a large group of part-time and temporary staff. This does not seem to us to be a robust or sustainable strategy for the long-term health of the School, and it puts at risk the current high quality of its teaching and research. In our detailed recommendations below, we identify a range of actions aimed at addressing some very pertinent resource issues. We hope that these, together with our other recommendations, will provide some useful pointers for areas of potentially fruitful development for the work of the School.

4 QRG Commendations and Recommendations

4.1 QRG Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

1.	The clear and strong mission statement of the School, which is being actively pursued and which has widespread support, in particular with regard to the element of communication.
2.	The School's strong connections outside UL as demonstrated by ties to industry in Journalism and Technical Communication and Instructional Design (TCID), by involvement with local initiatives such as literary festivals and by links to international universities participating in Erasmus.
3.	A curriculum that is imaginative, innovative, and often interdisciplinary.
4.	The Co-op and mandatory study abroad programmes, which benefit students practically and intellectually and are popular with students.
5.	The new BA programme which will offer two kinds of curricular opportunities: 1) access for UL students to disciplines not offered at UL, such as philosophy, theology and geography and 2) more choices for students taking subjects offered by both Mary Immaculate College and UL.
6.	Student satisfaction levels with the modules, which are above the UL average.
7.	The hard-working and dedicated staff who are highly praised by students at all levels.
8.	The fact that external examiners find assessment to be working well and that C&C responds positively to suggestions for revision.
9.	The move towards more continuous assessment in response to student demand.
10.	The well-designed modules, which are routinely updated to improve quality and respond to changing conditions.
11.	The encouragement that C&C gives to interdisciplinary activity by pursuing opportunities for team teaching.
12.	Aonad na Gaeilge, which is widely used by staff and students, provides good access to a range of teaching, learning and language support resources, including online resources.
13.	The facilities for students of journalism, including in particular the radio and

	broadcasting equipment.
14.	The range and availability of appropriate technology and the willingness of staff to embrace IT training and to use effectively platforms such as SULIS and Turnitin.
15.	The good working relationships among staff in the School and their enthusiasm and willingness to collaborate.
16.	The dedication of staff in delivering high quality and volume of teaching and research.
17.	The commitment of staff, in collaboration with Student Affairs support services, to supporting students in difficulty and staff willingness to engage in relevant training.
18.	The feedback from lecturers, which is greatly valued by students.
19.	The UL Research Grant for Returning Academic Carers, which should be more widely advertised in the university community.
20.	The Faculty Book Completion Award system, which is a valuable support to research and should be continued.
21.	The very positive feedback of postgraduate students with regard to the mentoring, support and networking opportunities provided by the School.
22.	The Head of School for his hard work, professionalism and dedication in leading the School of Culture and Communication, despite the fact that he needs more support in order to sustain this level of activity.
23.	The positive role of Aonad na Gaeilge in promoting the Irish language throughout the university.

4.2 QRG Recommendations

Level 1 Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

No.	Level (1/2)	Recommendation	**Brief Justification** (Level 1 only)
1.	1	Work with the University to make sure that planning for the delivery of programmes is informed by the most up-to-date information on expected student numbers and communicate this information in a timely manner to relevant teaching staff.	Proactive communication will help to ensure that staff are sufficiently prepared to provide students with a high-quality programme (particularly in year 1) that can scale sufficiently to accommodate increasing numbers in terms of physical space, teaching strategies and assessment methodologies.
2.	1	Work with staff to explore and adopt a coherent school identity so that the mission can be accomplished in the most collaborative and streamlined way possible.	Having a united front will support the School's efforts to attract investment from the university and to attract high-quality students.
3.	1	Explore ways of hiring staff, reducing contact hours and/or reducing administrative workload.	This will allow the School to deliver on its strategic goals of providing high-quality teaching to smaller groups, increasing research output and increasing the depth and continuity of knowledge within the School by reducing staff turnover.
4.	1	Adopt a more strategic approach to getting more resources, for example by using levers such as student enrolment in the business case for new programme offerings.	Since investment is made by the University on the basis of revenue-generating opportunities, requests for additional resources should speak to this framework. For example, use the impact of year 1 of the new BA to justify additional staff resources.
5.	1	Take advantage of collaboration with Journalism and TCID to integrate digital humanities more thoroughly into more C&C modules.	This approach, which takes advantage of a burgeoning field, can give UL an edge in the way it approaches English. Students also generally want more digital

			education and resources.
6.	1	Conduct a systematic overview of teaching loads to address over-teaching and consider reducing the number of contact hours in later years of the programmes.	This would free up staff and encourage more advanced students to take greater responsibility for their own learning.
7.	1	Continue to lobby for a dedicated location or building to accommodate the whole School and, in the short term, use informal mechanisms such as breakfast or lunch meetings to strengthen the sense of community and staff relationships across the School.	While the QRG supports the long-term goal of the School to acquire a building, in the short term informal mechanisms should be put in place to make up for the effects of not having a physical communal space. Bringing colleagues closer together will increase opportunities for collaboration and for identifying and acting on synergies.
8.	1	Continue to develop and strengthen links with ITD regarding the maintenance of equipment and access to a dedicated technician.	Currently, the School has no dedicated technician and as a result the equipment is not being used to its full capacity and students' access to the equipment is limited.
9.	1	Work with UL senior management to find ways of increasing core staff in the School.	This will alleviate the current risk to the quality and sustainability of teaching and research and will contribute to staff well-being. It will also allow for planned growth. Staff are currently spread too thinly.
10.	1	Create a mechanism to communicate to students how the School has responded to their feedback and/or suggestions.	It is important to communicate to students that their feedback is taken on board and that change can occur as a direct result. It is equally important to explain to students why some suggestions cannot be implemented.
11.	1	As a matter of urgency, address with UL senior management the issue of sabbatical and research leave conditions.	As it stands, the UL policy on sabbatical research leave is exceptionally restrictive compared to that of other universities in the state, particularly in the requirement

No.	Level (1/2)	Recommendation	Brief Justification (Level 1 only)
			that leave be taken outside Ireland. We call for a flexible policy more responsive to the realities both of the different types of research undertaken by staff and to their domestic circumstances.
12.	1	Find ways to increase, by appointment and/or promotion, the number of senior posts so that a greater proportion of staff will be available to assume administrative and leadership roles.	The dearth of senior posts in the School means that many administrative and leadership roles cannot rotate and depend on a very small staff pool.
13.	1	Develop mechanisms to increase coherence and integration of school activities, including an annual school day, outside of term time, to discuss issues of teaching and research collaboration.	There is potential benefit in identifying synergies across the subject areas within the School.

Level 2 Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

No.	Level (1/2)	Recommendation	Brief Justification (Level 1 only)
14.	2	Further increase connections with industry in fast-moving areas such as Journalism.	Closer contact with industry will help equip students with workplace skills (such as using Google Analytics and pitching stories) and competencies (such as adaptability and willingness to learn).
15.	2	Ensure that staff who share offices have ready access to private meeting rooms for confidential discussions with students.	This will facilitate staff to provide support to students as part of their duty of care as per official guidelines.
16.	2	Work with the University to streamline the process for curricular innovation and shorten the time frame within which University approval for changes can be secured.	This will encourage staff to innovate more often and will give them greater flexibility to respond to staff turnover and other unexpected changes that affect curricular decisions.
17.	2	Working with the Cooperative Education & Careers Division, formulate advisory guidelines to help students make an informed choice of placement in the context of their specific field of study.	There is a need to balance the desirability of paid and professionally appropriate placements with the reality that

			these are not always available and that in some contexts, unpaid placements may be educationally valuable.
18.	2	Develop ways to help students of Irish seeking to fulfil the requirements of the Teaching Council by supporting residential placements in the Gaeltacht.	
19.	2	Make the Final Year Project optional.	
20.	2	Continue to develop a new model for the re-launch of the MA in Irish studies that focuses on the core subjects of literature, history and music, participates in current trends towards transnational, global, and comparative approaches, and has a clear and feasible business model based on reliable research into the market for such a degree.	
21.	2	Investigate ways to shift the format of contact away from large lectures and towards tutorials in response to student demand.	
22.	2	Identify and support resources for student groups whose numbers are set to increase as part of UL's strategic plan: undergraduates in the new BA, international, part-time, distance and mature students.	For mature students, this would address needs for additional technology support and would provide help with re-entering an academic environment and with academic writing. For international students, it would boost support for TESOL by coordinating with the School of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics. For distance learners, it would involve further development and monitoring online support systems.
23.	2	Develop better planning mechanisms to predict which modules international students will take.	
24.	2	Support student learning with additional library resources, up-to-date software, and other equipment.	
25.	2	Address the issue of limited access to buildings and resources outside academic teaching hours, by liaising with Buildings & Estates, Room Booking and ITD to obtain access to labs, equipment and	

		computers that have software relevant to C&C students in buildings that remain open after hours.	
26.	2	Liaise with the library to access new databases and make arrangements for access to Irish language material in a range of dialects.	
27.	2	Work with Student Academic Administration (SAA) to improve timetabling in relation to international students and the impact their ad hoc arrival has on tutorials and room allocation.	
28.	2	Work with the University to ensure that research activities which are relevant for C&C are fully and explicitly recognised within the University's criteria for promotions.	
29.	2	Review the organisational set-up of Aonad na Gaeilge and explore alternative models currently in place for units such as the Centre for Teaching and Learning.	The current hourly paid staffing does not support the strategic development of Aonad na Gaeilge and poses a risk to the quality and sustainability of what the centre currently offers.
30.	2	Review the current high levels of staff turnover and identify appropriate remedial actions.	Current staff turnover poses risks to the quality of teaching and research through loss of continuity and brain drain.
31.	2	Liaise with the International Education Division, Student Affairs and course directors to improve awareness among online, outreach, part-time and distance learners of the pastoral support services available to them.	
32.	2	Enhance the role of class reps as a channel for two-way communication, for example by developing more effective forums for discussion and by encouraging reps to seek accredited training through the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP).	
33.	2	Raise awareness of the new Personal Academic Support System (PASS) and monitor the effectiveness of this advisory system.	
34.	2	Continue to work with senior management to ensure that research in the humanities is appropriately recognised within the University's	

		system for measurement of research activity.	
35.	2	To enhance the research profile of the School, ensure that the research and publication records of its members are up to date, visible and easily accessible on the relevant web pages.	
36.	2	Explore and develop other models of applying the Performance Development and Review System (PDRS) based on delegation or wider collaboration.	The PDRS places an onerous burden on the Head of School.
37.	2	Work with senior management to have the role of Head of Subject recognised formally as an administrative and leadership role.	The role of Head of Subject is of major importance within the School and involves a significant workload, yet it is not recognised as an administrative and leadership role by the University. The role of Course Director, on the other hand, is so acknowledged.

Appendices

A   Membership of the QRG

Dr. Bill Harvey	Former Director, QAA Scotland
Prof. Diarmuid Ó Giolláin	Department of Irish Language & Literature, University of Notre Dame
Prof. Marjorie Howes	Professor of English, Boston College
Rachael Hewetson	Knowledge Manager, SAP
Sarah Dunphy	President, UL Students' Union
Ailish O'Farrell	Technical Writer (Recording Secretary)

B   Membership of the Unit's Self-Evaluation Team

Tadhg Ó hIfearnáin (Head of School)	
David Coughlan (Quality Team Leader)	
Ann Marcus-Quinn	
Deirdre Ní Loingsigh	
Henry Silke	
Niamh O'Sullivan	
Síle de Cléir	