UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Quality Review

of the

Finance Department

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), as well as the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB, whose functions are now carried out by Quality and Qualifications Ireland; QQI). This involves a seven-year cycle during which all Departments work to improve the quality of their programmes and services, and 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.

Issued by QSU	10th July 2015
Review dates	23rd to 25th June 2015
Quality Review Group (QRG)	Appendix A
UL QSU website	www.ul.ie/quality
Division website	http://www3.ul.ie/finance/
QQI website	www.qqi.ie
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1 Background

1.1 The 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), whose functions are now carried out by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). The review process involves an approximate seven-year cycle during which each department 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 UL Quality Support Unit (QSU) website (www.ul.ie/quality) provides an elaboration of this process.

The UL quality review process comprises the following four phases:

1. Preparation of a self-assessment report by the unit under review, taking into account feedback from students and customers.
2. Quality (peer) review involving external experts, both national and international, who visit the department, meet with stakeholders and review the self-assessment report (SAR).
3. Preparation of a quality review report (this report), which is made publicly available on the QSU website.
4. Promotion of continuing improvement through monitored implementation of the report recommendations within the resources available to the university.

Support departments are reviewed against international standards as described in the document *Quality Review Guidelines for Support Departments*, which is available on the QSU website. The planned schedule of quality reviews for both academic and support departments is available on the QSU website.

1.2 The Follow-up Process

The recommendations made by the quality review group (QRG) form the basis of a quality improvement plan prepared by the QSU for the department under review. The department immediately sets about evaluating and implementing the recommendations, as appropriate.

Approximately four months later, the Head of Division provides a summary overview of progress to the university's Governing Authority Strategic Planning and Quality Assurance sub-committee (GASPQA). GASPQA members are afforded the opportunity to discuss and evaluate progress.

Approximately 12 months after the review site visit, the Head of Division, 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 Finance Department

The Finance Department is responsible for managing the university's financial, budgeting and reporting processes. The department reports to the President through the office of the Director of Finance. In addition to having overall responsibility for the Finance Department, the Director of Finance has responsibility for the Buildings and Estates Department, the Education Procurement Service, Campus Life Services and subsidiary company activity including residences, sports facilities and the University Concert Hall.

The Finance Department provides financial leadership that supports the University's mission of achieving excellence in teaching, learning and research. This is achieved through: adherence to regulatory governance and legislation, providing a broad portfolio of financial services and maintaining financial stability.

The Finance Department seeks to ensure that customer requirements are determined and met. As the Finance customer base is spread across a wide range of internal and external customers, the Department aims to provide effective and efficient services that meet customer needs.

The department comprises two main units: Operations and Decision Support (Budgeting and Management Reporting). Led by the Financial Controller Operations, the Operations unit has responsibility for payroll, accounts payable, expenses, treasury, systems management, research support, research reporting, preparation and audit of statutory financial statements, procurement, purchasing and the fixed asset register. Led by the Financial Controller Budgeting and Management Reporting, the Decision Support unit has responsibility for budgeting processes, including resource allocation, accounts receivable, costing, budget and financial management, self-funding projects, state funding, information requests, Governing Authority reporting, Executive Committee reporting and the pension control account.

Day-to-day responsibility for the operations of the department rests with the two financial controllers. The Director of Finance and the financial controllers meet on a weekly basis, mainly for the purpose of facilitating communication between the director and the UL Executive Committee.

3 Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

The Quality Review Group (QRG) appreciates the welcome extended to it by the University of Limerick (UL) and, in particular, Professor Gary Walsh's introduction to UL and to the task in hand. The QRG also wishes to thank the staff of the Finance Department and all the relevant stakeholders for their cooperation throughout the review process. The department is commended for its thorough self-assessment report (SAR), the provision of requested supplementary information and the frank and informative participation of the departmental quality team and other staff in their several meetings with the QRG.

The Finance Department defines its mission as one of support for the university's strategic initiatives. The QRG believes that this short statement rather understates the role of the department in the day-to-day operation of the university; it must be the case that practically everyone connected with the university has dealings with the Finance Department or, at least, its processes. A published extended mission statement to reflect this would focus attention on the key operational role of the department. A recommendation to this effect will follow. The QRG believes that the department would benefit from a refreshed image which could include a review of the department name.

UL is a well-established institution within the Limerick and Shannon area. The Finance Department has traditionally contributed to the local community by supporting local suppliers. Where feasible it should continue to strengthen these relationships and support the local region.

It is evident that the department has put significant thought and effort into the continuing development of its QMS process since the last review. The QRG believes that this commitment to continual improvement will provide further benefits for the department's work, staff, customers and stakeholders. The QRG notes with pleasure the high regard in which Finance staff are held; this is based on personal contact and their focus on problem solving and is a real strength of the department. Nevertheless, there is a need for the continued development of robust formal systems for effective liaison and engagement with customers and stakeholders.

4 QRG Commendations and Recommendations

4.1 Quality Management System

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.1.1	The enthusiastic engagement of the Finance Department in the development of the QMS.
4.1.2	The impressive quality of both the service delivered by the department and its contribution to the strategic goals of the university.
4.1.3	The very extensive recent developments in the department driven by the QMS process.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.1.4	Provide ongoing support to embed the QMS across the department.
4.1.5	Create an annual business plan for the department with objectives and clearly defined KPIs which will also inform the PDRS process.
4.1.6	Review the mission statement to fully reflect the department's complete range of activities.

4.2 Customer Focus

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.2.1	The integration of customer requirements into business processes.
4.2.2	The awareness of the need for extensive customer interaction and attention to feedback, reflected by the formal collection of customer feedback through a variety of mechanisms.
4.2.3	The extensive programme of training provided to customers.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.2.4	Use the planned relaunch of the website to make it more user-friendly and ensure that information is kept up to date and that key pages are easily accessed.
4.2.5	Further extend the systematic collection and analysis of customer feedback.
4.2.6	Capitalise on the forthcoming upgrade of the Agresso finance system by providing induction and refresher training and by better signposting opportunities for users to suggest improvements to the system.

4.3 Leadership

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.3.1	The participation of the Finance Department in a range of sectoral, functional and government liaison groups at national level.
4.3.2	The very significant contribution by the department to achieving the objectives of the UL strategic plan.
4.3.3	The progress made in addressing the few shortcomings in the Leadership section of the QMS gap analysis.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.3.4	Match the devolution of budgetary responsibility with clearer budgetary authority by eliminating routine Finance intervention in purchase orders.
4.3.5	Apply the LEAN process review to other areas of the department and champion this approach more widely across the university.
4.3.6	Propose a set of standard documents to ensure clarity and transparency of the budgetary process throughout all levels of the university.

4.4 Involvement of Staff

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.4.1	The commitment to the advancement of Finance staff through training, professional development and mobility.
4.4.2	The increase in engagement of the staff with the PDRS process.
4.4.3	The formalising of the staff communication process through the scheduling of meetings with relevant agendas.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.4.4	Reappraise the workspace, considering in particular both the privacy and accessibility of the Fees office and the desirability of an open plan workspace.
4.4.5	Formalise a consistent approach to documenting and tracking staff suggestions across each function.
4.4.6	Reinforce the use of team meetings, departmental meetings and the PDRS process to ensure effective communication in the department.

4.5 Continual Improvement

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.5.1	The commitment to continual improvement in all areas of the department in recent years, evidenced by significant improvements actually achieved.
4.5.2	The use of benchmarking against other universities to identify best practice and, where necessary, the action taken to reach this level.
4.5.3	The demonstrated ability of the department to adapt to an increasingly demanding economic and regulatory climate.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.5.4	Fully communicate and explain changes and improvements in Finance Department systems and procedures to all customers.
4.5.5	Continue to communicate audit findings to Finance management and to staff working in the audited area, and share audit insights with areas to which they may be of relevance.
4.5.6	Strengthen the department's contribution to benchmarking exercises within the university.

4.6 Process Approach to Services Provided

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.6.1	The high level of quality-related documentation which is now available on the Finance website.
4.6.2	The affirmation of standards through several channels, including internal and external audits and feedback from customers and other stakeholders.
4.6.3	The maintenance of the quality improvement (QI) action plan with targeted outcomes.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.6.4	Ensure that the content and progress of the QI action plan is formally approved by the Director of Finance.
4.6.5	Carry out an annual self-assessment of progress on the quality agenda.
4.6.6	Continue the efforts to improve the user experience by working to reduce the number of rejected purchase orders.

4.7 Systematic Approach to Management

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.7.1	The continued efforts to optimise the benefits of the Agresso system.
4.7.2	The high quality of work management demonstrated by the department in producing the large number of time-critical outputs, reports and audit responses required of it.
4.7.3	The externally validated quality of the expenses, payroll and asset management systems, which are close to leading practice for the university sector in Ireland.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.7.4	Use the planned upgrade of Agresso to reduce the need for Finance Department review and approval of purchase orders, by automating the validation of entries and budget availability checks.
4.7.5	Improve the ability of budget holders to customise management reports from Finance Department systems.
4.7.6	Enable users to better interrogate standard reports to the level of detail they require.

4.8 Factual Approach to Decision-Making

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.8.1	The contribution of the department to the development of strategic decision making within the university.
4.8.2	The extent of evidence-based change, such as in the expenses system, the use of online purchase orders, and prompt payment performance.
4.8.3	The commitment to the continued development of risk management across the department.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.8.4	Maximise the devolution of both responsibility and control to budget holders having due regard to business needs and best governance practice.
4.8.5	Introduce the phasing of budgets to facilitate enhanced monitoring.
4.8.6	Extend the use of KPIs within the department and assist in the development of appropriate KPIs for other parts of the university.

4.9 Supplier, Partner and Community Relationships

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.9.1	The department's strong identification with all key stakeholders, which is informed by comprehensive customer surveys and demonstrated, for example, by engagement in open days and high levels of supplier satisfaction with the tendering processes.
4.9.2	The high score achieved in the QMS gap analysis, with no apparent scope for further improvement and an indication of a continuing strength in this area.
4.9.3	The effective and improving interaction and communication channels with external auditors.
4.9.4	The very favourable performance of the department in relation to supplier payments in a benchmarking exercise against other Irish universities.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.9.5	Improve general access to the Fees function especially in cases of urgency. This could be achieved by extension of opening hours or cooperation with the Student Academic Administration office.
4.9.6	Support and promote opportunities for the utilisation of local and regional SMEs as suppliers.
4.9.7	At university level, consider the benefits of a single co-located student service centre.

Appendices

A Membership of the Quality Review Group

Prof. Nigel Steele (Chair)	Emeritus Prof of Maths, Coventry University
Mr. Tony Buckley	Assistant Secretary, Revenue
Ms. Jacinta Grimes	Financial Consultant, GE
Mr. Andrew Menzies	Director of Finance, Heriot-Watt University
Ms. Deirdre O'Dwyer	Risk Management Officer, University of Limerick
Ms. Ailish O'Farrell	Technical Writer, Limerick (Recording Secretary)

B Membership of the Division's Quality Team

John Field	Director of Finance
Rosemary Fogarty	Financial Controller - Operations
Declan Hannan	Financial Controller - Decision Support (Budgeting & Mgt Reporting)
Ber O'Connell	Finance Systems Manager (Quality Lead)
Liam Ryan	Financial Accountant
Sandra Hammersley	Finance Manager Research
Majella O'Gorman	Procurement Manager
Sean Ryan	Finance Manager Decision Support
Valerie Moore	Cost & Management Accountant
Clare O'Shaughnessy	Revenue Accountant
Thomas Vaughan	Research Accountant