UNIVERSITY *of* LIMERICK

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

Quality Review

of the

International Education Division

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.

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Quality Review Group (QRG)	Appendix A
UL QSU website	www.ul.ie/quality
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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 International Education Division

Since its inception in 1972, UL has focused on attracting international academic staff and forging links with overseas institutions. Internationalisation was first formalised in 1987 when UL joined the European mobility programme Erasmus and later through the development of a Study Abroad programme in 1991. In 2000, the university centralised internationalisation activity by establishing the International Education Division (IED). With a staff of six, the new division had responsibility for implementing UL's internationalisation strategy across three growing areas of activity: (i) Erasmus and international exchange; (ii) full-degree international student recruitment; and (iii) the Study Abroad Programme (SAP). To reflect these areas of activity, the work of the division is based on the following three functional units: Erasmus & Exchanges, Full Degree and Study Abroad. The work of the three functional units, or sections, is supported by the cross-cutting student support function.

The division has 17 staff members and is structured around the Erasmus & Exchanges, Full Degree and Study Abroad sections. Each section team has three sub-functions: (i) management, to oversee promotion and lead the section; (ii) admissions; and (iii) student query/pastoral care. The Full Degree section has two managers while the Erasmus & Exchanges and Study Abroad sections have one manager each. The overall structure is complemented by a cross-functional Student Support Officer and Digital Media Coordinator. The division is led by the Director and Deputy Director.

A comprehensive communications structure has been in place for a number of years. All members of the division meet annually to review activity and plan for the year ahead and monthly to review progress. Each section team meets weekly to plan activity ('section meetings'). The Director and Deputy Director meet with each section manager and the Student Support Officer once a month ('manager meetings') to review and plan activity, and the Director and Deputy Director meet once a week.

A core strength of the IED team is the high level of knowledge and teamwork developed within each functional area. IED uses market intelligence and applies international best practice to ensure that UL is promoted effectively overseas, the application process is efficient and the student journey on the programmes managed by the division runs smoothly.

Professional knowledge in the area of international education is constantly developed within the division through access to training and conferences on a planned and ongoing basis. The team works hard and in a collaborative and congenial manner, which makes for a positive work environment.

3   *Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)*

The QRG found the self-assessment report (SAR) of the International Education Division (IED) to be a clear account of the division's activities and a thoughtful analysis of its current environment and context. All members of the division 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 division responded to our requests for additional documentation. The SAR formed a very helpful basis for our engagement with the division.

In our discussions with members of IED, the QRG found staff to be very helpful and open. We met with a range of stakeholders and with students who had made use of IED services; all spoke highly of the professionalism displayed by members of the division and we heard many endorsements of the high quality of service provided by staff.

IED demonstrated a clear and consistent commitment to addressing the needs of the students it supports, and to delivering the ambitious and challenging targets for international recruitment in the new University of Limerick Strategic Plan 2015-2019: *Broadening Horizons*. The high profile given to internationalisation in the plan provides a very timely opportunity for the division to reflect on ways in which its good work can be further enhanced, in collaboration with its partners and stakeholders.

In the view of the QRG, there is scope for more proactive and targeted engagement by the division with both academic and support departments across the university, in order to better address complex issues which require more effective collaboration and sharing of information across the university. This will require the support of UL senior management.

While IED operates its internal processes very effectively, we think there is scope for further reflection and review of its operations, in order to enhance divisional flexibility and cohesion across the full range of activities. We would encourage the division to explore options for sharing skills and perspectives more widely across all its functional areas, in order to develop a more strategic approach to prioritisation of its key objectives over the next few years.

The detailed QRG recommendations in the following sections will, we hope, provide some useful pointers for areas of potentially fruitful development for the work of the division.

4   QRG Commendations and Recommendations

4.1   Quality Management System

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.1.1	The established quality and continuous improvement ethos which has resulted in significant and tangible benefits to the university as a whole.
4.1.2	The IED team, which is passionate about service delivery and will clearly "go the extra mile" to look after its students.
4.1.3	The involvement of students in delivering a quality service through initiatives such as the Buddy Programme.
4.1.4	The outstanding results achieved by IED in the International Student Barometer (ISB) surveys.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.1.5	Review and update quality objectives in line with the recently published UL strategic plan.
4.1.6	Update the customer charter to identify precisely who the customers are. The mission statement and quality policy appear to reference staff, but the customer charter, business and quality processes and other aspects of the quality management system (QMS) do not appear to cover these customers in any depth.
4.1.7	Ensure appropriate methodologies are in place to gather feedback from each type of customer and to respond to emerging issues and trends.
4.1.8	Fully document the quality assurance measures for the vetting, selection and monitoring of education agents.
4.1.9	Document procedures in relation to the Buddy Programme, to include screening, recruitment, training and engagement with students, and describe the role of the buddies.
4.1.10	Promote the Quality section on the IED website - the charter and surveys are certainly worth bringing to the forefront of the site.

4.2   Customer Focus

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.2.1	The active role of IED in using external research to measure student satisfaction, in particular the use of focused ISB surveys which facilitates benchmarking against selected universities.
4.2.2	The good evidence that IED has used its various student satisfaction surveys to address any identified weaknesses.
4.2.3	The extremely positive feedback given by students in focus groups about the services provided to them by IED.
4.2.4	The high student satisfaction scorings for the work of agents, which reflects the constructive relationship developed with agents by IED.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.2.5	Undertake a student journey analysis (from first contact to becoming an alumnus), identify critical touch points to the relationship, and hence continue to improve the total student experience at UL through involving all key actors (including academics, support services, IED and agents).
4.2.6	Review levels of customer care to ensure an appropriate balance between legal requirements, customer needs and IED resourcing.
4.2.7	Initiate a review across the university of all units and activities that focus on international students (including the academic departments, the offices of the Assistant Deans International, the Graduate School and IED) with a view to ensuring a more consolidated and cost-effective service.
4.2.8	Ensure that the new website directly reflects the diversity of international student needs, targets priority countries and supports the marketing and communications strategy of the university.
4.2.9	Liaise with UL colleagues to ensure that the availability of any programme or module advertised to potential international students is accurately presented and updated, and that student expectations are appropriately managed.

4.3 Leadership

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.3.1	The very obvious focus of IED management on quality in meeting and exceeding customers' expectations.
4.3.2	The strong match between the division's organisational structure and its core functions.
4.3.3	The division's approach to internal communications, which is a good blend of formal meetings and informal exchanges.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.3.4	Engage with faculty in a formal structure to facilitate and showcase the added value of internationalisation.
4.3.5	Identify relevant interrelationships within the university support departments and raise awareness of the division internally by developing effective means of communication with those concerned.
4.3.6	Review both current best practice with regard to the scope of international student support services and referral to other support structures in order to ensure that IED staff resources are used most appropriately.

4.4 Involvement of Staff

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.4.1	The enthusiastic, engaged, competent and customer-focused IED team whose strong identity and ethos were very visible to the QRG.
4.4.2	The clear evidence that staff training and development are prioritised in line with divisional objectives.
4.4.3	The clear evidence of staff engagement with the QMS.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.4.4	Conduct a more detailed risk assessment in relation to travel that IED staff undertake in the course of their duties, with a view to identifying and mitigating both personal and financial risks and bearing in mind any legal or insurance implications.
4.4.5	Clarify IED's role in the duty of care UL has to students and staff who travel abroad for study- or work-related reasons. This would help define boundaries for appropriate intervention by IED staff in supporting students.
4.4.6	Consider a flow chart or similar document to assist staff in dealing with queries at the margins of IED's service boundaries which would also allow for special cases where flexibility or personal judgment may be required.

4.5 Continual Improvement

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.5.1	The great willingness displayed by the division to continually improve its services based on formal and informal customer feedback.
4.5.2	The strong sense of professional commitment throughout the division in its efforts to deliver excellent student support services.
4.5.3	The readiness of IED to investigate and adopt technical solutions that can enhance the division's service to customers.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.5.4	Implement proposed changes to the continual improvements and customer feedback logs to ensure that quality improvement measures are completed and evaluated.
4.5.5	Ensure that positive customer feedback is appropriately publicised to IED staff and service users.
4.5.6	Link the customer feedback log with the planned in-house customer relationship management (CRM) system.
4.5.7	Implement a structure whereby activities logged in the continual improvements log are reviewed by the quality team on a quarterly basis and potential trends are analysed annually.

4.6   Process Approach

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.6.1	The rapid progress made by the division in implementing the formal UL QMS and in documenting IED quality and business processes.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.6.2	Further develop process maps to identify 'critical-to-quality' interdepartmental, partner and stakeholder relationships.
4.6.3	Update business processes to ensure that interdepartmental dependencies are mapped and that customer feedback mechanisms are included, and establish mutual expectations and deliverables to enhance quality across the university.
4.6.4	Provide linkages within the process maps to internal department procedures such as marketing and business activities.
4.6.5	Make explicit reference to the division's QMS in the IED induction process for new staff.
4.6.6	Develop an appropriate schedule for reviewing documented quality and business processes to embed continuous improvement and to ensure the continued relevance of the processes, while minimising unnecessary administrative burdens.
4.6.7	Review and rationalise the way in which student queries are handled (for example, face-to-face queries vs. FAQs) to allow a more effective deployment of staff resources.

4.7 Systematic Approach to Management

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.7.1	The agility and responsiveness of the division in actively collecting, analysing and reacting to customer feedback.
4.7.2	The clear evidence of a systematic approach to operational planning and management.
4.7.3	The evidence that much work and planning have gone into implementing the UL QMS framework.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.7.4	Develop more effective mechanisms to ensure a stronger match between IED's evolving business plan and the allocation/reallocation of human and financial resources within the division.
4.7.5	Consider carefully the format and nature of feedback mechanisms that will provide most value in terms of strategic decision making and planning, taking into consideration the effort required to record, review and prioritise records.

4.8 Factual Approach to Decision Making

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.8.1	IED's systematic approach to prioritising markets and to developing appropriate country-focused marketing strategies.
4.8.2	The implementation of an applications management process that turns applications to offers within a turnaround time significantly faster than that of benchmarked universities.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.8.3	Work with senior management to ensure that all staff across UL (academic, management and administrative) 'own' the UL international strategy, and promote the use of appropriate KPIs by relevant units within the university.
4.8.4	Liaise with senior management to ensure better alignment between long-term strategic goals and current funding models to reflect the fact that a two- or three-year cycle is required to achieve impact in international student markets, and that IED investment projects have many of the characteristics of capital projects.
4.8.5	Exploit the existing synergies across UL and develop country focus groups and associated action plans (to include student recruitment, research cooperation, marketing, communications and exchanges) for each priority country. The country focus groups should comprise all staff (academic, management and administrative) with strong interests in the country.
4.8.6	Update the risk register to reflect the new UL strategic plan.

4.9   Supplier, Partner & Community Relations

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.9.1	IED's welcoming and flexible approach when reacting to feedback from stakeholders.
4.9.2	The division's analysis of historical data to pre-empt future issues.
4.9.3	The division's success in building strong relationships with partners and suppliers.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.9.4	Prioritise categorising and filtering in the continual improvements log to enhance its use as a quality tool for work with IED's partners.
4.9.5	Contribute to the development and promotion of UL's global brand identity through IED's work with partners and suppliers.

Appendices

A   Membership of the Quality Review Group

Dr. Bill Harvey (Chair)	Former Director, QAA Scotland
Ms. Erika Dabhilkar	Head of International Office, Uppsala University
Mr. Neil Kemp	International Higher Education Consultant and Visiting Fellow, Institute of Education, University of London
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Ms. Elaine Potter	Marketing Executive, IMS Marketing
Ms. Ailish O'Farrell	(Recording Secretary) Technical Writer, Limerick
Mr. Tony Shone	Director, Invisio

B   Membership of the Division's Quality Team

Josephine Page (Director)	Katie McAuliffe
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