



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Quality Review of the Research Office

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	12 th February 2016
Review dates	19 th to 21 st January 2016
Quality Review Group (QRG)	Appendix A
UL QSU website	www.ul.ie/quality
Division website	http://www.ul.ie/research/
QQI website	www.qqi.ie
Copyright © University of Limerick,	February 2016

This report is the property of the University of Limerick and may be printed and distributed for personal use only. The document must not be redistributed or republished, in part or whole, without the express permission of the University of Limerick.

Table of Contents

1	Background	1
1.1	The Quality Review Process	1
1.2	The Follow-up Process	1
2	Office of the Vice President Research (Research Office).....	2
3	Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG).....	3
4	QRG Commendations and Recommendations	4
4.1	Quality Management System	4
4.2	Customer Focus.....	5
4.3	Leadership	6
4.4	Engagement of People	7
4.5	Process Approach.....	8
4.6	Continual Improvement.....	9
4.7	Evidence-Based Decision Making.....	10
4.8	Relationship Management	11
	Appendices	12
A	Membership of the Quality Review Group.....	12
B	Membership of the Division's Self-Evaluation Team	12

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.

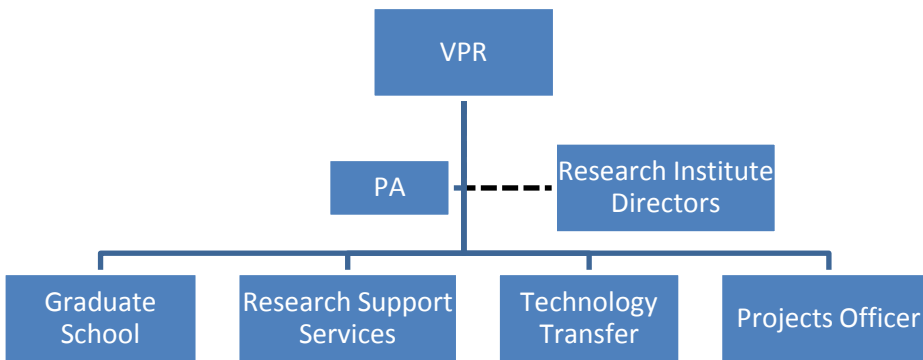
Approximately 12 months after the review site visit, the Head of Division, Vice President Academic & Registrar and Director of Quality meet to formally review progress and to agree on any remaining actions to be taken.

2 Office of the Vice President Research (Research Office)

Established in 1991, the [Office of the Vice President Research](#) leads the formulation, development and delivery of the university’s research policy, strategy and support services. The mission of the Research Office is to facilitate the growth of excellent, impactful and innovative research, postgraduate education and knowledge transfer activities at UL.

The Office works with the faculty deans, UL management and the research community to grow research capacity, quality, output and revenue. The Office plays an important role in building links with national and international policymakers, funding bodies, industry and other external bodies.

As outlined in the figure below, the Research Office comprises three operational units – Graduate School, Research Support Services and Technology Transfer – and the Research and Innovation Projects Officer.



The Vice President Research (VPR) provides strategic leadership in terms of strategy development and implementation. The VPR is supported by the managers of the three units – Dean Graduate School, Director of Research Support Services and Director of Technology Transfer – and by the Research and Innovation Projects Officer. Each unit delivers operational services to its customers. Along with the VPR, the three unit managers and the Projects Officer form the Research Office management team. The research institute directors report to the VPR on strategic matters and report to their departments and faculties in terms of line management.

The Research Office plays a leadership role in supporting the growth of the university’s research activities. This is achieved by developing and implementing strategic research initiatives. In addition, the Research Office is responsible for monitoring research performance metrics to support strategic decision making.

In collaboration with other support divisions, the Research Office provides pre- and post-award support to researchers. It also supports researchers to engage with external partners through collaborative funding proposals and liaises with funding agencies, nationally and internationally, on behalf of the university.

3 Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

The Research Office works with university management, the faculty deans and the research community to grow research capacity, quality, output and revenue. Under the strong leadership of the Vice President Research, the Office has overseen an expansion of research income, an impressive increase in journal publications and citations and a substantial growth in postgraduate research student numbers. Since 2008, when the Office underwent the first review of its recently developed quality management system (QMS), the core operations, services and customer base of the Office have largely remained unchanged; the QMS has, however, evolved as the Office's remit has expanded to include policy and innovation activities. In preparation for the current review, many of the recommendations of a gap analysis conducted by the Quality Support Unit have been implemented and significant efforts have been made to promote the QMS across the Office. It was clear to the QRG that preparations for the review, including the writing of the self-assessment report (SAR), had increased levels of staff engagement with the QMS.

The QRG found the SAR to be a very useful foundation for the conduct of the review. It was well organised, clearly written and reflective in tone. It was open about progress on the QMS since the 2008 review and about the work that remains to be done on improving it. The QRG was provided with a substantial portfolio of supporting evidence and the Office responded with alacrity to further requests for documents and data. During the visit the team was able to meet most of the staff of the Office in a series of discussions on the elements of the QMS. All of those present in the meetings responded openly and generously to questioning and engaged collegially with the team in articulating the various operations of the Office and in fleshing out elements of the SAR.

The QRG had the opportunity to meet with a group of postgraduate research students who had used the services of the Office and who spoke gratefully of the generic training offered and the advice and aid provided in seeking funding. A group of research-active staff provided helpful and mainly supportive comments on the activities of the Office. The QRG also met with representatives of other support departments who reported on fruitful and harmonious partnerships with the Research Office. A group of external stakeholders spoke with enthusiasm of the work of the Office in engaging with industry and with regional and development agencies. The QRG was pleased to note the high regard in which internal and external customers and stakeholders hold individual members of the Research Office staff.

The QRG concludes that there can be no doubt about the commitment of the Research Office to quality in all its activities, and it hopes that the Office will be able to maintain the momentum demonstrated in preparation for this review as it continues to develop its QMS.

4 QRG Commendations and Recommendations

4.1 Quality Management System

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.1.1	The embedding of the quality management system (QMS) across all functions within the Research Office.
4.1.2	The effective use of the quality improvement action plan (QIAP).
4.1.3	The commitment of all staff to a culture of high quality and continuous improvement.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.1.4	Engage with postgraduate students when new processes which may have an impact on their experience are being introduced.
-------	---

4.2 Customer Focus

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.2.1	The genuine commitment of the Research Office staff to customer identification and service.
4.2.2	The significant improvement in recent years of the support provided to researchers.
4.2.3	The timely and comprehensive service provided to external stakeholders.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.2.4	Redesign the customer survey to cover all aspects of the support provided to researchers, including support from units other than the Research Office.
4.2.5	Consider introducing training for new PIs on post-award grant management.
4.2.6	Streamline the opening of a research account once a grant has been awarded.

4.3 Leadership

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.3.1	The inclusive process used for the production of the high-quality, clear and ambitious research strategy, <i>Excellence and Impact 2020</i> .
4.3.2	The work of the Research Office in creating conditions conducive to higher levels of institutional performance in research, graduate training and technology transfer.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.3.3	Continue creative and indefatigable leadership in the evolution of the UL culture with the objective of further increasing the institution's research profile, regionally, nationally and internationally.
4.3.4	Develop a leadership succession strategy to ensure that the impressive pace of progress achieved under the current leadership and management team is sustained.

4.4 Engagement of People

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.4.1	The effective communication within and between the different operational units of the Research Office.
4.4.2	The effective use of cross training to cover staff absence.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.4.3	Ensure a consistent level of service provision by using the PDRS to assist staff to achieve their full potential.
4.4.4	Develop a formal method for recording all staff development.

4.5 *Process Approach*

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.5.1	The proactive approach to the use of technology to enhance service provision.
4.5.2	The identification and articulation of Research Office services and associated business processes.
4.5.3	The introduction of online application and enrolment systems for taught postgraduate programmes.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.5.4	Enhance the process for dealing with postgraduate research students on leave of absence.
4.5.5	Continue to produce high-quality documentation to support and strengthen the core business of the Office.
4.5.6	Prioritise the development of a web-based platform for workflow management.
4.5.7	In accordance with international practice, adopt a more timely process for ratification of the results of postgraduate research degrees.

4.6 Continual Improvement

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.6.1	The embedding of a culture of continual improvement at all levels in the Research Office.
4.6.2	The effective use of feedback from both internal and external stakeholders.
4.6.3	The provision of an improved service, in particular to support research.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.6.4	Consider engaging external experts to further develop staff expertise in proposal writing.
4.6.5	Build on the existing process for continual improvement to identify disruptive stimuli in order to effect step change.

4.7 Evidence-Based Decision Making

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.7.1	The development of clear, well-considered metrics and monitoring/reporting processes.
4.7.2	The effective use of data to influence institutional, departmental and individual decisions and to incentivise behaviour that advances the UL research profile.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.7.3	Use all available means to advance the case for institutional investment in the development of integrated information systems to streamline and facilitate the collection and generation of reliable data.
4.7.4	Employ data on UL's realised and planned growth in research, graduate training and innovation to inform the allocation of adequate resources to the Research Office and associated units.

4.8 Relationship Management

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

4.8.1	The excellent formal and informal relationships between the Research Office and its stakeholders.
4.8.2	The effective representation of the Research Office on significant regional, national and international strategic and policy-making committees.
4.8.3	The leadership role of the Research Office in the proactive development of, and participation in, significant external collaborative initiatives.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.8.4	Develop a marketing strategy to increase awareness of the services provided by the Research Office to regional and national companies and industries.
4.8.5	Establish a more visible on-campus physical presence to make the services of the Research Office more accessible to potential external clients in a welcoming environment.
4.8.6	Prioritise the internationalisation agenda within the Research Office in line with UL's strategic goals under Horizon 2020.

Appendices

A Membership of the Quality Review Group

Ms. Ann Kettle (Chair)	Honorary Senior Lecturer, University of St. Andrews
Ms. Shannon Burns	PhD Student (University of Limerick)
Ms. Judith Chadwick	Assistant Vice-President, Research Services, University of Toronto
Mr. Hugh Deighan	Quality Assurance Manager, Ulster University
Ms. Neasa Fahy O'Donnell	Senior Exec Sport Administrator, University of Limerick
Prof. Ieuan Owen	Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research & International), University of Lincoln
Ms. Ailish O'Farrell (Recording Secretary)	Technical Writer

B Membership of the Division's Self-Evaluation Team

Mary Shire (Vice President Research)	Joan O'Sullivan
Paul Dillon (Quality Team Leader)	Yvonne Kiely
Puneet Saidha	Margaret Fennessy
Huw Lewis	Michael Frain
Eileen O'Connor	Regina Fitzgerald