



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 Office of the President

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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.

Support units are reviewed against international standards as described in the document *Quality Review Process for Support Units: Guidelines and QMS Framework*, 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 Office of the President

2.1 Introduction

The President is the Chief Officer of the University of Limerick (UL). Reporting to the University's Governing Authority, the President is responsible for directing the University in its academic, administrative, financial, human resource and other activities. The Office of the President provides management and administrative support to the President and other senior officers and to the Governing Authority.

2.2 Structure of the Office

The work of the Office of the President is structured around three units: President's Office, Corporate Secretary's Office and Quality Support Unit. Each unit has distinct functions, structures and reporting lines. The Vice President Academic & Registrar (VPA&R), Corporate Secretary, Director of Corporate Affairs and Office Manager report to the President. The Associate Vice President Academic, Associate Registrar and Director of Quality report to the VPA&R.

For the purpose of this quality review, the term 'Office of the President', or 'Office', refers collectively to the three units identified above.

2.2.1 President's Office

The President's Office incorporates the President, VPA&R, Director of Corporate Affairs, Office Manager and members of support staff. The President's Office supports the strategic planning work of the President and is responsible for developing and maintaining individual, corporate and institutional relationships on behalf of the President. The unit has overall responsibility for leading the academic activities of the University and for the support services that underpin those activities, including teaching and learning strategies and academic systems, policies and procedures. Additionally, the unit oversees programme development, approval and review processes, academic regulation, student discipline and external examining processes. It undertakes a range of external relations, special projects, communications, public relations and protocol functions involving the President.

2.2.2 Corporate Secretary's Office

The Corporate Secretary's Office has responsibility for the University governance functions (including the Governing Authority), legislative compliance, corporate legal affairs, risk management, internal audit and the visual arts collections. The unit also manages the recruitment and appointment of the president, academic vice presidents and deans.

2.2.3 Quality Support Unit

The Quality Support Unit ensures that statutory and regulatory requirements are met by the University. The unit manages the quality review process, supports the development of QMSs for all units within the University and conducts student surveys and student progression analysis.

3 Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

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

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

The QRG met with a range of stakeholders and users of the services provided by the Office; all spoke highly of the professionalism displayed by members of the Office and we heard many endorsements of the high quality of service provided by staff.

The Office of the President is a complex multi-functional unit and there have been challenges in applying the University's quality framework to the analysis of the Office's functions. In particular, senior officers, including the President, have dual roles as both leaders and service recipients of the work of the Office. We were very conscious that the focus of our review was the operation of the Office and not the broader leadership functions of the University senior management. We would invite the Office to reflect further on how these dualities affect their approach to quality improvement and their implementation of the quality management system (QMS).

While the SAR provides careful documentation and analysis of a wide range of relevant activities, the QRG feels that it underplays the importance of the Office's role in some areas. In particular, we feel that the SAR does not reflect the totality and full value of the Office's expertise in policy development and implementation, both in support of the work of University committees and senior managers, and also as a source of advice and guidance to the UL community as a whole. We would encourage staff in the Office to reflect further on ways in which they might highlight their undoubted skill set in this area, in order to enhance their profile and the contribution they make to the wider work of the University.

Our detailed recommendations below will, we hope, provide some useful pointers for areas of potentially fruitful development for the work of the Office.

4 QRG Commendations and Recommendations

4.1 QRG Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

1.	The Office staff, who are held in high respect because of their professional service, policy knowledge and expertise.
2.	The Office staff, who are regarded as approachable and supportive by their colleagues, student leaders, campus community members and external stakeholders.
3.	The strong and productive relationship of the Office with the student representative bodies and the demonstrable commitment to working in partnership to deliver initiatives that respond to student demand and improve the student experience.
4.	The effective systems in place and the dedication of staff to delivering a high-quality and efficient committee servicing operation.
5.	The high-quality support and advice that adds value to the experience of UL units undergoing quality reviews.
6.	The comprehensive communication process employed in drafting the current UL strategic plan and the establishment of suitable oversight processes for monitoring progress in the implementation of the plan.
7.	The President's Implementation Report to Governing Authority on progress against the strategic plan, which is a model of good practice for monitoring the implementation of plans.
8.	The high level of cross-training and subsequent scope for cover among staff in the President's Office and the Corporate Secretary's Office and the added resilience which this brings to the functioning of these two units.
9.	The positive impact that the QMS process has had on the work and working practices of staff in the Office of the President.
10.	The high standard of documentation that supports the QMS, particularly the quality improvement plan (QIP) which is an exemplar of good practice.
11.	The strong process approach as demonstrated by the audit schedule, the number of trained auditors across the Office and the impact of process review recommendations on continual improvement.
12.	The significant development and embedding of the QMS to a high standard in a relatively short period of time.

4.2 QRG Recommendations

Level 1 Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

No.	Level (1/2)	Recommendation	Brief Justification (Level 1 only)
1.	1	Prioritise a coordinated approach to the University's institutional research and data analysis capacity.	A range of data sets is collected, stored and analysed for various purposes across the University but accessing them can be difficult as individuals need to know who holds what data. The QRG recommends implementing a more coordinated approach. As a technical solution will take time and significant resource, an interim means of providing a single gateway or point of contact for institutional research and data requests is recommended.
2.	1	Strengthen the plan for a University technical solution for managing UL data by establishing specific timelines and budgets.	A technical solution, such as a data warehouse, is an important tool for a variety of planning purposes. A plan with timelines and budget can both keep a project on track and be a signal of senior management commitment.
3.	1	Implement more rigorous procedures for screening institutional data for accuracy, completeness, reliability and relevance.	As the Office provides data to external sources, both for legislative compliance and university rankings, it has ultimate responsibility for data verification and this should be operationalised. Verification should extend beyond the current model which is based on a plausibility check.
4.	1	Explicitly recognise, adopt and develop the role of the Office in support of strategic policy makers at UL (namely, Governing Authority and its committees, the President and Executive Committee), in providing input to both short- and long-term strategic planning, evaluating the input provided and facilitating the strategy and policy making processes of UL leadership.	While the Office of the President is (rightly) charged with tasks related to implementation of regulations, policies and good practice at an operational level, the information gathered, the insight into opportunities and risks accrued and the expertise of staff also make the Office an invaluable resource as a content provider in strategic planning and as a process facilitator. De facto, the Office of the President acts in this capacity already. Moving forward, it should make this role explicit

			and proactively embrace it by defining the Office's role in providing services in strategic development processes.
5.	1	Identify and publish owners (in terms of both institutional function and name) for each policy and process in the remit of the Office of the President.	Clearly understood personal assignment of tasks helps to sharpen personal responsibility as well as to enhance individual leadership capacity in the areas so assigned. From a customer perspective, communicating personal responsibilities helps to identify contact points, thus facilitating easier access to services and avoiding complications in addressing matters of concern or suggestions for improvement. Committees cannot be responsible for implementation.
6.	1	Review and revise communication channels with UL staff and faculty in order to improve awareness of the outputs of the Office.	It is important that the members of the University community be adequately informed about matters that affect their work and that staff and faculty know whom to contact for advice, support and query resolution. The QRG would encourage the Office to consider using multiple and targeted communication channels.

Level 2 Recommendations

7.	2	Provide staff with opportunities to connect with university administrators working in equivalent offices, nationally and internationally, through networking opportunities, conference attendance and comparative site visits.	Comparison with peer roles and offices provides opportunities for new approaches, knowledge exchange, benchmarking and staff development. In addition, international engagement by staff in the Office of the President will support the international focus of the University strategic plan.
8.	2	Implement the proposed systematic approach to maintaining the strong professional interest and engagement of staff in the quality framework.	Staff engagement is very high and this recommendation is to express the support of the QRG for activities that will maintain this level of engagement.
9.	2	Establish an appropriate form of cover arrangement to support the functions of the Quality Support Unit (QSU).	There is a significant risk to key institutional functions caused by the small size of the QSU. There are also potentially great opportunities for staff development through involvement in the work of this unit. The aim of this

			measure is to improve the resilience of the QSU and ensure ongoing delivery of service.
10.	2	Track and check the completion of processes which are dependent on input or action from other departments and divisions.	
11.	2	Review and revise mechanisms to enable customer feedback to the Office.	The QRG recognises the openness and willingness of the Office to receive and act on feedback. Customers should have more accessible routes to give feedback for eventual inclusion in the QIP. The survey link attached to email communications from the Office does not appear to be generating sufficient useful feedback that sheds light on customer requirements.
12.	2	Develop a comprehensive, UL-wide approach to gathering and responding to student feedback, including student surveys.	The QRG heard evidence at a number of meetings that there is no central coordination of student surveys across UL and that an institution-wide policy would be desirable.
13.	2	Identify, approve and publish a set of institutional key performance indicators that are monitored by UL.	
14.	2	Highlight the capacity of the Office to provide expertise and advice to the University community on a range of policy and strategic issues.	

Appendices

A Membership of the QRG

Dr. Bill Harvey (Chair)	Former Director, QAA Scotland.
Dr. Liz Eedle	Executive Officer to the Vice-Chancellor, The Australian National University.
Prof. Dr. jur. Jürgen Kohler	Professor of Private Law and Civil Procedure, Greifswald University.
Mr. Derfel Owen	Director of Academic Services, University College London.
Mr. Diarmuid Scully	PhD Student, University of Limerick.
Ms. Ciara McCaffrey	Deputy Librarian, University of Limerick.
Ms. Ailish O'Farrell (Recording Secretary)	Technical Writer, Limerick.

B Membership of the Unit's Self-Evaluation Team / Quality Team

SET Team	Quality Team
Seamus Dolan	Seamus Dolan (Quality Team Leader)
Grainne Frain	Nancy Holt
Eamonn Moran	Eamonn Moran
Kim O'Mahony	Aelish Nagle
Pat Phelan	Deirdre O'Dwyer
Gary Walsh	Kim O'Mahony