



Report of the Quality Review Group to the National Council of Exercise and Fitness

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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](#), as amended by the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019. The UL Quality Support Unit (QSU) website (www.ul.ie/quality) provides details on the process.

Academic units are reviewed against international standards as described in the document *Quality Review Process for Academic Units*, 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 report and responds to the recommendations of the QRG, devises plans to implement them and reports implementation progress to the University Quality Committee 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 seven to nine months after receiving the QIP template from the QSU, the head of unit provides a summary overview of progress to the university's Quality Committee. Committee members are afforded the opportunity to discuss and evaluate progress.

Approximately 18 months after receiving the QIP template, the head of unit, Vice President Academic Affairs & Student Engagement, Dean (where relevant) and Director of Quality meet to formally review progress and to agree on any remaining actions to be taken.

2 Summary Details of the NCEF

The National Council for Exercise and Fitness (NCEF) was established in 1987 at Thomond College of Education (now part of the University of Limerick) and became an academic affiliate of UL in 2006. The NCEF provides and facilitates comprehensive education and training for exercise and health fitness professionals in Ireland. The organisation was established in 1987 by the Physical Education Association of Ireland (PEAI) in association with Thomond College of Education (now the Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences (PESS) at the University of Limerick). The initiation of the scheme was supported by the Irish Government through the then Sports Section, Department of Education. In 2006, the NCEF became an independent company limited by guarantee.

Starting in 1988, the first programme offered by the NCEF was the National Certificate in Exercise and Fitness Instruction, which was jointly awarded by the PEA and Thomond College.

NCEF/UL awards and modules are audited and aligned to EuropeActive, the EU-approved industry sectoral quality assurance (SQF) body for the European health and fitness sector.

The NCEF administration office (Head Office) is located on the UL campus within the PESS Building. NCEF/UL courses and modules are developed, operated and stringently monitored in line with UL's academic regulations and the demands of the exercise and health fitness industry. To respond to industry needs, new policies are developed and implemented on an ongoing basis and specific procedures are closely followed.

The NCEF/UL flexible learning pathway provides an opportunity for aspiring exercise and health fitness professionals to follow a flexible learning pathway from Year 1 certificate to Year 2 higher certificate to Year 3 diploma and onwards to Year 4 honours degree, accumulating European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) credits on a stage-by-stage basis. The learning pathway facilitates education on a continual basis or with step-in, step-out options, which affords the learner more choice and greater flexibility. As well as being offered at UL, the Year 1 certificate programme is available at a number of outreach centres in colleges of further education throughout the country and also within the defence forces and the Department of Justice (for prison officers). The BSc in Exercise and Health Fitness will continue to be offered by the NCEF through the stepped flexible learning pathway, whilst the new BSc in Exercise and Health Fitness LM105, will operate directly through the PESS department but will be delivered directly by the NCEF

The NCEF employs five full-time staff: two directors, two administrators and a course leader for the Year 1 and 2 programmes. Both directors and the course leader teach across all four years of the programme. Another 30 tutors (approximately) are contracted annually on a module-by-module basis.

3 Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

Because of COVID restrictions, this review was conducted entirely online, with no physical attendance at the University of Limerick (UL) campus. The Quality Review Group (QRG) wishes to thank UL and the National Council for Exercise and Fitness (NCEF) for their welcome and their support during the operation of this review. In particular, we wish to thank the staff of the University's Quality Support Unit for developing and maintaining a robust and effective online platform for the review.

The QRG found the NCEF's self-assessment report (SAR) to be a clear account of the Council's activities and a helpful analysis of its current environment and context. The report was supported by a wide range of relevant evidence and we are grateful for the helpful and timely way in which the NCEF responded to our requests for additional documentation.

The QRG met with a range of students on NCEF programmes. All spoke very highly of the professionalism, enthusiasm, responsiveness and commitment of staff, and the quality of support provided to learners. It is clear that students feel that having an NCEF qualification has high credibility in relevant professions, and that they also greatly value the benefits of working towards an award of UL.

We also met with a range of external partners, all of whom spoke very highly of the NCEF, in terms of the calibre of their awards, the professionalism of staff, and the very positive relationships which have developed between their organisations and the NCEF.

The NCEF is currently providing courses at a range of levels, which meet the needs of students as well as employers in both the private and public sectors. The courses are delivered and managed by very experienced and highly committed staff in a variety of modes and settings. The NCEF has a long-standing relationship with UL, supported by strong formal and informal mechanisms. However, the QRG believes that it is now timely for both the NCEF and UL to review and refresh this relationship. The primary driver for such a review is the imminent introduction of a new UL degree, the BSc in Exercise and Health Fitness Management (LM105), the teaching of which will be subcontracted to the NCEF; this is a significant change from past contractual relationships. We feel there is also a broader strategic need for UL to consider its role in promoting sustainability and resilience in the NCEF and its provision. Such a review could usefully take into account factors such as: succession planning within the NCEF; the likely competitive environment for sport and exercise programmes; and the future aspirations of UL's Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences (PESS).

4 QRG Commendations and Recommendations

4.1 Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

1.	The strong commitment by the NCEF to ensuring that students have multiple access routes to its programmes and associated progression opportunities.
2.	The long-standing committed leadership provided by the directors of the NCEF, which enables it to adapt and evolve.
3.	The cohesive and effective administrative team which, despite being small in numbers, is able to provide friendly, student-centred support and ensure the smooth running of operations.
4.	The very positive feedback from students on course content, staff support and employability of graduates, with students very willing to recommend the NCEF as a place of study.
5.	The effective mechanisms, including structured biannual meetings, to respond to feedback from certified providers and NCEF tutors on improvements to course delivery.
6.	The vocational module offerings specific to fitness-professional qualifications, which are attractive to prospective students, since an NCEF qualification is often specified in job listings.
7.	The flexible stepped course pathways which allow students to work and continue in education.
8.	The provision of the Certificate in Exercise and Health Fitness, which allows students after only one year to be instantly employable within the fitness industry with a highly recognised qualification.
9.	The whole range of NCEF qualifications which allow for direct access to the Register of Exercise Professionals in Ireland (REPs Ireland) up to Level 6 and are thereby directly portable internationally through the European Register of Exercise Professionals (EREPs)/EuropeActive and the International Confederation of Registers for Exercise Professionals (ICREPs).
10.	The high standing of the NCEF with external partners and international bodies in the delivery of high-quality programmes in exercise and health fitness.
11.	The very strong brand of the NCEF within the national exercise and health fitness sector, and the NCEF's integrated access to UL awards, which together provide access for graduates to wide-ranging industry and educational opportunities.
12.	The very supportive and flexible partnership models that the NCEF has created with its certified providers.

4.2 Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.2.1 Level 1 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
1.	Undertake consultation with UL prior to the confirmation of the next NCEF strategic plan, to ensure that the decisions made in that plan will be supported by UL's resources including physical estates and quality assurance systems.	As the NCEF is offering programmes that lead to UL awards, the decisions it makes in its strategy are fundamentally tied to its ability, in collaboration with UL, to provide an appropriate quality assurance environment in which to offer those programmes.
2.	Confirm and document, in collaboration with UL, how all learners on programmes offered by the NCEF and leading to UL awards will be protected in the event of the NCEF being unable to deliver or complete the delivery of those programmes.	It is important to ensure that learner protection arrangements be confirmed for all programmes leading to UL awards.
3.	Seek a change in title of the Diploma qualification to the major award at Level 7 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) to ensure that the qualification of NCEF learners is understood and recognised nationally and internationally.	The use of the title 'Diploma' is not clear in a national context (i.e., it is not a major award on the NFQ) and will equally be unclear in terms of recognition through the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and otherwise.
4.	Identify, with UL, the points at which the NCEF should provide assurances to the UL governance system regarding provision that is taking place through certified providers and leading to UL awards.	While the NCEF is assuring itself regarding certified providers, the links back to the UL governance system appear limited.
5.	<p>In conjunction with UL, develop a specific staffing strategy for the NCEF that addresses key issues including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership succession planning • Creating capacity for greater delegation of operational roles by directors • Addressing the changing staff requirements due to the changing portfolio of courses • Continuing professional development for staff, particularly aiming to increase the number of 	While it is clear that the NCEF has a strong staffing base to support its teaching provision, the introduction of the new BSc and the changing profile of students, with ambitions to increase the overseas cohort, suggest the need for a stronger vision for how the staffing needs will evolve as a result. Having a strategy for developing future leaders for the NCEF and taking actions towards this will help to make the NCEF a more resilient organisation.

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	staff with higher-level qualifications.	
6.	<p>Implement a clearer academic and corporate governance structure for the NCEF, which includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A more direct role for the Board of Trustees • Clarification of the role of UL in academic governance • Strengthened links with the Irish exercise and fitness industry. 	The board has an important role to play in supporting the NCEF to achieve its aspirations and in providing feedback. Two meetings per year of an advisory board are not sufficient to meet these aspirations. The expected governance role of the NCEF as a collaborative provider of UL needs to be clarified.
7.	Develop a long-term sustainability plan with certified providers to ensure sustainability and relevance in the market.	As certified providers start awarding their own qualifications through the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) framework, the market for the NCEF may be reduced. The NCEF needs to develop a long-term plan to ensure sustainability with these partnerships and UL should be part of that planning process.
8.	Provide a forum for engagement with stakeholders, such as certified providers and EuropeActive, to assist the NCEF in its future development.	As the NCEF is growing and diversifying, it would benefit from the experience, views and foresights of those it works with and of industry experts.

4.2.2 Level 2 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
9.	Ensure that HR procedures for appointing staff and external examiners are aligned with best practice within UL.	The recruitment process should be defined and aligned with the UL recruitment policy.
10.	Encourage tutors to achieve higher qualifications.	Currently, some tutors are teaching at a level for which they do not hold a formal qualification.
11.	Develop a strategy to improve the students' evaluation report rate.	Although strong lines of communication exist between students and teaching staff, which can lead to the enhancement of courses, the response rate in student evaluation reports is quite low.
12.	Develop an NCEF alumni association.	Currently, the NCEF does not have an alumni association, which could help with the development of its strategy.
13.	Liaise with the UL induction team/First Seven Weeks initiative to enable students on stepped routes to be fully integrated in the UL induction process.	Currently, NCEF students on the stepped programme (at all qualification intake levels) are excluded from participation in the formal induction processes made available to other Year 1 undergraduates in UL. Current students reported not being aware of services available to them. This will be compounded when the LM105 students

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		can participate in the full UL induction programmes while students on the stepped programme would be excluded.
14.	Formalise engagement between NCEF students and the UL Cooperative Education & Careers Division (CECD) to provide students with additional guidance on career development.	The careers service provided by CECD has a strong employability focus and could assist students with career options, broadening aspirations beyond vocational study and careers, and giving them exposure to different types of employers, for example through careers fairs. Current students reported not being aware of the careers service and its career development programmes.
15.	Work with PESS/UL central booking to allow NCEF practical sessions to be conducted where practicable in appropriate facilities within the PESS Building in preference to the main hall in the UL Arena.	The noise generated by competing groups in the main hall of the UL Arena is distracting and makes learning difficult. The lack of privacy and use of the main hall for other booked sessions and the use of the running track by the public compounds this issue. The planned introduction of the UL LM105 degree will exacerbate the current problem.
16.	Develop strategies within practical modules to assist graduates with future-proofing their fitness business, for example by embedding within exercise modules ways of engaging customers and monetising their services in an online capacity.	The Covid-19 pandemic has required fitness professionals to embrace new technologies and turn to online fitness provision, requiring updated risk assessments, disclaimers, customer-relationship techniques and marketing strategies.
17.	Seek early engagement with potential Co-op placement providers to secure high-quality work placements for the new LM105 cohort.	There will be a long lead-time for building up capacity for new Co-op placements.
18.	Encourage non-CAO entrants to seek a range of work experiences across vocational as well as broader public health, management and business settings.	Students and tutors report difficulties in obtaining quality work experience positions, with many students being limited to janitorial services in gyms rather than practical work experience due to insurance issues. Students have expressed interest in periods of work-shadowing personal trainers and group exercise co-ordinators and in undertaking exercise management and special population placements to help them deal with real-world clients upon graduation.
19.	Seek guidance from future employers and feedback from existing students and graduates on the modules offered, and use this feedback to review and update module content.	Students reported satisfaction with the core modules but expressed the need for more innovative masterclass experiences, particularly in Spin/studio cycling. Students also saw a need for an understanding of how their core competencies and skills can be applied directly to other fitness offerings, such as TRX and kettlebells.
20.	Liaise with UL administrative and finance departments to rectify the delays regarding Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) grants	The delays experienced by students accessing SUSI grants have caused financial difficulties for some. Without addressing the practical issues of payment/repayment there will be further differentiation between students on the LM105 course (with SUSI grants being paid

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	experienced by students on the stepped programme.	immediately) and those on stepped programmes (where delays of up to four weeks have been reported).
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5 Appendices

A Membership of the QRG

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Dr Jennifer Cumming	School Head of Research and Co-Deputy Head of School, University of Birmingham. CPSYCHOL CSCI AFBPSS FHEA
Mr John Windle	Manager WIT Arena, Head of WIT Sport, Board member of Student Sport Ireland
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Dr Fabrice Favret	Director of Faculty of STAPS (Faculty of Sports Science), Université de Strasbourg
Dr Trish O'Brien	Director, O'Brien / Governance Design
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B Membership of NCEF Quality Team

Damien Jackson	Fiona Corbett
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