

Quality Review of the

School of Law

The University of Limerick (UL), through its membership of the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB), follows an established process for Quality Assurance (QA) and Quality Improvement (QI). This involves a seven-year cycle during which all Departments work to improve the quality of their programmes and services, undergo a rigorous self evaluation prior to a quality review by internationally recognised experts in the field.

The process itself has 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 and the state of progress.

The broader picture is described in the publication *A Framework for Quality in Irish Universities* which can be downloaded from the IUQB web site: http://www.iuqb.ie/

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Quality Review Group Appendix A

UL-QSU Web Sitewww.quality.ul.ieWeb Sitewww.law.ul.ie/IUQB Web Sitewww.iuqb.ie

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Quality Review, School of Law, University of Limerick.

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1.0 Background

1.1 Legislative Framework

The University of Limerick, in common with all the universities in the Republic of Ireland, falls within the Universities Act, 1997. This Act specifies the responsibilities of universities in Ireland for Quality Improvement and Quality Assurance. Section 12 stipulates that, 'The objects of a university shall include - ... to promote the highest standards in, and quality of, teaching and research'.

Section 35 (1) of the Act further requires that each university Governing Authority 'shall...require the university to establish procedures for quality assurance aimed at improving the quality of education and related services provided by the university'. The Act provides a framework for the universities to develop their quality processes. Section 35 requires each university to review the quality of the work of all faculty, academic Departments and service (including administrative) Departments on a tenyear cycle. In particular 'The procedures shall include ... assessment by those, including students, availing of the teaching, research and other services provided by the university'.

Although each university is free to develop its own procedures in fulfilling its obligations under the Act, close co-operation has been achieved through the co-ordinating role of the Irish Universities Association Quality Committee, (IUAQC). Accordingly, the universities have developed a framework comprising a set of common principles and operating guidelines for quality improvement and quality assurance. These principles and guidelines have been integrated into each of the universities procedures, which ensure coherence through the university system, while maintaining the autonomy of each university and its individual institutional culture.

More detail is available at www.quality.ul.ie/The Act.htm and www.iugb.ie

1.2 The Irish Universities Quality Board

The Governing Authorities of the seven Irish universities established the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) in February 2003. This board comprises representatives of the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities (CHIU) and a number of external members.

The aims of the IUQB are:

- To increase the level of inter-university cooperation in developing Quality Assurance processes
- To represent the Irish universities nationally and internationally on issues relating to quality assurance and quality improvement
- To articulate, on behalf of the Governing Authorities of the universities, the resource implications of recommendations for quality improvement.

The IUQB subsumed the roles and functions formerly carried out by the IUQSC (Irish Universities Quality Steering Committee). More detail is available at www.iuqb.ie

1.3 The Quality Review Process

The common framework adopted by the Irish universities for their Quality Assurance/Quality Improvement systems consistent with both the legislative requirement of the Universities Act 1997 and international practice comprise the following stages:

- 1. Preparation of a self-assessment report by the unit taking into account feedback from students and customers.
- 2. Quality (Peer) Review involving external experts, both nationally and internationally, who have visited the Department, met the students and studied the Self Assessment.
- 3. Quality Review Report, made publicly available by the Governing Authority of the university, incorporating the reactions and quality improvement plans of the Division and University.
- 4. Continuing improvement through implementation within the resources available to the university.

More detail is available at www.quality.ul.ie

1.4 Management of Quality in the University

The Vice President Academic and Registrar has overall responsibility for implementation of Quality Assurance/Quality Improvement policy and implementation at the University of Limerick. Implementation is carried out by the Director of Quality. The planned schedule of Quality Review of both academic and support departments was commenced in the year 2000, with the first full cycle of units within the University being reviewed within a seven-year cycle.

Academic departments are reviewed against international standards as described in the document "A Guide to the Quality Review Process for Academic Departments", which is available on the UL website at www.quality.ul.ie.

In 2006, the university decided to implement a bespoke quality management system (QMS) and developed a suitable template with the assistance of external quality experts. This system is described in the document "Quality Management Systems – Standard Framework for Support Departments".

More detail is available at www.quality.ul.ie

2.0 The School of Law

Originally there was a Department of Law and Insurance but a separate Department of Law was established in 1992. The entity was renamed the School of Law in 2000.

It now delivers approximately 75 student-modules on law each year. The modules provide the core material for five undergraduate level degree programmes and for four postgraduate level programmes, as well as service teaching to other programmes at under and post-graduate level.

From 2008 to 2010, the number of postgraduate students on taught law programmes increased four-fold. From a base of 5 in January 2005, there are currently 24 full-time active doctoral research students in the School.

Over the past six years, every individual holding a full-time post from lecturer below the bar to professor (a total of 15 individuals) has been research active. The collective output in terms of refereed publications over that period consists of 18 books, 32 articles in peer-reviewed journals, 35 articles in refereed journals and 28 chapters in books.

Over the past six-year period, the School has landed very significant research funding from competitive external sources. Seven individuals have earned almost half a million euro (€460,000) between them.

School of Law Mission

The School of Law is a department of the Faculty of Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences.

Inspired by the University's mission statement, the mission of the School of Law is: To provide a practical legal education that incorporates a multidisciplinary dimension and is underpinned by high-quality research of national and international standing in areas of key strengths and to serve the broader community.

We achieve our mission by:

- 1. Offering innovative programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, which incorporate as key components both work-based learning and extensive subject choice;
- 2. Maintaining a friendly supportive environment in which students can develop their knowledge and skills through close engagement with academic staff;
- 3. Prioritising publications of books and in high-ranking national and international journals and conducting research projects for policy-makers and NGOs at home and abroad;
- 4. Expanding the recruitment and progression of research postgraduate studies;
- 5. Enhancing our research and teaching networks internally and with universities, the legal professions and community groupings locally and internationally.

The School currently comprises 14 academic members: eleven full-time permanent academic staff; two lecturers who hold specific purpose contracts and one Teaching Assistant. The School is assisted by two support staff (administrators). The fourteen academics include one professor, one senior lecturer, six lecturers (above the bar), five lecturers (below the bar) and one teaching assistant.

The School offers four undergraduate law programmes, four taught LL.M. postgraduate programmes, a structured PhD in Criminal Justice and postgraduate degrees by research. See www.law.ul.ie

3.0 The Follow-up Process

The Quality Review process occurs on an approximately seven-year cycle at the University of Limerick. An average of five academic Departments are reviewed annually. Once the Peer Review Group report is finalised, the Department concerned immediately sets about planning its response to the issues raised therein.

The self-evaluation process is intended to be a reflective exercise in which a Department/Division should identify many of its strengths and weaknesses and develop plans to strengthen and grow as appropriate. Quite often, the Peer Review Group (PRG) will reinforce these issues and may identify areas of concern that were overlooked. In many cases, the PRG will also highlight the strengths of the Department and encourage faculty and staff to take advantage of these.

After the department and the university have been given time to respond to the issues raised; the Peer Review Group's report will be made available to the wider community through the University's web site. Normally, the report is available within the University less than four weeks after the PRG visit. Responses and plans for action are incorporated into the report and are subject to the approval of the Deans' Council.

Presentation to the University's Governing Authority usually follows within six months of the PRG visit. The Governing Authority will publish the Peer Review report, including reactions and plans, immediately following approval.

It is expected that a review of progress in implementing recommendations and investigating issues raised would occur quarterly for the two years following the Peer Review Visit. Progress Reports will be published as deemed appropriate.

Date	Action
May 2011	School of Law is issued with Peer Review Group report and required to prepare reactions and plans for Quality Improvement as appropriate. The report is circulated to all members of Management Committee for comment.
July 2011	Reactions and plans, from all levels, incorporated into the document. Quality Improvement Action Plan developed and circulated to GA committee Strategic Planning and Quality Assurance. PRG Report with Responses and Quality Improvement Action Plan are tabled at Executive Committee meeting for discussion.
November 2011	PRG Report, incorporating reactions, is presented to UL Governing Authority for approval for publication.

4.0 Preliminary Comments of the Peer Review Group (PRG)

The comprehensive self-assessment report (SAR) produced by the School of Law was appreciated by the PRG, and the presentation of clear strengths and the acknowledgement of areas of possible improvement were particularly welcomed. During the PRG visit, the members of the School displayed a strong team spirit, and their willingness to engage in constructive discussion made the task of the peer reviewers pleasant and straightforward.

The staff of the School of Law are enthusiastically committed to meeting the needs of students, and student support services within the University are good. There is, however, scope for better engagement between staff and students within the School.

Although the School would benefit from being located in an area which allowed more frequent interaction between staff and postgraduate students, both facilities and learning resources are of a high standard. The state-of-the-art replica courtroom, with its advanced IT/AV system, is unique within the Irish universities and allows students to review their own advocacy and presentation skills.

During its short history the School of Law has accomplished a great deal with comparatively limited resources. In particular, it has developed the quantity and quality of its teaching so that a high proportion of its undergraduate students now graduate with a first class honours degree. The quantity and quality of its research output are also impressive, with a range of significant books and journal articles having been published in recent years. All members of academic staff are research-active with some having international reputations. In terms of research, the School punches well above its weight. The members of the PRG were pleased to find that there is no lack of enthusiasm within the School for continuing to enhance performance in the areas of teaching and research.

Largely as a consequence of the current economic climate, the School has been unable to increase its staff complement to match that in law departments elsewhere. There is significant work overload and this places a limit on what can be achieved. Indeed the load on staff is such that even current activities could become unsustainable and a risk assessment is recommended. However, even without additional funding from the University, there is scope to improve the situation. "Smarter" management, such as more effective prioritisation and better rationalisation, would bring immediate benefits. There is also scope for considering additional income streams for the school through, for example, the provision of CPD training.

5.0 The Report of the Peer Review Group

5.1 Mission

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

programmes.

5.1.1 The clear, well-defined School of Law mission which is connected to the broader mission of the University.
5.1.2 The due regard in the School's mission statement to the needs of staff, students and the wider community.
5.1.3 The delivery by the School on its mission to provide practical legal education to students, differentiating itself in this way from its peers.
5.1.4 The continued commitment by the School to deliver programmes with a multidisciplinary dimension with the introduction of the LLB Law Plus and new LLM

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.1.5 Further engage with career guidance counsellors to explain the offerings available to students.
 - Response of Departmental Quality Team: Contact has been made with the Institute of Guidance Counsellors with a view to organising this.
- 5.1.6 Introduce targets for international student representation on LLM programmes.
 - Response of Departmental Quality Team: International marketing opportunities are being identified and pursued.
- 5.1.7 Conduct a survey of second-level students to identify and measure the perception and understanding of undergraduate offerings, particularly Law Plus.
 - Response of Departmental Quality Team: The Marketing Centre is assisting us in finalising a questionnaire to do this in October.
- 5.1.8 Undertake a review of the LLB (Graduate Entry) degree with a view to maximising the numbers of registered students.
 - Response of Departmental Quality Team: Two members of faculty have agreed to undertake programme review before end December 2011.
- 5.1.9 Amend the mission to reflect a commitment to continuous improvement and review.
- 5.1.10 Examine alternative mechanisms for raising additional revenue including, but not limited to, the development of a business plan for the delivery of appropriate CPD to the legal professions at local and national level.
- 5.1.11 Examine ways in which to connect better with the wider stakeholders of the School of Law, including alumni.

Response of Departmental Quality Team: In June the Head of School met some law alumni in Dublin to launch a closer network with the Alumni. A further meeting is being arranged for early December. A School of Law Alumni group has also been established on LinkedIn. Other ideas will be explored in this regard.

5.1.12 Consider the appointment of a judge in residence in order to enhance the relationship of the School with the local legal professions.

Response of Departmental Quality Team: The Head of School has issued an invitation to a judge of the Superior Courts.

5.2 Design and Content of Curriculum

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

	3
5.2.1	The spread of undergraduate and postgraduate law degree programmes offered by the School.
5.2.2	The efficiency with which resources are utilised in the degree programmes to ensure that classes are of the appropriate size and that such opportunities as exist to use research-led teaching are maximised.
5.2.3	The practical aspect to the undergraduate Law Plus degree, as manifested through its Lawyering modules and its Cooperative education opportunities.
5.2.4	The opportunity given to Law Plus undergraduates to take non-law modules in each year of the degree programme and to spend part of the four-year programme at a foreign university.
5.2.5	The willingness to keep the design and content of the curriculum under constant review and to make changes to it relatively quickly when these are appropriate.
5.2.6	The introduction of a structured PhD programme in conjunction with other departments in the university.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.2.7 Review the range and content of current undergraduate and postgraduate programmes with a view to ensuring that they continue to be market-attuned and that existing staff are not overburdened with teaching commitments in a way which would put the delivery of programmes at risk were one or two members of staff to leave the University.
- 5.2.8 Review the range of electives available to Law Plus students to ensure that the choice of law modules available is wider than at present and that interdisciplinarity as well as multi-disciplinarity is more likely to be assured.

Response of Departmental Quality Team: This is being arranged to take effect in spring 2012.

- 5.2.9 Explore the possibility of teaching LLM programmes to part-time students through evening classes, weekend classes, and/or virtual-learning classes, with a view to increasing taught postgraduate student numbers.
- 5.2.10 Review the teaching and assessment of Administrative Law, Evidence and Jurisprudence with a view to ensuring that these modules are more accessible to all undergraduate students.
- 5.2.11 Do not allow any further expansion in the range of degree programmes to occur, or any significant uplift in the number of undergraduate or postgraduate students, unless allowance is genuinely made for the resource implications this would have for the School, especially in terms of additional demands on staff time.

5.3 Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

5.3.1	The appointment of a Director of Teaching and Learning for the School of Law (on the understanding that this is supported by a clear job description and terms of reference).
5.3.2	The high proportion of students attaining first class honours degrees in the Law & European Studies and Law & Accounting degree programmes.
5.3.3	The extensive use of the University's online collaborative learning environment (SULIS).
5.3.4	The willingness of School of Law staff to seek feedback from students.
5.3.5	The programme in place for training teaching assistants within the School.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

5.3.6 Draw up a new policy document on Teaching, Learning and Assessment to reflect the changes that require to be accommodated since the last such policy document was produced in 1996.

Response of Departmental Quality Team: This is a work in progress.

5.3.7 Devise and put in place as quickly as possible arrangements to ensure that all students, but especially undergraduates, receive timely and informative feedback of both a formative and summative nature so that they can be better equipped for assessment regimes both during and after their university degree.

Response of Departmental Quality Team: This will be discussed during the compilation of the School teaching policy document.

5.3.8 Review assessment regimes so that the appropriateness of assessing students by coursework rather than by examination is considered, with a view to enhancing the writing skills of the students and making the modules more interesting to them.

Response of Departmental Quality Team: This will be discussed during the work on the School teaching policy document.

5.3.9 Devise and put in place a formal system of peer observation of teaching with a view to ensuring that best practices in this field can be shared and optimised.

Response of Departmental Quality Team: The peer observation of teaching will be encouraged further through the PDRS.

5.3.10 In line with European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), introduce a system requiring modules to be formally evaluated by the students who take these after they have been assessed in the modules and notified of their performance.

5.4 Staff

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

5.4.1 The delivery of new graduate and postgraduate degrees which has been achieved despite constraints in staff numbers.
5.4.2 The success of the School in continuing to attract student numbers despite having fewer senior academic staff than comparable law schools.
5.4.3 The fact that teaching assistants are relatively well qualified with all three pursuing PhDs.
5.4.4 The increase in use of the Centre for Teaching and Learning by academic staff.
5.4.5 The assigning of a mentor for all newly appointed academics.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

5.4.6 Develop a service level agreement with the Faculty of Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences (AHSS) regarding the support available from the faculty manager. Response of Departmental Quality Team: This is not a priority as there have been no difficulties in the past with the support given by the Faculty Manager. 5.4.7 Ensure that as part of the risk assessment plan (referred to in recommendation 5.8.4) the consequences of staff departures are fully considered. 5.4.8 Develop a training plan for all staff to take account of changes in responsibilities, succession planning, and staff and school development. 5.4.9 Ensure that PDRS reviews are linked to the School research strategy and the School policy on teaching. 5.4.10 In line with recommendation 5.6.5, secure an additional administrative resource to alleviate some of the burden on teaching staff. Response of Departmental Quality Team: Financial resources do not permit this but we may use existing resources differently. 5.4.11 Create a task force to examine ways in which staff can innovate in the delivery of programmes in order to free up research time. 5.4.12 In line with recommendation 5.3.9, ensure that peer observation of teaching is mandatory for all teaching staff. Response of Departmental Quality Team: It would not be appropriate to make this mandatory but it will be encouraged. 5.4.13 Seek to increase staff teaching numbers to ensure that core undergraduate programmes are covered adequately and teaching resources are sufficient to meet the ambitions of the school. 5.4.14 In line with recommendation 5.7.7, develop and implement a formal workload

policy for teaching staff with a view to enhancing resourcing, planning and the

utilisation of staff.

5.5 Facilities and Learning Resources

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

5.5.1 The School of Law's foresight and innovation in constructing the courtroom facility on campus.
5.5.2 The excellent IT facilities made available to staff and students, including in particular PCs available to each PhD student.
5.5.3 The electronic resources, particularly e-journals and the speedy inter-library loans service, which facilitate research at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.
5.5.4 The innovation of establishing a joint venture in legal writing with NUIG.
5.5.5 The innovative introduction of a structured PhD programme, that efficiently

utilises the facilities and learning resources of other departments in the

Recommendations

university.

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.5.6 Establish a structured forum for postgraduate research students to meet regularly to discuss research issues and problems, present to peers on aspects of their research and receive guidance on aspects of research, writing skills and publication.
 Response of Departmental Quality Team: This has been instigated and the two School research groups will alternate the hosting of a forum between them.
- 5.5.7 Establish a more clearly defined and identifiable home for the School of Law with staff, postgraduates, meeting rooms and study areas grouped together to foster collegiality, collaboration and an esprit de corps in the School.
- 5.5.8 In line with recommendation 5.2.9, continue to innovate in the postgraduate programmes provided in the School, including the possibility of providing off-campus courses, targeting in particular the Dublin market.
- 5.5.9 Plan for the optimal use of the courtroom facility.

5.6 Student Guidance and Support

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

5.6.1 The availability of student guidance from professional academic staff and programme directors to orient students to the world of legal education.
5.6.2 The existence of a structure whereby students who may face academic or personal difficulties can receive attention and remedial assistance.
5.6.3 The fact that staff members make themselves available to offer career guidance in law.
5.6.4 The use of exit surveys to measure career planning.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

5.6.5 Seriously explore the creation of a non-academic staff position in the School of Law that is devoted to student services and administrative duties (including student guidance, counselling and support) and external programmes (Co-op and Erasmus), thereby improving service delivery and relieving the administrative burden on academic staff. Response of Departmental Quality Team: No additional resources are available to the School. 5.6.6 In cooperation with the University, make the mental health of students a service priority, through more awareness and counselling programmes. 5.6.7 Ensure the student advisor system operates consistently and much more effectively. 5.6.8 Ensure effective feedback from students on the quality of student services. 5.6.9 Develop and communicate a clear policy on tutorial attendance. Response of Departmental Quality Team: This will be implemented in autumn 2011.

5.7 Research Activity

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

5.7.1 The response by the School of Law to the new pressures in the research environment.
5.7.2 The rise in the quantity of published research over the review period.
5.7.3 The increasing placement of published research in high-quality journals and other scholarly outlets.
5.7.4 The higher number of doctoral students.
5.7.5 The growth in collaborative research.
5.7.6 The high number of academic staff with doctorates or who are undertaking

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

doctoral studies.

- 5.7.7 Develop and implement a formal workload policy for the teaching staff covering research, teaching and administration with a view to enhancing research outputs.
- 5.7.8 Develop and adopt a research strategy specific to the School of Law, with measurable targets within defined timeframes.

Response of Departmental Quality Team: Work on this has commenced and will resume in September.

- 5.7.9 Formalise a research mentoring process, where senior academic staff provide advice and guidance to junior staff on the development of their individual research portfolios.
- 5.7.10 Continue to focus on the target of placing research in high-quality publications.

5.8 Quality Management

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.8.1 The active and ongoing review of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes provided by the School of Law which is responding to the needs and interests of students.
- 5.8.2 The creation of the posts of Director of Teaching and Learning and Director of Research which should be a positive addition to both the management of the resources and the quality of the output of the School of Law.
- 5.8.3 The fact that the Head of School actively assigns work on a basis that appears to be equitable.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.8.4 Undertake an immediate and full risk assessment with associated contingency planning.
- 5.8.5 Establish as a matter of urgency a new Management Committee within the School of Law to consist of the Head of School, the Director of Teaching and Learning, the Director of Research and the senior administrator in the School, to meet frequently to oversee the operational management of the School.
- 5.8.6 Introduce a more innovative and varied approach to structuring courses and semesters in line with recommendation 5.4.11.
- 5.8.7 Put in place formal job descriptions for the Director of Teaching and Learning and Director of Research with a view to enhancing the quality of teaching and research.

Response of Departmental Quality Team: Draft job descriptions have been circulated by the Head of School

5.8.8 Ensure that all staff with senior administrative responsibilities receive training in appropriate management skills.

5.9 Quality Improvement Plan

Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

- 5.9.1 The recognition by the School of Law that a strategic plan is required and that it will benefit the school.
- 5.9.2 The recognition of the need to prioritise actions and to innovate.

Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

- 5.9.3 Ensure that the quality improvement plan is premised on a clearly stated ambition and vision.
- 5.9.4 Ensure that the quality improvement plan reflects a greater emphasis on the strategic goals of the School.
- 5.9.5 Set and adhere to clear delivery dates for all prioritised activities.
- 5.9.6 Include in the plan appropriate metrics to monitor progress on its implementation.
- 5.9.7 Include in the plan regular scheduled reviews to monitor its appropriateness

Appendices

A Membership of the Peer Review Group:

Prof. Brice Dickson Director of the Human Rights Centre, Queen's University, Belfast

Mr Kevin Hannigan Head of Learning and Development, Matheson Ormsby Prentice, Dublin

Prof Michael Lynk University of Western Ontario, Canada

Mr David McFadden Legal Advisor, The Competition Authority, Dublin

Ms Ailish O'Farrell Technical writer (Secretary), Limerick

Dr David Whan Quality consultant, Darlington, UK (Chair)

B Membership of the School of Law Quality Team:

Ms. Sinead Eaton Head of Department, Chair of Quality Review Team, Lecturer below the bar

Ms. Andrea Ryan Lecturer above the bar

Ms. Una Woods

Lecturer above the bar (On maternity leave since February)

Ms. Suzanne Nicholas School of Law Administrator

Ms. Laura Donnellan Lecturer above the bar

(Replaced Una Woods since April)

C Contact

The Peer Review Group were given the opportunity over three days to talk to the School of Law Quality Team both formally and informally. Meetings with staff, postgraduate & undergraduate students and others were scheduled as group sessions. The Review Group was given the opportunity to meet all staff during a visit to the facilities of the department and this was most helpful.

All the meetings provided extremely useful additional information to support the SAR.