



Report of the Quality Review Group to the Human Resources Division (HR)

Review dates	6 th to 9 th December 2021
Issued by QSU	8 June 2022
UL QSU Website	www.ul.ie/quality
Unit Website	www.ul.ie/hr
QQI Website	www.qqi.ie

Approved for publication by Executive Committee, 12th May 2022

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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.

All units are reviewed against quality assurance standards as described in the tailored quality review guidelines, which is available on the [QSU website](#). The planned schedule of quality reviews 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 and formally 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, Deputy President Chief Operations Officer and Register or Vice President Research, 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 Human Resources Division*

The [Human Resources Division](#) (HR) has 43 members of staff and is led by the HR Director. The HR Division provides a complete range of HR services throughout the employee lifecycle, from recruitment through to termination or retirement.

The Division comprises four main functions: HR Central Services, HR Service Engagement, Health & Safety, and Internal Communications.

The Division's first strategic plan which has been submitted to Executive Committee for approval, provides a real opportunity for communicating our longer-term goals and a shared understanding of priority areas to the UL community.

On foot of issues arising from 2015, the focus of the last few years within HR has been on improving governance, reviewing policies and procedures and restructuring the team to enable the Division to deliver a strategic, high-quality service in line with UL goals. Having restructured and regrouped, the HR Division is now focused on driving and delivering the University's strategic agenda. Significant progress has been made on many of these fronts, including the introduction and review of all policies.

The Division's focus on quality over the past seven years is evident through its retention of ISO 9001 certification. Other achievements of note include the successful pilot development of online recruitment, comprehensive management development programmes, effective management of the COVID-19 crisis and improved communications.

We recognise that there are areas that require attention, including systems development and process automation, the progressions and promotions framework, career and development pathways, management and leadership, and new staff members' experiences. These goals and others are reflected in our strategic plan. Coupled with this, it is expected that a planned culture audit (due to commence in the last quarter of 2021) will give rise to a concrete action plan and will provide the basis for ongoing review.

Feedback from focus groups held in March and April 2021 points to the positive efforts made by HR staff, who have demonstrated agility and responsiveness within the parameters of legislation and public sector regulation. The HR Division is particularly proud of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Division now looks forward to delivering on its strategy and goals and to driving and enabling the University to achieve its many ambitions.

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

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

The QRG found the self-assessment report (SAR) of the Human Resources Division (HR) 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 including key performance indicators (KPIs) and we are grateful for the helpful and timely response to our requests for further information. The SAR formed a very helpful basis for our engagement with the division. While circumstances required that the meetings all be held virtually, we found staff to be very helpful, open and reflective on the value added by their division to the University of Limerick (UL).

The QRG met with a broad range of stakeholders and users of HR services, all of whom spoke highly of the professionalism displayed by members of the division, and we heard many endorsements of the high quality of services provided by staff.

The HR Division has demonstrated a clear and consistent commitment to addressing the needs of its users and stakeholders since its previous review in 2014. Staff numbers and responsibilities have increased, with a continued focus on delivering meaningful services to users across the university in the wide range of functional areas that it serves. The improvement in services was commended by all stakeholders. There is an ongoing effort to ensure that processes are reflected correctly to ensure consistency of application across all the functions of the division. This includes timely amendments as required and implementation as appropriate. While recognising the operational requirements for clear and consistent processes, considering the Covid-19 experience for all users, the QRG thinks there is scope to explore new opportunities by which this process improvement work can be further supported using online systems. This would enhance the response to the ever-changing needs, activities and challenges faced by the university in the longer term to manage its processes in a consistent manner and allow the HR Division to focus on people-centric activities.

In tandem with the exploration and implementation of these opportunities, the division should engage more proactively with all of its users and stakeholders (using all means available to it) in order to anticipate their needs and collaboratively address these within the changes that are implemented.

The alignment of the HR strategy with the UL strategy is critical to its effectiveness for the benefit of all stakeholders. Therefore, it is imperative that the HR Division be actively involved at the earliest possible opportunity by the Executive Committee in its determination of the appropriate strategies for the university.

Finally, in the view of the QRG, there is scope for the division to develop further and communicate its approach to employee-centric processes such as the PDRS, career development, the promotions process and learning & development.

Our detailed commendations and recommendations in the following sections will, we believe, provide some useful pointers for areas of fruitful development for the work of the division into the future.

4 QRG Commendations and Recommendations

4.1 Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

1.	The introduction of the business partner role, with partners being uniformly singled out for praise and recognition. The example of business partners presenting to Faculty Board on HR developments was seen as an area of good practice that could be built on.
2.	The Learning & Development programme, which is very well regarded by colleagues across UL, with praise for the increased level of wellbeing support, such as mindfulness training.
3.	The introduction of the Internal Communications Manager role, with the weekly HR Notices email being especially appreciated by UL staff.
4.	The preparations in advance of the UL campus-wide culture audit due to start in early 2022.
5.	The cohesive nature of the HR Division, whose members appear to work well and cooperatively together, which is commendable given that some of them are new to the division.
6.	The strong emphasis on processes and the structured approach to providing information and enabling participation in the quality management system (QMS) across the division, thereby ensuring that a culture of quality exists.
7.	The successful planning and actions taken around the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in the area of health and safety, as recognised by stakeholders.
8.	The action register process and its delivery within the defined timeframe on issues raised.

4.2 Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.2.1 Level 1 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
1.	Following publication of the outcome of the culture audit and the finalisation of the UL@50 Strategic Plan, work with senior management to develop and deliver a People & Culture strategy for the organisation.	<p>The HR strategic plan is a plan for HR. The UL Executive Committee needs to identify the major people risks and opportunities that the University will be facing over the next 5-7 years and devise a strategy based on these. The strategy would be owned by the Executive but delivered by HR working in partnership with the leadership of UL.</p> <p>Developing and delivering a People & Culture strategy should assist with there being an overt connection between the role of HR and the overall student experience.</p>
2.	Carry out an in-depth review of the adoption of a standardised HR job evaluation system (Hay) and its impact on existing people processes prior to its acquisition.	Senior individuals spoke of the time involved in developing individual job descriptions in an independent manner. Having heard of the introduction of a more standardised approach to the recruiting process, more in-depth consideration needs to be given to the potential impact on other internal people processes.
3.	Develop a set of strategic people analytics to provide evidence of the impact of the People & Culture strategy.	Quarterly strategic people analytics with appropriate commentary that goes to the Executive Committee and the faculties will help build the evidence base for further change and improvement.
4.	Ensure that HR has an early input into Executive strategy.	HR is uniquely placed to understand the impact on UL staff of changes that the university may wish to make. Therefore, the inclusion of HR at the earliest possible opportunity will add value to the university's strategy implementation into the future.
5.	Work with senior UL management to develop a succession planning strategy for the University.	Management staff within the University have expressed a desire to have more regular strategic support from HR when it comes to areas such as succession planning for staff.
6.	Having identified the risk areas associated with acquiring and retaining talent, develop and publish a talent management strategy and incorporate this into the People & Culture strategy when this becomes available.	A talent management strategy will support a joined-up approach across the division to recruiting, developing and retaining talent.

7.	As a matter of priority, clarify and communicate the rollout of the online recruitment process.	A number of stakeholders expressed frustration at the perceived length of time it takes to get through the recruitment process, from inception to completion. There appears to be a disconnect between the HR perception of the service provided (KPI of 50 days) and stakeholders' perception of the service received, (up to six months).
8.	Carry out a bi-annual review of HR operations between relevant stakeholders and HR management.	A formal twice-yearly review would ensure that managers within the university who actively engage with HR on a regular basis would have a space to bring their concerns directly to HR management. This would ensure that issues do not get lost in the overall case-load management systems.
9.	Continue the transition from paper-based systems to online workflows as a priority and ensure that these are visible to stakeholders.	The HR Division is already working on this transition, but the UL community is frustrated because staff think progress is slow. Transitions like this are not inconsequential in terms of disruption and negative impact. Therefore, consideration should be given to change management planning for the individual elements involved.
10.	Work with senior management to review the academic promotions process, so that roles and responsibilities are clearly articulated, and appointees are held accountable.	Academic promotions appear to be a priority area for the university. HR should become involved in establishing a culture of accountability of senior academics.
11.	Provide clarification around the role of the business partners and communicate this to all stakeholders.	Confusion exists within the campus community as to the exact extent of the role of the business partners.
12.	Develop meaningful baseline KPIs to measure improvements in activity.	There is a lot of measuring of activity, but it is not clear how this is being translated into improvements. Doing more of the same may not be the best approach.
13.	Consider the introduction of a call logging system so that queries and response times can be measured and improvements made.	Some stakeholders identified that emails were not always responded to. A call logging system may complement the action register with management of the volume of contacts and common queries, which could then be addressed in other ways such as proactive comms, FAQs, etc. The QRG understands that a system is in place in ITD and Academic Registry. This system would also help to create clarity on whom to contact for what.

14.	Consider delaying the rotation of business partners until they are more strategic in their roles.	Whilst people could see the value of having shared expertise across UL, there was a concern that the role of the business partners is not yet fully developed, and this will take time to become established. The role of the business partner is highly valued, and the timing of rotations needs consideration and consultation.
15.	Improve follow-through on interactions between individuals and business partners and subsequently their relevant senior HR managers.	It was not evident to stakeholders that challenges move to a more senior level for resolution when necessary. Stakeholders indicated that they would like assurance that this is the case.
16.	Establish and communicate the process of discussion and consultation of newly written or amended HR policies.	Feedback suggested that policies were introduced with variable discussion or consultation and without subsequent notification to faculties, divisions or departments.

4.2.2 Level 2 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
1.	Consider the value of ISO accreditation in terms of time benefit ratio and awareness.	The division has a strong suite of processes with a range of usage from training to audit. The division acknowledged that service users are not aware of the accreditation. The added value beyond the division is unclear. Given the time spent preparing for audits, reaccreditation, etc, could this time be better spent focusing on strategic initiatives, given that a range of other audits take place?
2.	Update and publish the quality manual to create visibility of the HR quality approach.	The quality manual references the Department of Education and links are incomplete. It is not clear that it has been updated in the last year.
3.	Develop targeted communications for different audiences.	The weekly HR Notices email is appreciated but colleagues felt it might be helpful to expand this initiative with additional targeted communications relevant to specific groups of staff.
4.	Ensure the availability to stakeholders of data required for awards, applications and projects.	Stakeholders would value more readily available data for purposes such as Athena Swan applications and accreditation processes. Consider having all basic data available on a SharePoint site for ease of access.
5.	Review the evolution of the role of the business partner and the supporting structures.	Business partners cannot be both strategic and deal with individual complaints. As their role develops, it might be helpful to consider how, for example, individual case work is managed.

6.	Consider how the HR Division will continue to work effectively with the Internal Communications Manager.	The division should build on the good work started on internal communication and continue to integrate it into the wider communications network.
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Appendix One

A Membership of the QRG

Charlie Dolan (Chair)	HR & Educational Consultant, Cork, Ireland
Dr Sally Jackson	Chief People Officer, Sheffield Hallam University, UK
Margaret Ayers	Director of Human Resources and Organisational Development, Canterbury Christchurch University, UK
Jack Scanlan	Student Representative, UCD Michael Smurfit Graduate Business School
Ivanna D'Arcy	Erasmus+ Projects Manager, UL Global, University of Limerick

B Membership of HR Quality Team

Alison O'Regan	Quality Team Lead & Head, Staff Learning & Development
Yvonne Coughlan	Senior Administrator, Quality
David Deady	Senior Administrator, Service Engagement
Corey Downes	Projects Manager
Lynda Fitzpatrick	Administrator, Health & Safety
Valerie Nolan	Executive Administrator, Director's Office

Appendix Two

Site Visit Schedule?