



Report of the Quality Review Group to UL Engage

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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 18-24 months after receiving the QIP template, the head of unit, Provost/Deputy President, Vice President Global & Community Engagement and Director of Quality meet to formally review progress and to agree on any remaining actions to be taken.

2 Summary Details of UL Engage

UL Engage was established in September 2015. The aim of UL Engage is to integrate civic and community engagement into the University's core missions in research and teaching. Our communities include local and global connections with all kinds of stakeholders in civic, public or professional spheres, with policy makers, product users, third sector organisations, community groups and residents. UL Engage supports university/community collaborations in all shapes and sizes through a variety of new and existing UL programmes and projects.

It serves as the hub for civic engagement activities across campus and works with all divisions and faculties to amplify, incubate and co-ordinate the various ways that students, faculty and staff in the University of Limerick can work to make a difference.

3 Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

3.0 Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

The QRG wishes to thank University of Limerick (UL) and UL Engage for their welcome and support throughout the review. The members greatly appreciated the openness and reflective approach of the unit head and her team in their constructive conversations with us during the review process. The self-assessment report (SAR) and related documents provided clear insights into the impactful work of UL Engage over the past seven years.

During the site visit, the QRG met with senior leadership of the university, members of UL Engage, academic teaching and research staff and external stakeholders. The conversations with national experts on policy of engagement and future trends at national and international level were particularly helpful in understanding the positive context for the future work of UL Engage.

The QRG was highly impressed with the warm reception it received during its field visits to six community institutions in the Limerick area where the work of UL Engage was visibly very impactful. The innovative Community Wellness, Empowerment, Leadership and Life skills (CWELL) programme, designed and implemented by UL Engage over the past five years, had enabled disadvantaged and excluded community members to build capacities, confidence and courage to continue to learn and find creative ways to improve their situations individually and collectively.

Respectful and mutually beneficial community engagement has now become an integral part of quality in higher education teaching and research in Ireland, the EU and internationally. Recent UNESCO policy guidelines emerging from the third World Higher Education Conference (Barcelona 2022) and Recommendations on Open Science have clearly implied that co-construction of knowledge with communities is critical for sustainable solutions for achieving UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and addressing climate crises. It is clear to the QRG that the excellent efforts of UL Engage now need to be mainstreamed institution-wide so that early innovative and impactful engagement pilots can be scaled up.

UL Engage has built up an impactful record of community engagement, trusting and reliable partnerships with a range of external stakeholders and a reputation for high-quality training in community engagement and engaged research. The expertise of the unit should now be institutionalised with greater visibility and recognition of the critical significance of this approach to teaching/learning and research throughout the university. This will ensure that UL continues to be a national leader in impactful community engagement and secure new research and teaching resources in the coming period.

The QRG was impressed with the commitment of the senior leadership of the university to the development and implementation of a vision of respectful, continuous and mutually beneficial community engagement as enshrined in its strategic goals. It found the UL Engage team to be aware of its contributions and responsibilities in strengthening such engagement institution-wide, building on its own past efforts in supporting student placement & learning, research design and training of faculty, and engagement with national and international policy making on this theme.

The QRG wants to thank the UL Quality Support Unit team for excellent, timely and helpful informational and logistical support throughout the review process.

We hope that this review will enable the university leadership and the UL Engage team to mainstream social justice-focused civic engagement right across the university in its efforts to become a pioneering socially responsible, civically engaged higher education institution in Ireland and globally.

4 QRG Commendations and Recommendations

4.1 Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

1.	The highly regarded, competent, enthusiastic, passionate and inclusive UL Engage team, which the QRG found to be universally endorsed.
2.	The significant and influential leadership provided by the head of UL Engage, both locally where the QRG heard repeatedly that she is held in high regard, and nationally with Campus Engage right from its infancy, and her continuing active involvement in policy formulation at national and international levels.
3.	The strategic direction and internal cohesion of UL Engage to establish a strong alignment of its mission, strategy and outcomes with the key goals in the UL 2019-2024 strategic plan, UL@50.
4.	The exceptional, consistent commitment of the staff to maintaining supportive partnerships - such as Knowledge for Change (K4C), the Citizens' Assembly and the HAPPEE initiative - and leveraging networks and resources internally and externally, creating trusted relationships and strategic partnerships for sustainable and impactful activities and outcomes.
5.	The commitment of UL Engage staff to the professional development of education practitioners through the design and provision of the Postgraduate Diploma in Community Engagement, and graduate training through UL 2030 and the Practicum.
6.	The successful implementation of the innovative Health Alliance for Practice-based Professional Education and Engagement (HAPPEE) pilot (2020-22), linking student placement in allied health and therapeutic services to the direct benefit of children in disadvantaged communities through local schools.
7.	The positive contribution of UL Engage to Limerick city as a UNESCO-designated learning city, through enabling hitherto excluded community learners in the specially designed Community Wellness, Empowerment, Leadership and Life skills (CWELL) programme, providing a gateway to continuous higher education and high-impact community development projects such as the Garryowen Wall of Hope, the King's Island playground and the Moyross Made Me and Shine a Light projects.
8.	The provision of community-based practicum placements, which are highly valued by national and international students and their home universities.
9.	The impactful collaboration of UL Engage staff with community partners and internal stakeholders to design research projects with integrated community engagement.

10.	The evidence of a strong and authentic approach to community engagement through the co-creation/design of student-centred programmes focused on deep learning and, in this regard, the unit's engagement and commitment to the Limerick Regeneration programme.
11.	The total commitment of the UL Engage staff to CWELL and the postgraduate programmes and the highly appreciated, unfailing support they provide to their students.

4.2 Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.2.1 Level 1 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
1.	At university level, clearly articulate the value of UL Engage and establish a policy to integrate community engagement in the university's core mission of teaching and research.	There appears to be a lack of understanding institution-wide of the relevance, scope and potential of the role of UL Engage in achieving the core mission of UL.
2.	Embed UL Engage as a university-level resource by formalising and resourcing the unit as the university's centralised mechanism for the flow of ideas, information and practicum support for UL civic engagement and community-based research.	UL Engage has demonstrated its ability to both provide services and form collaborative inter-disciplinary informal networks and support services between the university and the city. Recognition of this and improving the visibility of its work by providing sufficient financial and HR resources is urgently required to sustain both momentum and results of consistent UL local, national and global social impact.
3.	Ensure that UL ENGAGE, under the leadership of the Vice President Global and Community Engagement (VPG&CE), is charged to advise the President and the Executive Committee in conducting a strategic process of streamlining, centralising and resourcing the diverse initiatives currently at play.	In the case of overlap with similar university services, UL Engage should be tasked with seeking co-operation and collaboration and building relationships for a coherent university-centred policy-driven strategic engagement programme, as it has also proven its success in this regard in several of its activities.
4.	Conduct a mapping exercise of all the community engagement (CE) activities at departmental and faculty level to design a hub and spoke model for sharing information and expertise and streamlining activities and resources.	The ad hoc nature of engagement in community projects across the university is not conducive to a coherent and consistent model of support and impact.
5.	Dissolve the original UL Engage advisory board, and establish an advisory committee, chaired by the VPG&CE, with representatives from Limerick City and County Council, community organisations, schools and other stakeholders to seek feedback and inputs on UL-wide engagement activities to ensure internal quality standards.	The practicum placements and CWELL programme have gone a long way towards improving community relationships with and perceptions of UL. This could be enhanced by the establishment of an advisory committee.
6.	Under the auspices of the VPG&CE, review the human and financial resources of the UL Engage unit in	As outlined in the SAR and witnessed during discussions with multiple academic and community stakeholders during the site visit, the UL Engage team

	terms of roles, responsibilities and employment conditions with a view to strengthening and empowering the unit.	are clearly passionate about the work they do but are understaffed, undervalued and not recognised, as evidenced by the precarious nature of the contracts held and/or not reflective of the responsibilities held.
7.	Establish a clear reporting and media plan and mechanisms for internal and external communication, to highlight and showcase the critically important work of UL Engage and its contribution to the core mission of UL on civic engagement and Limerick as a learning city. Reporting should be at Faculty Board and Management Council.	The work of the CWELL programme in the local communities has had life-altering impacts for many of the individuals, families and communities involved. The transformative experiences of these people and how the university interventions have helped them is evidence of civic-minded community engagement and empowerment at its best. These stories deserve an audience and would be of benefit to the university.
8.	At university level, establish institutional recognition of community engagement as part of the Performance and Development Review System (PDRS) for teaching and research staff and link it to their career progression.	The QRG witnessed the enthusiasm and interest in community engagement by faculty, but also the tension between this and what is recognised in promotional opportunities. Public research resources require evidence of social impact and UL should integrate this into its assessment process of academic and professional services staff.
9.	Establish and ensure a dedicated and suitable space and presence for UL Engage in the City Campus with a clear schedule of activities in place each academic year.	No commitment of a space for the CWELL and related programmes leads to lack of consistency for participants who have to navigate changing venues at the last minute.
10.	At university level, ensure UL's Citizen Mission Council programme is integrated into UL Engage.	Through its support for academic staff in designing community-engaged research projects and the widespread commendation of the success of the Citizens' Assembly, UL Engage has distinguished itself as already providing all the outputs that can achieve the desired outcomes of the mission, viz. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizen engagement • Student participants • Place-based interviews • Citizen support and appreciation for open innovation • Transparency and accountability
11.	Take steps to ensure greater collaboration between UL Engage and the Access Office to ensure coherent response to community engagement.	Greater collaboration between these two units has the potential to minimise duplication and scale up cooperation for efficient use of resources currently available.
12.	Build on the success of the pilot HAPPEE initiative to continue UL professional placement of students from Allied Health, the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance (IWAMD) and other therapeutic	This initiative demonstrates the educational and social entrepreneurialism of UL Engage, working as a mechanism to identify community needs that can be addressed by university expertise in innovative, co-created collaborations that provide real impact: to children, families, schools and communities

	services for early intervention at a school-based level.	experiencing socio-economic disadvantage; to practice-based professional and experiential learning; and to allied healthcare settings currently experiencing severe personnel shortages. This model of university-community co-creation and partnership offers the potential for UL to lead a paradigm shift in the integration of healthcare, education and services provision.
13.	Explore the potential for a pathway where CWELL graduates in collaboration with UL Engage and the Access Office can continue their education via level 8 programmes through recognition of prior learning (RPL) or micro-credential options.	There is currently no progression route from CWELL in UL. As a result, some CWELL graduates have secured entry to year 3 of level 8 Social Care and Community Development degrees in the Technological University of the Shannon (TUS).

4.2.2 Level 2 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
1.	Prioritise migrating the UL Engage website to the main university web platform.	This will immediately increase awareness and visibility of the unit's activities, achievements and initiatives.
2.	Provide opportunities for senior university leaders to participate in site visits to community projects.	Witnessing first-hand the profound impact of the university's best practice approach to community engagement will help to ensure that the core mission of civic engagement and inclusion is realised.
3.	Provide opportunities for the master's programmes in Community Research to be accessed on a part-time basis.	Currently, the Postgraduate Diploma in Community Engagement is offered to Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Coordinators on a part-time basis. However, it is not possible for these candidates to pursue the master's qualification as they are employed on a full-time basis.
4.	Ensure UL maintains and reenergises its commitment to membership of the UNESCO Knowledge for Change Consortium and trains and deploys the next generation of mentors.	UL has lost a number of K4C mentors, so it is important that these be replaced through ongoing engagement with the K4C mentorship training programme.
5.	Reestablish the role of Impact Officer to collect and evaluate data on behalf of UL Engage.	This will have the effect of illustrating and aiding the university's shifting academic culture to meet the emerging sustainability priorities.

Appendix One

A Membership of the QRG

Dr. Rajesh Tandon	Founder-President, PRIA (Participatory Research in Asia). UNESCO co-chair in community-based research and social responsibility in higher education.
Sahra Ryklief	General Sec IFWEA (International Federation of Worker Educational Associations). International NGO focused on community-based education.
Tiernan O'Neill	Principal, Christi Primary School, Moyross, Limerick
Dr. Mary Fitzpatrick	Head, Centre for Transformative Learning, UL
Eoin Fanning	Primary School Teacher, HSCL Coordinator and Graduate of UL the Professional Diploma in Community Engagement.
Ailish O'Farrell	Technical Writer, Limerick (Recording Secretary)

B Membership of UL Engage Quality Team

Maura Adshead	Niamh Anne O'Sullivan
Tracey Gleeson	Andrea La Touche
Eileen Hoffler	