



Report of the Quality Review Group to the Postgraduate Students' Union

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Unit Website	https://ulpsu.ie
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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, Associate Vice President Student 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 Postgraduate Students' Union

All UL students (undergraduate and postgraduate, taught and research) become automatic members of UL Student Life (students' union) when they register at the University. UL took a pioneering step when it facilitated the establishment in 2002 of a students' union specifically for postgraduate students, and since then, the University has had two strong students' unions on campus, a move that is in keeping with a global trend, especially in the USA (as explained in this LinkedIn article).

Our union started out as the Postgraduate Students' Association (PSA) in September 2002 and became the UL Postgraduate Students' Union (PSU) in 2012/13. The PSU is an autonomous entity and is independent of UL Student Life, although postgraduate students are members of both unions.

As specified in item 12.1 of Article 12 of the PSU constitution (appendix 1.1), the PSU recognises UL Student Life as the University's representative body for undergraduate students. Although UL Student Life recognises the PSU as the representative body of postgraduate students, it continues to state that it is the union for all students at UL, and with the addition of a fourth student officer in 2020/21, it added postgraduate students to its remit. Both unions perform very valuable roles in relation to meeting students' needs. However, postgraduates have very different needs to undergraduates.

The PSU represents the postgraduate community in every aspect of college life, from academic issues to helping students adjust to their new surroundings. The PSU manages interest-free hardship loans and bursaries (including a childcare bursary) from UL through the Financial Aid Committee.

The PSU is funded by a capitation fee that comes directly from UL. The fees are paid in instalments to the PSU by the UL Fees office over the course of the academic year. Once the money is transferred, the PSU is mandated to give a percentage of the capitation to Clubs & Societies (the collective term for all official UL clubs and societies).

3 Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

3.0 Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

The QRG wishes to thank the University of Limerick (UL) and the Postgraduates' Students' Union (PSU) for the warm welcome we received and for their support and hospitality during our visit. We thoroughly enjoyed all our engagements with members of the PSU, UL representatives and wider stakeholders; we felt that contributors were open, honest and direct, and we valued the time taken and the feedback provided by everyone involved in preparing for and participating in the review.

There has been considerable progress made by the PSU since the last quality review in 2018, and it is evident that the union is well-established as the representative body for postgraduate students on the campus. The student officers this year appear to have made a significant difference in terms of supporting and representing postgraduate students and should be recognised for the impact they have had.

Our primary observation from this review is that partnership is an area that requires urgent attention from the perspective of the PSU and the wider institution. Reviewers picked up on levels of disconnection between senior UL management and their understanding of the needs and requirements of the PSU in the wider context of campus life. Whilst the institution is supportive of the PSU, it does not appear to have been engaged with the development of the organisation, particularly as it has grown over the past few years. The reviewers would highlight that the University has a duty of care to the PSU to take a more active interest and would suggest a senior member of UL management be tasked with deepening the connections between the PSU and the University. This would also include an increase in the pastoral support offered to sabbatical officers where necessary.

Similarly, the PSU could do more to work closely with the University and UL Student Life, including working together in areas of common concern such as mental health and wellbeing, student accommodation, transport and student employment, to name but a few. We recognise that there have been positive developments throughout this year for both the PSU and UL Student Life to work more closely together and would highlight that this current spirit of cooperation represents an opportunity to continue this work in earnest and as soon as practicable. Furthermore, there may be data that the University can share with the PSU that would help inform the union's strategy and day-to-day work and better highlight the insight and impact the PSU is having on the postgraduate student experience.

There is potentially an element of institutional confusion around the roles of the PSU and UL Student Life, with stakeholders often mistaking UL Student Life activities for PSU activities (and vice versa). We believe that it is important to protect the sense of identity of the PSU and to support it to continue to grow and thrive; this will require adequate resourcing, space on campus and a budget that reflects the growing demands placed on the union.

In the opinion of the QRG, it is in the interests of UL that the PSU thrives, as this organisation is providing considerable care and support to international students and the wider postgraduate population and is well placed to enhance services if the resources are made available. One of the areas that requires urgent attention is the space available to the PSU as they are now exceeding capacity and have outgrown their current accommodation.

The reviewers were concerned about the level of workload that the sabbatical officers and Secretary-General are undertaking and the impact this is having on their mental health and wellbeing. There is a risk to the organisation in the fact that the Secretary-General has considerable institutional knowledge and experience, which would be lost should she leave her post as there is no succession or continuity plan in place. Increasing the number of staff and resources available to the PSU should be given urgent consideration, particularly with upcoming budget rounds.

Some of our recommendations have detailed specific timelines to support the PSU with implementation as the QRG felt that a lack of accountability and timescales heretofore has resulted in elements such as the memorandum of understanding (MoU) with UL Student Life and the strategic plan not progressing over the past few years. These are areas that require immediate prioritisation and delivery to move the PSU forward.

The QRG did consider recommendations around governance and democracy reviews, but we felt that the priority at this time was on improving current governance, developing partnerships and establishing the strategic plan with the understanding that any democracy and governance review would be included within cycle of the strategic plan. For this reason, most of the Level 1 recommendations focus on these areas.

The PSU has a solid foundation. We believe, however, that it has perhaps reached the limits of what it can achieve based on current space and resources. The time is right to revisit its funding and space allocation to ensure its continued growth and development. The PSU also needs to review its own structure, processes and finances to ensure that it is providing value for money and is fit for purpose. Furthermore, the PSU needs to look at how it is capturing data and insight and using this to inform its programme of work and engagement with its members.

As part of the PSU's growth and development, we suggest that support be provided to develop staff members and ensure that they are plugged into wider conversations across UL and the wider higher education sector. Building capacity, capability and competencies across the PSU team is going to be critical for this new stage of development.

We wish the PSU all the very best as it seeks to continue to serve the postgraduate community at the University of Limerick and look forward to hearing about progress in the coming months.

4 QRG Commendations and Recommendations

4.1 Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

1.	The high levels of general satisfaction with the PSU as highlighted in feedback from students that engaged in student groups and focus groups.
2.	The opportunities taken by the PSU to build community, which is appreciated particularly by international students, and the recognition that the PSU is well ahead in terms of multicultural events and is the most culturally inclusive organisation for students on campus.
3.	The open and approachable nature of the PSU team in engaging with its members, and the excellent job being done by the officers, as evidenced consistently in feedback from students during the QRG visit, with one student stating, "Of all the people we saw at orientation, they felt the most available".
4.	The outreach and community-building activities of the PSU over the past year, including advertising events in a more diverse way, aimed at bringing together students from different backgrounds.
5.	The greater recent impact achieved by the PSU team, particularly given its size, and the growth and development that the union should recognise as having taken place over the past few years.
6.	The material improvements in the lives of PhD students, including parity of rates of pay for internally and externally funded stipends and payment for teaching assistants, which came about due to lobbying by the PSU.
7.	The growing recognition that the PSU is the representative and advocacy voice for postgraduate students.
8.	The constructive nature of the PSU as partners across a wide range of university communities and the good job it does in representing its members, as recognised by university stakeholders, who see that engaging with the PSU is mutually beneficial, as in, for example, the upcoming review of the Student Health Centre on campus.
9.	Given the size of the officer team, the remarkable commitment of the PSU officers and staff in their representative and advocacy work, which ensures that the postgraduate voice is heard across 77 University committees.
10.	The introduction of the Secretary-General role, which is both valued and valuable and is recognised as such by both the leadership and management of the University and members of the PSU.
11.	The monthly meetings between the sabbatical officers from the PSU and UL Student Life, which are a welcome initiative that should be maintained.

4.2 Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.2.1 Level 1 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
1.	Produce a report template to capture the activities and impact of the current term of office (2024/25) as soon as possible to highlight the change the PSU is making on campus and the growth and development of the organisation. This should be published ahead of the start of the 2025/26 academic year.	This is an opportunity for the PSU to tell its story to the wider university community and produce a set of metrics to highlight the impact it is having for postgraduate students as well as to provide an indication of the future direction of travel of the organisation. This is also an opportunity to consider what 'good' looks like for the PSU and develop indicators of success. Ideally, the impact report should reflect the progress made regarding goals set out in a multi-annual strategic plan.
2.	As a matter of priority, work with senior management across UL and UL Student Life to develop a tripartite student partnership agreement.	<p>The University of Limerick, UL Student Life and the PSU have an opportunity to come together to focus on the areas that they will work on together.</p> <p>There should be 1-2 annual engagements with senior leaders from across all organisations to assess progress and delivery of the agreement.</p> <p>There are existing partnership agreements which may be useful as a guide (e.g., https://www.tcd.ie/teaching-learning/academic-policies/assets/student-partnership-policy-jul2020.pdf)</p>
3.	Institute the MoU with Student Life as a matter of urgency.	The MoU has been outstanding and should be prioritised. The university should support the student unions by externally mediating the creation of an MoU, which would delineate the membership and representation responsibilities of both bodies towards postgraduates, areas of co-operation (both regarding common causes and cooperation between officers with similar areas of responsibility) and mechanisms for mediating disagreement. It would also outline any services to be shared between both.
4.	Develop the PSU strategic plan and operational plan for commencement in September 2025.	<p>Several stakeholders from the university have offered to provide support to the PSU in helping to develop the strategic plan. This plan should be high level, SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timely) and deliverable.</p> <p>The strategic plan should cover both advocacy and policy goals and organisational development. It should prioritise a few but reasonably achievable goals,</p>

		<p>basing it also on input from the postgraduate student community (needs-based).</p> <p>The operational plan should be revised at the beginning of each mandate and can be expanded with annual goals to allow officers to implement their own ideas. It should map out relevant stakeholders for advocacy and/or an outline of different steps that need to be taken to achieve a specific goal. It should be reflected upon and, if necessary, revised halfway through the year (e.g., in January) as to its status of implementation.</p>
5.	<p>At University level, enhance collaboration with the PSU to better support officer wellbeing, by bringing the PSU sabbatical officers under the remit of the Student Counselling & Wellbeing Service.</p>	<p>The University should bring the sabbatical officers under the remit of the Student Counselling & Wellbeing Service, following standard practice across the sector.</p> <p>As the PSU is listed in UL policies and procedures as a point for support and advocacy for postgraduates, support from Student Counselling & Wellbeing should include training to include listening, self-care and referral/signposting skills.</p> <p>External supervision or debriefing (i.e., by Student Counselling & Wellbeing) should be offered to the student officers in the event of 'heavy' cases, disclosure or postgraduates presenting in distress.</p>
6.	<p>Develop and implement an officer wellbeing strategy.</p>	<p>Attention should be given to the hours worked by officers as well as considering the level of resources required for the PSU to function appropriately.</p> <p>It is vital that officers reflect on their own boundaries and not take on the emotional burdens of students but function rather as a point of referral. Additionally, the PSU should reflect on how to prevent escalations between officers and encourage stronger team building from induction onwards (e.g., through the use of social contracts, agreed behaviours, a code of conduct, discussions on communication and learning styles, etc.).</p> <p>The wellbeing strategy should include developing a mentoring offering, buddy system and/or coaching for sabbatical officers which focuses on external support from either a specialist provider or a buddying up arrangement with senior members of UL staff if relevant.</p>
7.	<p>Strengthen the capacities of the PSU by broadening opportunities for volunteering for PSU members.</p>	<p>It would be worth considering less formalised ways, which are not based on referendums or elections, through which students could volunteer structurally in the PSU, e.g., by establishing small committees that are overseen by the officers and can support their</p>

		<p>work. This could also serve as a training hub for future officers.</p> <p>A stronger approach to delegating tasks to Council members and other volunteers is also worth considering.</p>
8.	<p>Start a conversation with UL Student Life to consider opportunities for more shared space and services between the PSU and UL Student Life and formalise these in the MoU.</p>	<p>There is an opportunity to explore whether the new UL Student Life building could be used by both unions in collaboration as this was seen as something beneficial by students.</p> <p>Possibilities include having a shared walk-in office, which could then refer students to the PSU as appropriate, or using the building for postgraduate-related activities as UL Student Life also has a formal responsibility to offer these services.</p>
9.	<p>Review the constitution with regard to human resources, including current procedures for correcting misconduct or removing an officer.</p>	<p>The constitution should enable a simpler and more discreet procedure for suspension and dismissal of officers in case of serious misconduct beyond a referendum, e.g., through the Council. These procedures need to be set up on a basis of proportionality and be subject to appeal.</p> <p>Two aspects are to be considered:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. An administrative approach which is based on measures regarding employment-based obligations (this may, for example, include suspension, withholding salary or similar sanctions); 2. A political approach as to the dismissal of an officer through a voting procedure of a qualified body.
10.	<p>Review officer agreements to include dignity & respect and complaints components.</p>	<p>The officer agreements should include clauses on good conduct, acceptable behaviour and integrity.</p> <p>It is vital to have a robust complaints process and governance arrangements in place regarding officer conduct to ensure that there are suitable mechanisms available to address misconduct, provide for mediation and apply penalties, which may include suspension, withholding of salary and/or removal of officers whose behaviour and competencies do not meet the requirements of the job description.</p>
11.	<p>Explore ways that the current PSU events/community-building offering can be put on a more financially sustainable footing.</p>	<p>It is obvious that events are a key aspect of postgraduates' engagement with their union and their overall student experience at UL. Crucially, events also serve as an informal, two-way mechanism for feedback between PSU members and their officers. This activity, however, also represents a major overhead for the PSU, and may be inhibiting the</p>

		<p>union's capacity to invest in other strategic or operational activities. We also noted that events appear to be more well-attended where postgraduates have paid an even nominal sum to attend.</p> <p>We suggest that, at a minimum, all events be ticketed/require registration, to provide engagement data. We also suggest that the union consider revising the level of subsidisation of events from the PSU budget and charging a reasonable sum for tickets to social events and parties. There should be a clear cancellation mechanism to provide a more accurate headcount for catering and other costs borne by the PSU.</p>
12.	<p>Develop a business case to acquire more space on campus for the PSU to meet the current and future needs of the union, in addition to the new student centre.</p>	<p>Depending on the needs of the PSU and its members, the business case might include consideration of satellite campuses, the need for open/common areas or private meeting rooms/office space. The business case should be developed in line with the University's current and future strategic objectives, e.g., in relation to recruitment.</p>

4.2.2 Level 2 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
1.	Showcase how the PSU is addressing students' feedback and closing the feedback loop.	<p>By implementing activities suggested by students in focus groups, such as the provision of financial workshops or the organisation of more intimate events to address the isolation of some postgraduates, the PSU could demonstrate its responsiveness to student feedback.</p> <p>It would be worth considering more easy-to-execute opportunities to acquire feedback from students (e.g., before issuing meal vouchers, at events or when signing petitions on a specific issue).</p>
2.	Explore opportunities to streamline surveys with UL Student Life and the University and make better use of existing data sets.	<p>It may be possible to conduct joint surveys for areas of common concern, such as mental health, transport, student accommodation and employment opportunities.</p> <p>It would be useful to discuss with relevant offices in UL how existing data sets from previous surveys might be utilised by the PSU.</p> <p>The data sharing agreement should be integrated into the MoU and the tripartite student partnership agreement.</p>
3.	Communicate more proactively to the wider union membership, both online and offline, the advocacy work done by the PSU.	<p>By using social media and newsletters the PSU can promote the advocacy and lobby work it is doing beyond the members of the Council. To avoid overload, it is worth considering, for example, short half-yearly updates, which are not too demanding to produce, as well as regular 'You said, we did' updates on officer activity.</p>
4.	Consider how the current events/ community building offering can be made more sustainable and scalable through PSU collaboration with other student-led organisations, including UL Student Life and Clubs & Societies.	<p>We are mindful that the responsibility for organising events represents an integral, but human resource-intensive, element of the PSU's activity. We note that this largely forms part of the remit of the Associate Vice President Student Engagement (in collaboration with an events team). Given that a portion of postgraduates' capitation funding is allocated to UL Student Life and is also directed to sustain Clubs & Societies, consideration should be given to how this responsibility might be better shared through synergies with other student-led bodies.</p> <p>Sharing the organisation of events with Clubs & Societies and other interested parties will improve collaboration and ownership of events and promote better integration of postgraduates into the wider University community.</p>

<p>5.</p>	<p>Revisit the PSU election timelines, sabbatical officer start dates and student handover, to create synergies, increase efficiency and leverage expertise.</p>	<p>Aligning the PSU electoral cycle with that of UL Student Life would increase the visibility of the PSU elections. Furthermore, the aligned start date would allow for the possibility of sharing the expertise of both unions and collaborating on joint inductions where relevant.</p> <p>Instead of a two-week intensive handover period, we suggest phasing it over a longer period (to include an intensive one-week handover), which would prevent/reduce information overload. Incoming officers could benefit from the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Starting the training of officers-elect on policy right after the elections; • Integrating smaller pedagogic sessions over a longer period on how to advocate to and engage with different stakeholders; • Sharing important emails and knowledge, with an accompanying confidentiality agreement, before the mandate officially starts so officers-elect can acclimatise to the nature of their future work; • Incorporating smaller but consistent meetings during the handover period to foster stronger team connections, enhance collaboration and familiarise the incoming officers with the existing pattern of regular monthly meetings.
<p>6.</p>	<p>Develop terms of reference for the Advisory Board (regarding good governance and supporting and overseeing the role of the Secretary-General) and ensure that regular meetings are diarised throughout the year with clear agendas and supporting paperwork, informed by the strategic plan.</p>	<p>The Advisory Board can serve as a mechanism for oversight and consultation to ensure good governance in line with the PSU strategy. It can also support the PSU by making inputs from an external perspective. The terms of reference should ensure that the mandate of the Advisory Board members is clear and should seek to delineate the lines of responsibility between political responsibilities (the officers) and strategic/operational responsibilities (the Advisory Board).</p> <p>We would suggest that there be a suitable balance of external expertise alongside student representation on the Advisory Board and would question the practice of having previous officers, within two years of having served, sitting on the Advisory Board.</p> <p>We recommend a review of Article 11 of the constitution to facilitate better governance. Importantly, we feel there is a role for the Advisory Board in supporting and overseeing the work of the</p>

		Secretary-General. We suggest that the chair of the Advisory Board be an external appointee, shall not have been a member of the PSU, be appointed for a period of three years and provide a report to the PSU Annual General Meeting.
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Appendix One

A Membership of the QRG

Manish Joshi (Chair)	Professor of Practice, Strathclyde University
Martin John McAndrew	PG Student Support Officer, Trinity College Dublin
Iris Kimizoglu	President European Students' Union
Martina Darmanin	Research And Development Associate, Knowledge Innovation Centre
Ailish O'Farrell (Recording Secretary)	Technical Writer

B Membership of UL Postgraduate Students' Union Quality Team

Aimée McKenzie,	PSU SG
Louis Pemble	former PSU officer and AB member
Declan Mills,	AB member and former PSU officer
Roger Dsilva	Former PSU President
Lucy Edith Kiiza	Current PSU President
Celina Papendorf	Current PSU VP Engagement
Mahmoud Adda Djefal	Current PSU PhD and Research Officer
Shane Reynolds	PSU Council member and PhD candidate
Damian Clancy	PSU Council member and PhD candidate