

Quality Review for Academic Units – Emerging Themes

Background and Context

The [Quality Review Process](#) at the University of Limerick (UL) is one of the University’s cornerstone quality assurance mechanisms. The second cycle of reviews for academic units took place between 2009 and 2017. In total, [27 units were reviewed](#). Following comprehensive feedback on the review process, the guidelines were revised in 2015 and approved for publication in January 2016. Under these revised guidelines, four academic units participated in quality reviews: Nursing & Midwifery (Nov ’16); Clinical Therapies (Jan ’17); Culture & Communication (March ’17); and Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics (Apr ’17). This report outlines emerging themes from these four reviews.

Emerging Themes

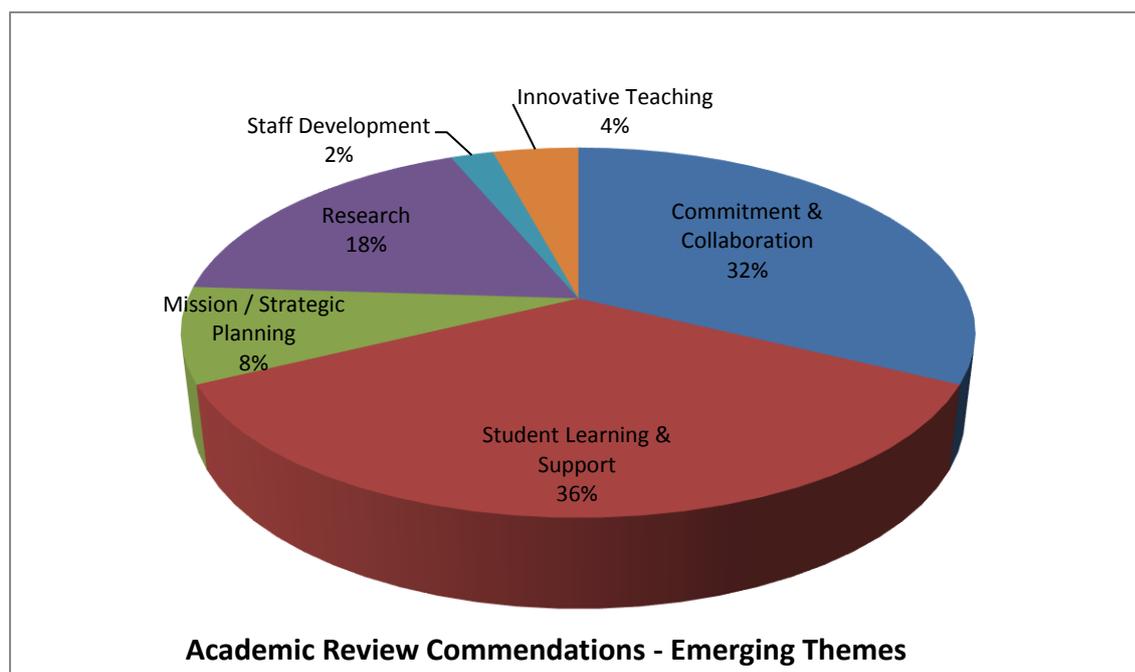
The quality review process at UL has three distinct phases:

1. Prior to the review, the unit undertakes a self-evaluation exercise and writes a self-assessment report.
2. The review site visit, during which the members of the quality review group (QRG) meet staff and stakeholders and write a final report (QRG report).
3. Post-review phase, when the report is published and the unit works on implementing the recommendations, with oversight at Governing Authority and senior management level.

The QRG report outlines the preliminary comments from the QRG, followed by a list of commendations and recommendations. Emerging themes from QRG report commendations and recommendations are outlined below.

Commendations

In total, there were 98 commendations between the four units reviewed. The following graph identifies emerging themes from these commendations.



Thirty-five of the commendations (36%) related to 'student learning and support'. Example commendations include:

- *The initiative of the department in the development of a comprehensive international education programme and its continuing exploration of intercultural learning.*
- *The willingness of staff to listen to the student voice and their responsiveness to feedback.*
- *The high level of support available to under-represented student groups, such as mature students, international students and students with disabilities.*
- *The move towards more continuous assessment in response to student demand.*
- *The well-designed modules, which are routinely updated to improve quality and respond to changing conditions.*

Thirty-one commendations (32%) were related to 'commitment and collaboration'. Examples include:

- *The strong and cohesive departmental team which demonstrates enthusiasm, passion and commitment to students, the programmes and the university.*
- *The department's flexibility to change and evolve to meet the requirements of students, the university and service users, while maintaining a focus on high-quality education.*
- *The commitment of the academic, administrative and practice education staff and the evidence of positive working relationships both across the unit and with service users and employers.*
- *The interdisciplinary, multilingual and research-informed approach to curriculum design and teaching across the School and in collaboration with other units in the University.*
- *The engagement of staff in cross-sectional work which helps both to address imbalance in staff-student ratios per section and to provide opportunities for knowledge exchange and sharing of best practice.*

Seventeen commendations (17%) were related to 'research'. Examples include:

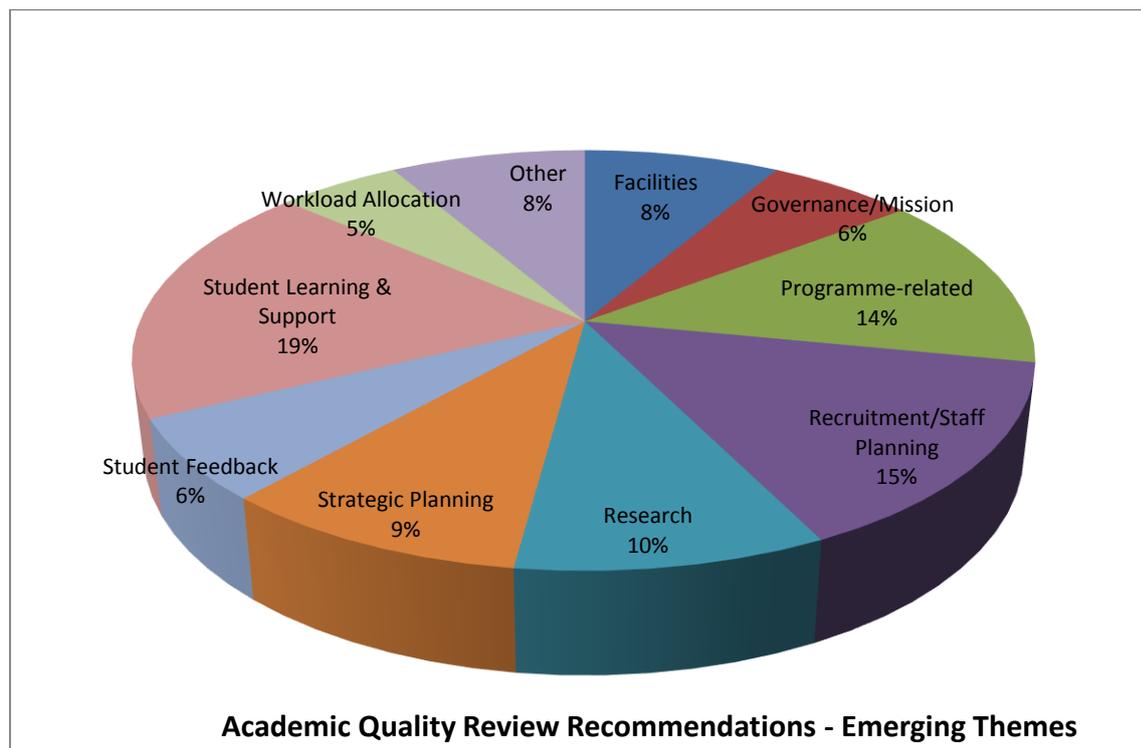
- *The well-developed research plan and the structures in place to support its implementation, which include, for example, aligning student projects with faculty research, scaffolding undergraduate work to align with publication requirements by final year, and participation in cross-department and cross-institution research partnerships.*
- *The realistic assessment of their research accomplishments by department members and their understanding of the university key metrics in this regard.*
- *The development of external research partnerships, both nationally with a diverse and extensive range of partners and internationally across a wide range of countries.*

Additional themes included 'mission/strategic planning' (8%), 'innovative teaching' (4%) and 'staff development' (2%). Examples of commendations include:

- *The clear and strong mission statement of the School, which is being actively pursued and which has widespread support, in particular with regard to the element of communication.*
- *The innovation student-centred and peer-assisted learning initiatives – a salient example being the exceptionally popular discussion groups led by native-speaker Erasmus students which boost student language skills while helping students from other countries to integrate.*

Recommendations

A total of 96 recommendations were received across the four units. The following graph identifies emerging themes from these recommendations.



With 18 recommendations in total (19%), the most cited theme emerging from the recommendations is 'student learning and support'. Examples include:

- *Explore creative ways to plan interprofessional learning (IPL) opportunities with students from other departments in the Faculty.*
- *Continue and strengthen the upskilling of teachers in pedagogically meaningful uses of technology.*
- *Identify and support resources for student groups whose numbers are set to increase as part of UL's strategic plan.*
- *Enhance the role of class reps as a channel for two-way communication, for example by developing more effective forums for discussion and by encouraging reps to seek accredited training through the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP).*
- *Support student learning with additional library resources, up-to-date software, and other equipment.*

With 14 citations (15%), 'recruitment and staff planning' was another emerging theme. Examples include:

- *Work with university senior management to expedite recruitment of senior faculty who can be expected to make a meaningful contribution to the development of the research programme.*
- *Explore ways of hiring staff, reducing contact hours and/or reducing administrative workload.*
- *Adopt a more strategic approach to getting more resources, for example by using levers such as student enrolment in the business case for new programme offerings.*

- *Carry out a strategic analysis of the actual administrative needs and processes of the School to determine what must be provided by administrative staff at School, Faculty and UL levels; and identify what can be done differently and more efficiently to avoid duplication or unnecessary processes, as well as gaps that exist and need supporting.*
- *Explore and develop other models of applying the Performance Development and Review System (PDRS) based on delegation or wider collaboration.*

'Programme-related' themes also emerged (14%), including the following recommendations:

- *Revisit the provision of each of the post-registration courses and comprehensively review whether each should continue to be offered considering the low numbers of students enrolling.*
- *Work with the University to make sure that planning for the delivery of programmes is informed by the most up-to-date information on expected student numbers and communicate this information in a timely manner to relevant teaching staff.*
- *Investigate ways to shift the format of contact away from large lectures and towards tutorials in response to student demand.*
- *Develop better planning mechanisms to predict which modules international students will take.*

'Research' was another emerging theme (10%). Examples include:

- *In collaboration with Research Support Services, design a system to collate and analyse data that will generate robust measures of research activity in terms of income and outputs. Outputs should be rated according to accepted standards and details of grants and PhD funding should be documented. Data should be accessible at individual staff member, research theme and department levels.*
- *Speed up the development of a shared and collectively owned School research strategy.*
- *Work with senior UL management for the appointment of a research champion in the department to lead on the development and implementation of a strategic plan for research.*

'Strategic planning' accounted for 9% of the recommendations. Examples include:

- *Review the strategic plan to ensure that the UL mission to become a research-intensive university with an international reputation is prioritised and implemented.*
- *Involve all staff in change management and facilitate this, for example, during a two-day retreat with a focused agenda, clear objectives and outcomes.*
- *Develop mechanisms to increase coherence and integration of school activities, including an annual school day, outside of term time, to discuss issues of teaching and research collaboration.*

'Facilities' accounted for 8% of the recommendations. Examples cited were:

- *Assist central administration to develop an understanding of the unique room requirements of the department in order to maximise efficiency of room allocation.*
- *Analyse the current use and scheduling of the department's physical space and explore the potential to optimise its usefulness.*
- *Liaise more comprehensively and strategically with other units, to identify needs in terms of space facilities both for staff and teaching and the opening hours of buildings.*

Less frequently occurring themes included 'governance/mission' (6%), 'student feedback' (6%) and 'workload allocation' (5%). Examples of recommendations from these areas include:

- *Prioritise the development of an implementation plan for the oversight and governance of the DN&M strategy.*
- *Include in the mission and goals, clear descriptions of the unique range of graduate attributes and linguistic levels achieved by students. This should inform all internal and external communications.*
- *Create a mechanism to communicate to students how the School has responded to their feedback and/or suggestions.*
- *Explore the possibility of increasing students' ownership of assessment criteria and participation in the conduct of assessments and provision of feedback.*
- *Review workload allocation to include specific focus on education, enterprise and research pathways. This should also include administrative support for research.*

Quality Support Unit
April 2018