



**UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK**  
O L L S C O I L L U I M N I G H

Quality Review  
of the  
**Department of Psychology**

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Peer Review Group (PRG)	Appendix A
UL QSU website	<a href="http://www.ul.ie/quality">www.ul.ie/quality</a>
Department/School website	<a href="http://www.ul.ie/psychology/home">http://www.ul.ie/psychology/home</a>
QQI website	<a href="http://www.qqi.ie">www.qqi.ie</a>
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## **1 Background**

### **1.1 The 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), whose functions are now carried out by Quality and Qualifications Ireland ([QQI](#)). The review process involves an approximate seven-year cycle during which each department 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 UL Quality Support Unit (QSU) website ([www.ul.ie/quality](http://www.ul.ie/quality)) provides an elaboration of this process.

The UL quality review process comprises the following four phases:

1. Preparation of a self-assessment report by the unit under review, taking into account feedback from students and customers.
2. Quality (peer) review involving external experts, both national and international, who visit the department, meet with stakeholders and review the self-assessment report (SAR).
3. Preparation of a quality review report (this report), which is made publicly available on the [QSU website](#).
4. Promotion of continuing improvement through monitored implementation of the report recommendations within the resources available to the university.

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 [QSU website](#). The planned schedule of quality reviews for both academic and support departments is available on the [QSU website](#).

### **1.2 The Follow-up Process**

The recommendations made by the peer review group (PRG) form the basis of a quality improvement plan prepared by the QSU for the department under review. The department immediately sets about evaluating and implementing the recommendations, as appropriate.

Approximately four months later, the Head of Department provides a summary overview of progress to the university's Governing Authority Strategic Planning and Quality Assurance sub-committee (GASPQA). GASPQA members are afforded the opportunity to discuss and evaluate progress.

Approximately 12 months after the review site visit, the Head of Department, Dean, Vice President Academic & Registrar and Director of Quality meet to formally review progress and to agree on any remaining actions to be taken.

## **2 The Department of Psychology**

Established in 2006 and residing in the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences (EHS), the Department of Psychology is one of UL's most recent academic departments. The department comprises 15 full-time academic staff, 2 postdoctoral staff, 1 one full-time technical staff and 2.5 administrative staff.

In addition to offering masters degrees by research, the department offers the following two full-time undergraduate and four full-time postgraduate programmes:

- Bachelor of Science (BSc) in Psychology
- Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Psychology and Sociology
- Master of Science (MSc) in Psychological Science
- Master of Arts (MA) in Psychology
- Doctor of Clinical Psychology (Professional Doctorate in Clinical Psychology)
- EHS structured PhD (full-time and part-time)

The BSc Psychology is also delivered in the IST College in Athens (currently to 15 students) through a franchise agreement. The BA Psychology and Sociology is jointly delivered by the Department of Psychology and the Department of Sociology. The EHS structured PhD programme is operated through the Faculty of EHS but delivered by each department within the faculty to students registered within that department. For the past three years, the Department of Psychology has had an average of 20 PhD candidates per year registered on the programme.

With the exception of the MSc and the structured PhD, the above programmes are accredited by the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) and therefore have been through repeated external assessment and validation since their inception. In 2015, the undergraduate programmes were subject to a re-accreditation review by the PSI; both were fully accredited, without condition, for a full cycle of five years.

The department provides service teaching (i.e., teaching modules on programmes owned by other UL departments) to the Department of Nursing & Midwifery, the Graduate Entry Medical School and the Department of Clinical Therapies.

All academic staff are research active, and the department is one of the highest-performing departments in the Faculty of EHS in terms of research. Staff have been nominated to work on institutional committees and working groups on policy and strategy. National and international links have been developed and strengthened in the areas of teaching and research.

### **3 Preliminary Comments of the Peer Review Group (PRG)**

The Peer Review Group (PRG) appreciated the warm welcome it received from the University of Limerick (UL) and wishes to thank the Department of Psychology and the Quality Support Unit for the cooperation it received throughout the review process. The department has produced a thorough and well-presented self-assessment document which identifies many of its strengths and some of its concerns. There have been frank and informative meetings with members of the departmental quality team and other staff, and these meetings, as well as discussions with various stakeholders, have facilitated the work of the PRG.

The Department of Psychology was established in 2006 as part of the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences (EHS) and offers specialist programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. A significant event in the department's development was the integration of Clinical Psychology from the Department of Education & Professional Studies (involving four members of staff) in 2013.

All programmes except the MSc and the structured PhD are accredited by the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) which specifies a broad range of disciplinary standards, including the student-staff ratio (SSR) at which the department may operate. Currently this ratio is adequate but with little room for growth in student numbers. A further challenge for the department is the management of the needs and demands of non-psychology students taking psychology modules.

Students from a range of programmes and stages expressed enthusiasm and a high level of satisfaction with the content of their programmes, demonstrating accurate recognition of the programmes' distinct strengths, and felt that they were well supported in their studies by the staff of the department.

The department has developed considerable expertise in psychological science, social issues and, in particular, social, clinical and health psychology, and it has matured into an impressive member of EHS. A good level of research output by staff underpins both undergraduate and postgraduate teaching and, in this connection, the PRG feels that, through the identification of a desired direction, the department has the capability to develop significant further research growth.

## 4 **PRG Commendations and Recommendations**

### 4.1 **Mission**

#### **Commendations**

The PRG commends the following:

4.1.1	The departmental mission, which communicates the department’s purpose, guiding principles and ethos, with the mission statement being relevant to current social and cultural contexts and well aligned with the University of Limerick strategic plan 2015-2019, <i>Broadening Horizons</i> .
4.1.2	The department’s international staff profile, which is a positive and welcome feature.
4.1.3	The distribution of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, which represents excellence in student learning and relevance in the application of psychological theory to life and living.

#### **Recommendations**

The PRG recommends the following:

4.1.4	Establish a memorandum of understanding with the Health Service Executive (HSE) which reflects the stakeholder partnership involving the Professional Doctorate in Clinical Psychology.
4.1.5	Identify and confirm the distinctive contribution of psychology to society and the Department of Psychology’s working within the multifaceted stakeholder environment.
4.1.6	Draft a policy statement addressing service user participation in consultative fora appropriate to programmes in the Department of Psychology.

## 4.2 *Design and Content of Curriculum*

### Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

4.2.1	The balanced curriculum experience for students, resulting in a good preparation in psychology.
4.2.2	The enthusiasm and competence shown in curriculum development and delivery, especially in the development of generic skills.
4.2.3	The emphasis on absorbing recent research and conceptual development into the curriculum.

### Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

4.2.4	Within the constraints of accreditation requirements, articulate and express in the curriculum the distinctive qualities of the Department of Psychology at the University of Limerick.
4.2.5	Explore and implement creative ways of bringing social issues more clearly into the undergraduate curriculum.
4.2.6	Develop procedures both within the department and with central services to ensure better integration and supervision of the co-op experience with the taught Psychology curriculum.

### **4.3 Teaching, Learning and Assessment**

#### **Commendations**

The PRG commends the following:

4.3.1	The range and variety of teaching and learning strategies used by staff.
4.3.2	The enthusiasm of staff to engage with students.
4.3.3	The variety and quality of assessment procedures used in teaching, especially at the undergraduate level.

#### **Recommendations**

The PRG recommends the following:

4.3.4	Strengthen mechanisms to ensure teaching effectiveness and efficiency through the designation of a director of teaching, whose role would be to monitor and help develop innovative teaching strategies and to ensure effective dissemination of good practice within the department.
4.3.5	Immediately develop procedures for dealing effectively at a departmental level with external examiner reports, and improve procedures and liaison with central services to develop mechanisms for distributing reports and monitoring responses to external examiners.
4.3.6	Further develop procedures for the regular review of student teaching and assessment loads and, in particular, explore mechanisms for changing assessment frameworks whilst maintaining the quality and breadth of assessments.



#### **4.4 Facilities and Learning Resources**

##### **Commendations**

The PRG commends the following:

4.4.1	The excellent collection of library and e-resources available to the department and the provision to students of core psychology texts in e-format where available.
4.4.2	The new centralised location of the Department of Psychology with its impressive research labs, equipment and teaching laboratory.
4.4.3	The availability of dedicated library and IT support.
4.4.4	The availability of data analysis software for download which is of great benefit to students for off-campus study.

##### **Recommendations**

The PRG recommends the following:

4.4.5	Plan strategically for the expansion of the department.
4.4.6	Engage with the UL time-tabling review group to proactively address the recurrent serious problems with scheduling.
4.4.7	In the context of raising the international profile of the department, work with relevant parties to explore how the costs of hosting international conferences at UL could be reduced.

## 4.5 Staff

### Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

4.5.1	The committed and collegial approach of staff to delivering the department's mission and its active contribution to achieving the university's strategic objectives.
4.5.2	The scientific approach to staff management in using the workload recognition model (WRM) for the measurement and use of staff resources.
4.5.3	The department's proactive response to staff management issues.

### Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

4.5.4	Recognise, within the WRM, the head of department function as a full-time commitment in order to facilitate the further development of the leadership role.
4.5.5	Ensure continuing delegation of responsibility in specific areas from the head of department to senior colleagues.
4.5.6	Engage with both the Dean of EHS and HR to review current shortlisting protocols when selecting candidates for interview.

## 4.6 *Student Guidance and Support*

### Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

4.6.1	The excellent support provided to students, which includes an attentive and receptive approach and efforts where necessary to direct students to appropriate supports.
4.6.2	The department's awareness of and proactive approach to particular challenges which some students may face.
4.6.3	The inclusion of specific modules in both undergraduate and MSc programmes which develop students' professional skills and provide them with an opportunity to reflect on the direction they may wish to pursue.

### Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

4.6.4	Provide career guidance prior to co-op placement in order to enhance the work of the Cooperative Education & Careers Division (CECD) in facilitating students to source or select a placement which will be beneficial to them.
4.6.5	Identify further support options for research participants in psychological studies on very sensitive topics.
4.6.6	Facilitate the educational psychologist in the department to become a formal link between Psychology and the Disability Support Services to improve engagement with these services.

## 4.7 Research Activity

### Commendations

The PRG commends the following:

4.7.1	The development of a research-active, internationally visible group of academics whose distinct strengths reflect the departmental mission.
4.7.2	The development of a student body with research and critical thinking skills that allow their meaningful contribution to the department's research culture and activities.
4.7.3	The successful development and use of a bespoke and innovative laboratory infrastructure which supports a range of sub-disciplinary areas in psychology.

### Recommendations

The PRG recommends the following:

4.7.4	Strengthen research themes into a realistic high-level strategy which identifies and focuses investment and effort in a small number of areas in which the department can excel, and communicate these through the department webpage.
4.7.5	Develop the legacy of prioritising social issues to define priority areas for research impact with time-linked targets for achieving evidence of successful impact.
4.7.6	Develop the research profile of the department through student research that is in alignment with the departmental research priorities and impact targets and that stretches the ethos of research-led teaching.

## **4.8 Department Organisation and Management**

### **Commendations**

The PRG commends the following:

4.8.1	The evidence of a culture of collegiality, collaboration and goodwill among colleagues which supports effective student learning and a strong student experience.
4.8.2	The progress made in supporting junior colleagues to achieve promotion since the recession.
4.8.3	The successful departmental merger followed by renewed emphasis on strategic planning (including attention to research at the away day, the development of strategic themes, the SWOT analysis and the definition of terms of reference for the departmental research committee).

### **Recommendations**

The PRG recommends the following:

4.8.4	Develop a strategy for the recognition of ring-fenced, accountable time for research activities for all academics engaged in teaching.
4.8.5	Institute regular strategic planning by the research committee, which is informed by systematic external scanning and supports the head of department to shape and meet the departmental mission.
4.8.6	Identify and reward innovative and successful research practices, particularly those of early-career researchers (such as research-led teaching, research and publication with students, and the development of research culture through CECD).

## **4.9 Quality Improvement Plan**

### **Commendations**

The PRG commends the following:

4.9.1	The quality of the SAR which, with its supporting documents, gives a good insight into both the working and some of the aspirations of the department, including the desire to ensure that its priorities map onto the university's strategic plan.
4.9.2	The reflective and constructive consideration which has been given to areas for improvement, with the resultant quality improvement plan (QIP) containing a list of sensible actions which span the range of the department's activities.

### **Recommendations**

The PRG recommends the following:

4.9.3	Initiate negotiations aimed at allowing conjoint-approval events to take place which would permit simultaneous internal programme approval and PSI accreditation.
4.9.4	Establish a list of priorities for the proposed improvements, in particular concerning the potentially conflicting aspects of improving assessment feedback.

## **Appendices**

### **A Membership of the Peer Review Group**

Prof. Nigel Steele (Chair)	Emeritus Prof of Mathematics, Coventry, UK
Mr. Patrick Brosnan	Former director of Mental Health Services. Health Service Executive Mid-West, Ireland
Prof. Peter Hegarty	School of Psychology, University of Surrey, UK
Ms. Rebecca Heslin	Primary Care Adult Mental Health Practitioner, Health Service Executive West, Ireland
Prof. Max Taylor	Visiting Professor, Department of Security and Crime Sciences, University College, London, UK
Ms. Ailish O'Farrell	Technical Writer (Recording Secretary), Limerick, Ireland

### **B Membership of the Department Quality Team**

Dr. Patrick Ryan	Head of Department; Quality Team Leader
Dr. Barry Coughlan	Senior Lecturer
Dr. Eric R. Igou	Senior Lecturer
Dr. Rachel Msetfi	Senior Lecturer Assistant Dean Research, EHS Faculty
Prof. Orla Muldoon	Founding Chair of Psychology
Ms. Denise Roche	Department Administrator