



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

O L L S C O I L L U I M N I G H

**Report of the Quality Review Group
to
School of Modern Languages and Applied
Linguistics**

Review dates	25 th to 27 th April 2017
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Quality Review Group (QRG)	Appendix A
UL QSU website	www.ul.ie/quality
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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](#). The UL Quality Support Unit (QSU) website (www.ul.ie/quality) provides details on the process.

Academic units are reviewed in line with [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 units 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 the recommendations of the QRG, devises plans to implement them and reports implementation progress to a Governing Authority subcommittee 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 six months after receiving the QIP template from the QSU, the head of unit provides a summary overview of progress to the university's Governing Authority Strategic Planning and Quality Assurance (GASPQA) sub-committee. GASPQA members are afforded the opportunity to discuss and evaluate progress.

Approximately 12 months after receiving the QIP template, the head of unit, Vice President Academic & Registrar and Director of Quality meet to formally review progress and to agree on any remaining actions to be taken.

2 School of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics

The School of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics (MLAL) came into being in 2014 when restructuring saw the earlier School of Languages, Literature, Culture and Communication divided into the School of Culture and Communication (where Irish resides) and the School of MLAL (French, German, Japanese, Linguistics/TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and Spanish). MLAL is part of the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS). The [UL Language Centre](#), which had resided in the School of Languages, Literature, Culture and Communication prior to the 2014 restructuring, moved to the Faculty of AHSS as part of that process.

The School is primarily housed in the Languages Building/Millstream Courtyard Building complex, but a number of individual colleagues are still spread across the campus. The Languages Building houses the Language Learning Hub which supports MLAL's commitment to student-centred, self-directed learning and technology-enhanced learning inside and outside the classroom.

MLAL is a multicultural, multilingual academic unit with an international profile and outlook. There are currently 50 permanent, contract and hourly paid academic staff whose work is supported by three administrative staff, including the Language Learning Hub Coordinator. Head of School is Dr Cinta Ramblado and Associate Head, Quality in Teaching, Learning and Research is Dr Jean Conacher. Professor Helen Kelly Holmes holds the Chair in Applied Languages, the only professorial position in the School. The School also runs a system of subject leaders who are assigned a range of duties on a 3-year rotational basis (current resourcing levels means this mechanism does not relate to Japanese).

In line with the University's aim to strengthen its international profile within the *Broadening Horizons* Strategic Plan, MLAL is excellently positioned to play a leading role in promoting cross-cultural and multilingual teaching, scholarship and research. MLAL has a long tradition of quality teaching, recognised by students and evidenced by individual and collaborative institutional, regional and national teaching awards. MLAL continues to work closely with the School of Culture and Communication as undergraduate and postgraduate programmes were largely established well before the 2014 restructuring process; co-supervision of doctoral research also takes place across the two schools. MLAL also continues good links with *Aonad na Gaeilge* which promotes and supports the use of Irish as a vibrant language on campus, not least through teaching and research through the medium of Irish.

At the core of MLAL's identity and distinctiveness lies a commitment to interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research across a range of languages. The School is a multilingual space, and research is carried out and published in a number of languages and in a variety of research traditions. With a strong comparative dimension, research in the School focuses in the main on the acquisition, analysis and interpretation of a range of languages and their associated cultures. The School specialises in research in linguistic, literary and cultural studies in French, German, Japanese, Spanish and Linguistics/English for Speakers of Other Languages. In addition to its active support of the individual work traditionally characteristic of modern languages research, the School of MLAL is home to three research centres: the Centre for Applied Language Studies ([CALS](#)), the [Centre for Irish-German Studies](#) and the [Ralahine Centre for Utopian Studies](#).

3 Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

The QRG is grateful to the School of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics (MLAL) for its very comprehensively prepared self-assessment report (SAR) and accompanying appendices. We met a very wide and thoroughly engaged range of staff, students and stakeholders. All requests for supplementary information and data were responded to promptly. The experience of conducting the review has been smooth, efficient and helpful.

One overarching impression from the review process is that the School may be underselling itself and its strengths in a number of regards, both internally to the University and externally. The School's actual and potential contributions to UL's internationalisation and graduate attributes agendas and to international postgraduate recruitment should in our view underpin a more confident approach to strategic and resource planning.

Throughout the process, the QRG encountered a willingness to reflect, respond to our questions and engage in frank discussions. We also encountered considerable levels of understanding of wider systemic challenges by members of Faculty and University staff, including some in senior positions, demonstrating that dialogue exists in an ongoing manner. However, while the findings and recommendations that follow include a number of matters which we draw to the School's attention, they also include others in which the wider Faculty or University will need to be involved if the School is to realise its potential and address some concerns about the quality of its teaching, learning and research activities.

The QRG is cognisant of the wider economic context in which the University is operating and the constraints within which all departments have historically needed to (and indeed still need to) operate. We are equally cognisant of the challenges which face MLAL in terms of the complexity of its constituent sub-disciplines, language-based sections and multiple study pathways, which are inevitably resource-hungry. This review comes at a time when the 'new' Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) BA is still to be launched. The impact of this on take-up of MLAL programmes is as yet unknown and appears to be quite unpredictable. Our overall findings reflect these wider contexts in several ways. On the one hand the School has felt hampered in its ability to develop its strategic and operational planning because of uncertainties and resource constraints (felt particularly in relation to securing continuity in human resource planning); and on the other hand the School does not appear to have had, or to have found, the internal resources or time to engage more proactively in strategic planning, whether in relation to research strategy or to modelling business cases for new programme developments (such as new MAs) and considering if these should be in addition to or instead of some current activity.

As a quality review group, we would highlight one particular challenge above all others, which has a negative impact on every aspect of the School's activity: this is the extent of reliance on non-renewable contract staff and hourly paid teachers to deliver core teaching. It is a high testament to these teachers and to the permanent staff who induct, develop and mentor them, that the learning outcomes and student satisfaction rates are as high as they are. However, the current situation is resource-hungry in relation to permanent staff, impacting on the School's capacity to drive its research and curriculum development agendas and to ensuring continuity of development of its staff base. We would encourage the School to be bolder in making its business case for alternative staffing modes. The School is performing well in research terms but is hampered by the lack of a coherent research strategy aligned with that of the University. This is partly a consequence of having only one professorial appointment who therefore has sole responsibility for leadership in research.

The School, which has only existed for three years, since the 2014 restructuring, is operating in many regards with a commendable degree of coherence, cross-fertilisation of ideas, and practices in research and programme delivery, and there is considerable collegiality in spite of some real

constraints in relation to the appropriateness and amount of space available. There is further work to be done in addressing aspects of consistency, particularly in relation to the delivery of undergraduate teaching to students taking multiple languages, but in the overall scheme of things these are relatively minor issues.

4 **QRG Commendations and Recommendations**

4.1 **QRG Commendations**

The QRG commends the following:

1.	The drafting of the mission statement by all members of MLAL, following a SWOT analysis, thereby reflecting consensus among staff on a mission that all can identify with and follow, which is very important for cohesion within the School.
2.	The contribution of the School to language studies, both in teaching and research, and the clear commitment of staff to fulfilling the University's strategic aim of developing in students the skills defined as UL graduate attributes.
3.	The School's willingness to explore further revenue streams by seeking to expand its MA offerings and increase PhD student recruitment, particularly of non-EU students.
4.	The School's whole-hearted engagement with the new BA programme with Mary Immaculate College (MIC).
5.	The interdisciplinary, multilingual and research-informed approach to curriculum design and teaching across the School and in collaboration with other units in the University.
6.	The high quality of the curriculum which provides the students with a strong theoretical background and good language skills; particularly the professional preparation provided by the MA in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages).
7.	The opportunity to study up to three languages, including Irish, to degree level, with delivery of most of the modules in the target language.
8.	The cross-School commitment to the development of technology-enhanced innovations in teaching, learning and assessment, as exemplified by the well-attended regular seminars and the widespread and versatile use of technology developed through empirical research.
9.	The increasing use of the Sulis and other IT platforms as teaching and research resources, which facilitates the dissemination of learning materials, the follow-up of student work, and student-teacher and student-student communication.
10.	The extremely dynamic Language Learning Hub (LLH) with its wealth of language learning resources and activities, which are very much appreciated by students and staff.
11.	The innovative 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.
12.	The strong sense of collegiality in the School, with staff being clearly supportive

	of each other in, for example, sharing the workload of colleagues on sabbaticals, sharing knowledge through workshops and seminars and supporting hourly paid staff who do not have an office.
13.	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.
14.	The accessibility and openness of staff, which are much appreciated by students.
15.	The support and information provided to students preparing for Erasmus placements and other placements abroad, including access to reports by previous Erasmus students and meetings with students returning from their placements abroad.
16.	The excellent relationship between MLAL staff and the UL Counselling Service.
17.	The integration within the curricula of co-operative (Co-op) work placements which are an excellent way of boosting students' language skills while preparing them for the realities of the labour market and the workplace; stakeholders consulted by the QRG reported that their experiences with UL students and with the Cooperative and Careers Division (CECD) were extremely positive.
18.	The very active MLAL research centres and their rich, original, productive and relevant programmes of activities.
19.	The collegial approach to owning the School's research objectives, disseminating the research of individuals and the research centres, and supporting staff research development, especially through the fostering of early-career researchers through mentoring, the Performance and Development Review System (PDRS) and joint School-UL (via HR) funding of PhD programmes for staff.
20.	Within the strictures and challenges of a very limited budget, the encouragement and democratic support of research and the flexible approach to freeing up research time where possible.
21.	The School's good record in attracting fully funded international PhD students, as well as small- and medium-scale external funding.
22.	The very good completion rates by PhD students, especially vis-à-vis AHSS Faculty averages.
23.	The very high level of satisfaction by graduate research students who are highly appreciative of the support they receive (in terms of supervision, flexibility, openness to a wide variety of research topics, training opportunities, facilities and researcher development funding).
24.	The effective panel review system for PhD students.
25.	The positive use of co-supervision to enhance supervisory activity and to develop

	the supervisory capability of all staff.
26.	The high level of research-led and research-informed teaching at all levels, which leads to the production of strong research by students, including at undergraduate level, such as through the final year project (FYP) and the poster competition.
27.	The existence of a work allocation scheme (WAS) and the commitment to making work allocation more equitable and transparent.

4.2 QRG Recommendations

Level 1 Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

No.	Recommendation	Justification
1.	Revisit with HR and senior management the reliance of the School on hourly paid staff and teaching assistants (TAs) on temporary contracts, exploring opportunities to create permanent fractional contracts.	<p>An over-reliance on temporary staff has negative effects in the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Collegiality and cohesion of the School; b) Sustainability of the delivery of teaching with quality implications from a lack of continuity; c) Curriculum development informed by research as well as teaching experience; d) Strategic planning and follow-through with regard to implementation of University goals; e) Faculty and national programmes for both languages and language teaching and learning; f) Provision of support for students; g) Research output and workload of permanent staff, who suffer the negative impact of recurring recruitment, induction and mentoring of casual staff, while casual staff are unable to contribute to administration; h) A risk of failing to attract and retain talent.
2.	Speed up the development of a shared and collectively owned School research strategy.	The research strategy is being developed through successive (yearly) themed research days, and therefore taking a very long time. The length of the process may hinder the achievement of UL, AHSS and MLAL goals.
3.	Work with AHSS and UL to find a solution to the mismatch between the criteria for evaluation of research identified locally (as encouraged by the Faculty and University) and the central criteria based on ISI metrics used for promotion and research-related resource allocation (which appear to be privileged at national level in determining funding formulas).	The metrics privileged at UL level do not always recognise the value of Arts & Humanities/modern languages publications and foreign publications; consequently, the devolution of responsibility to faculties, schools and departments to identify their own alternative metrics can be very positive for internal evaluation of research. However, this may be detrimental to individuals' career progression/promotion prospects and to the Faculty and School when allocation of funds is decided if the criteria used do not reflect those elaborated locally.
4.	Explore with Faculty senior management opportunities for	The current sabbatical leave system is very inventive but favours research activity abroad and

	<p>extending the research leave scheme, independently of the requirement to spend it abroad and, wherever possible, of the size of the section staffing.</p>	<p>is potentially discriminatory.</p> <p>Moreover, the current research leave scheme is unavailable to sections where staffing levels are low and ability to cover for absent colleagues is reduced or non-existent.</p>
5.	<p>Include in the mission and goals, clear descriptors of the unique range of graduate attributes and linguistic levels achieved by students. This should inform all internal and external communications.</p>	<p>For both students and potential employers, it is important to be able to gauge the level of language proficiency at graduation. A clear commitment to providing a statement of the student's level of achievement, mapped to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), is required to increase employability. The same applies to a clear explanation of the graduate attributes which should be expressed in a quantifiable manner. It is important to be bolder in making claims which are sustained by curriculum, teaching and assessment, and by graduate outcomes and destinations.</p>
6.	<p>To inform strategic planning, review and develop the business cases for all PhD and MA programmes (current and future) with senior UL management.</p>	<p>Evidence needs to be presented to demonstrate the viability of current and future MLAL programmes, including cross-subsidisation (modules shared across multiple programmes and strategic positioning of small programmes within the School's portfolio).</p>
7.	<p>Conduct a careful, longitudinal analysis of both the challenges and opportunities related to the new BA being introduced in collaboration with MIC, as well as ways of addressing the challenges.</p>	<p>The new BA is an important new venture offering both opportunities and challenges for MLAL: opportunities to raise the visibility and profile of its programmes but challenges as regards the practicality of delivering across two institutions. Consideration might be given to delivering some more modules through the medium of English to broaden appeal.</p>
8.	<p>Restate and implement a commitment to consistency of teaching, learning and assessment practices across languages, highlighting to students the rationale behind feedback and assessment practices including intentional variability.</p>	<p>It is important, from the point of view of both fairness to students and to staff (in terms of workload expectations) and the perception of MLAL as a coherent unit, that the practices in different languages be broadly comparable, while differentiating as appropriate to different languages and content. Consistency in feedback practices is particularly important in this regard.</p> <p>It is also important that the practices in different languages not only <i>are</i> comparable but are perceived to be so, and there is therefore a need to communicate these more clearly to students.</p>
9.	<p>Work more closely with CECD to</p>	<p>Much career advice and information is provided</p>

	ensure provision of career guidance tailored appropriately to final year MLAL students.	by CECD, but final year students appear to be unaware of the opportunities available to them following achievement of an MLAL degree. Greater effort should be made to reassure nervous final year students that they do have opportunities, and more targeted career advice should be provided to them.
10.	Engage with senior management at the appropriate level to revisit the roll-out of the new Personal Academic Support System (PASS).	The PASS system seems to be quite ambitious, but its implementation appears rather problematic, placing as it does a higher burden on a smaller number of staff. At University level, there needs to be consultation with staff and students to determine the type of academic advisory system that would best suit them. There should then be a measured, phased roll-out of the system.
11.	Liaise more comprehensively and strategically with Buildings and Estates, as well as other units, to identify needs in terms of space facilities both for staff and teaching and the opening hours of buildings.	<p>The increasing student numbers have put significant pressure on MLAL resources. It would be useful for the School to consult with the University authorities in a timely manner so that they could jointly identify any opportunities that may arise to assign greater spatial resources. It is a priority to find a space where part-time and hourly paid teachers can prepare their classes and interact with students in a confidential manner. Another priority is to provide a communal, collaborative space where staff can meet in a more informal manner and thus facilitate the exchange of ideas around research and innovation.</p> <p>Keeping the Language Learning Hub (LLH) open in the evenings, even on one evening per week, would be of great benefit to staff and students (especially MIC students on the new BA programme). Furthermore, it would facilitate the School's engagement with the wider community via the Language Outreach Programme, whereby participants in the programme could use the Hub's resources. There are cost implications in longer opening hours, but these could be mitigated by working closely with other units in order to share the financial burden.</p>
12.	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	There has been little if any strategic reflection on how administrative needs have changed as the School has been reshaped and ways of working have evolved (whether through changes in the technology, in pedagogy, in student numbers or in profile of students). It is vital to clarify how the roles of administrative staff in MLAL are related to

	more efficiently to avoid duplication or unnecessary processes, as well as gaps that exist and need supporting.	those of AHSS and UL, and of academic staff in MLAL. More regular meetings and opportunities for interaction with administrative staff in different areas of UL can lead to sharing good practice and identifying possible economies.
13.	Review the effectiveness of the new work allocation scheme (WAS) developed by the School, adjust if necessary to ensure workload disparities are not invisibly introduced, and provide input into any initiatives undertaken at UL level.	There is considerable worry by several staff that their roles are not recognised and that the simplified WAS does not give a clear measure of where individual workloads stand in relation to the average. It is also vital that any University-wide system be appropriately adaptable to different disciplines. There are roles, such as the subject leader role, that are necessary in MLAL but not formally recognised at UL level; this situation leads to overwork and demoralisation in those who feel their work is not valued.
14.	Review how the research day is protected in the WAS and in the timetable.	Student Academic Administration is asked to schedule a research day for each staff member but the complexities of timetabling do not always allow this. Other pressures are eroding the research day, which is however crucial if staff are to deliver the high-quality research that is expected.

Level 2 Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

No.	Recommendation	Justification
1.	Ensure that all MLAL activities are clearly outlined in the mission and that their rationale, strategic fit and plans for further development are explained.	The School's contribution to the University's internationalisation agenda and to community engagement (such as through broadening modules, electives for other departments and the Language Outreach Programme) is currently underplayed and the strategy for further development of these is absent.
2.	Work closely with CECD to analyse problematic or unsuccessful Co-op work placements in order to identify and implement mitigations.	Even if the number of unsuccessful placements is small, there appear to be occasional issues with the management of expectations because of a disconnect between the work experience and applied language development objectives of the placement.
3.	Work with relevant UL units to	The School's laudable commitment to continuous

	bring the information in the Book of Modules up to date with the current curriculum content.	improvement is not reflected in the official Book of Modules, which risks poor or out-of-date information being provided to current and prospective students and can thus undermine the credibility and attractiveness of both UL and MLAL.
4.	Explore the possibility of increasing students' ownership of assessment criteria and participation in the conduct of assessments and provision of feedback.	Learners benefit from a deeper understanding of assessment criteria and standards of performance if they actively engage in formulating criteria and actually carrying out peer- and self-assessment as well as providing feedback to other learners. Some of this can also lessen the teachers' burden in assessment and provision of feedback. This approach is very compatible with the UL goal of increasing student independence.
5.	Continue and strengthen the upskilling of teachers in pedagogically meaningful uses of technology.	The use of technology in teaching is part of UL strategy. Teachers' skills in this respect are bound to vary, especially in the current context of a reliance on hourly paid and contract staff
6.	Ensure better communication between the library and the LLH to ensure comprehensive information about learning resources regardless of location.	This recommendation is partly driven by the resource implications of the new BA with MIC but is actually inherently desirable.
7.	Review, in conjunction with HR and UL senior management, the regulations for the PhD by publication route to enable pre-registration publications to be included.	Inclusion of pre-registration publications is common in the sector; PhD by publication can enhance the professional development of staff and their ability to attract PhD students in their area, which would support the School's aim of increasing PhD recruitment.
8.	Devise a fair system to acknowledge the contribution of staff in supporting research and more junior researchers, not just in the WAS or in making a case for career progression but also as a demonstration of 'good citizenship'.	Invisibility of some research(er) support activities, such as mentoring, is damaging to morale and unfair to those who act collegially and helpfully towards more junior staff.
9.	Possibly in collaboration with AHSS or UL, consider the viability of establishing a seed fund to facilitate the development of bids for external funding.	There is very limited funding to support research activity; this could be an investment that would generate returns.

Appendices

A Membership of the QRG

Jocelyn Wyburd (Chair)	Director of Language Centre, University of Cambridge, UK
Prof. Ari Huhta	Professor of Language Assessment, University of Jyväskylä, Finland
Prof. Lucia Boldrini	Professor of English and Comparative Literature/Head of Department, Goldsmiths, University of London, UK
Dr Gesine Stanienda	Manager, Globalization Services (SLS), SAP SSC Ireland Ltd, Ireland
Kevin McCarthy	Conference Interpreter (European Commission), Belgium
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B Membership of the Unit's Self-Evaluation Team

Dr Jean Conacher	(Chair / German, Associate Head, Quality in Teaching, Learning & Research)
Dr Cinta Ramblado	(Head of School / Spanish)
Emma Foley	(Administrator)
Catherine Jeanneau	(Coordinator, Language Learning Hub)
Prof. Helen Kelly-Holmes	(Linguistics/TESOL)
Dr Frédéric Royall	(French)
Dr Elaine Vaughan	(Linguistics/TESOL)
Dr Barrie Wharton	(Spanish)