



EUA (European University Association)
Institutional Evaluation Programme

INSTITUTIONAL QUALITY REVIEW OF THE UNIVERSITY OF
LIMERICK

EUA REVIEWERS' REPORT

November 2004

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1. Introduction

Irish universities are required under the 1997 Universities Act to establish and implement procedures for quality assurance, and arrange for a review of the effectiveness of these procedures “from time to time and in any case at least every 15 years”. For this purpose, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and all seven Irish universities represented by the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) engaged the European University Association (EUA) to undertake this review with the participation of experts from Europe, the USA and Canada.

The review of all seven Irish universities took place in a coordinated manner during the calendar year 2004, using the EUA institutional review methodology and guidelines. These guidelines were specially fine-tuned to meet the specific requirements of the Irish quality review. The process is designed to ensure that each individual university, the university system as a whole, and its stakeholders gain maximum benefit from comprehensive reviews by teams of experienced international quality assurance experts. This methodology also ensures that the procedures and processes in place in Irish universities are reviewed against best practice internationally.

The EUA has a strong international reputation in quality assurance having conducted institutional reviews of some 135 universities in 33 countries during the past ten years. The tenth anniversary of the EUA programme was celebrated during 2004.

Under the joint IUQB/HEA commission, the EUA was requested to report on the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures in each university and the implementation of findings arising out of the application of those procedures, in the context of the university’s overall institutional decision making and strategic planning.

It was further requested that these key elements should be placed within an institutional analysis, allowing the review teams to comment on institutional obstacles and success factors for an effective internal quality management.

EUA institutional reviews are usually based on an agreement between the university and the EUA, although there have been cases where the state authorities have accepted an EUA evaluation or review as part of a national quality assurance programme, without any special terms of reference. In the case of the Review of Quality Assurance in Irish Universities, the HEA is clearly also an interested party.

2. Process

Following a formal request by the President of the University of Limerick (UL), the Steering Committee of the EUA institutional review programme appointed a team for the review of quality at UL. This team was composed of:

- Henrik Toft Jensen, Rector, University of Roskilde, Denmark, as chair;
- James Downey, former President, University of Waterloo, Canada;
- Jürgen Kohler, former Rector, Greifswald University, Germany;

- Lewis Purser, Programme Manager at the European University Association, as secretary.

The Team came to UL for a preliminary visit from 3-5 May 2004 and for a main visit from 25-28 October 2004.

The EUA quality review methodology is guided by four central strategic questions. These questions, which have also been adopted by the IUQB in its Framework for Quality in Irish Universities, and which ensure that quality is examined within its wider institutional context, are:

- What is the university trying to do?
- How is the university trying to do it?
- How does the university know that it works?
- How does the university change in order to improve?

In accordance with the EUA methodology and guidelines, and in advance of the preliminary visit, the University of Limerick sent a 24 page Self-Evaluation Report (SER) to the EUA team, analysing the institutional context, norms and values, its quality monitoring and quality management, as well as its strategic management and capacity for change. This SER was accompanied by detailed annexes. The EUA Team appreciated the work done in the SER and considered it to be an excellent report. The team also received further relevant documents during its visits to UL, including the University's Strategic Plan 2001-2006, and reports and general presentational material from some of the Departments and service units.

For its main visit, the Team requested some additional documentation regarding UL's mechanisms for promoting new initiatives, the roles of the course boards, and the university's responsiveness to some of the governance and management issues related to the implementation of quality. These issues were discussed during the preliminary visit but not fully reflected in the SER. This additional information was provided in advance of the main visit and covered the issues adequately.

During its two visits, the EUA team held detailed discussions with a wide variety of persons, both from inside and outside the university community. These included:

- the UL President and Vice-Presidents;
- the Chair of the UL Governing Authority;
- the self-evaluation group established for the EUA review process;
- the Deans' Council and Executive Committee;
- central university staff responsible *inter alia* for the promotion of quality, teaching and learning, administration, buildings, research, international education, cooperative education and careers, human resources;
- a cross-section of assistant Deans for academic affairs and course directors;

- the Students' Union leaders;
- leaders, staff and students from seven Departments (maths and statistics, mechanical and aeronautical engineering, education and professional studies, economics, sociology, nursing, life sciences);
- leaders, staff and researchers from two major research centres (materials and surface science, software engineering);
- representatives of UL stakeholders and partners in society.

The team would like to thank UL and its President, Prof. Roger Downer, for the welcome and hospitality provided during its two visits. Both visits and all meetings were efficiently and pleasantly arranged by Adrian Thomas, Director of Quality, who also acted as a very effective liaison person between UL and EUA.

The team would also like to put on record the open manner in which it was received across all parts of UL and the frank discussions which characterised the team's meetings. During these meetings the team was able to discuss a very wide range of issues linked to the ongoing development of UL and the role of the quality review process in this.

3. General context for Quality Assurance

The EUA team received very many positive general impressions during its visits to the University of Limerick, all of which provide an important backdrop to quality assurance and quality management activities at the university.

The team was struck by the energy and enthusiasm of the vast majority of UL staff and students whom it met. Given that the success of any university rests on the commitment and quality of its staff and students, this augurs well for the future of UL.

UL as an institution is little over 30 years of age, and as a university is 15 years old. The fact that such a body of staff undertaking such a wide range of teaching, research and other activities represents a huge achievement over these relatively short time scales. The EUA team was very impressed with the UL campus and the large amount of capital investment which has taken place over recent years. The campus, including teaching and learning as well as sporting and cultural facilities, was regarded with pride by all university members, not least by the students, with whom the team met.

Great efforts have been put into developing well-functioning support schemes for teaching and learning, aimed at both students and staff. This is a sign that the university takes these activities seriously, and is committed to the continuous improvement of quality in these fields.

The EUA team was given details regarding the rapid internationalisation of life at UL. Active international cooperation and exchanges are an important element of ensuring quality in a modern university, allowing for formal and informal benchmarking and the sharing of best practice across a range of teaching and research activities, the active

exchange of ideas and methods across cultural and other boundaries, and the general exposure of the institution to alternative ways of thinking. These can add significantly to the quality of the work of both students and staff at a university. Student and staff exchange figures at UL, while still relatively modest in real terms, have increased substantially over the last ten years, and a new international education strategy is currently being put in place, e.g. with UL taking on a leading role in the Luxembourg-based project Campus Europae. While UL sends fewer outgoing students for periods of study abroad than it receives incoming students, many UL students also obtain international experience and exposure through the Cooperative Education programme, which is an integral part of each student's experience at UL.

The Cooperative Education system at UL also provides a direct link for each student between the world of learning and the world of work, and as such gives the student a better understanding of the links between these two spheres and better opportunities for making a successful transition once he or she has left the university. This system has been a strength of UL over the past number of years and contributed substantially to the university's strong visibility and reputation regionally, nationally, and indeed internationally. It has helped focus attention on the outcomes of teaching and learning, and has contributed to a very realistic approach to ensuring the quality of these activities. However, the monitoring of student placements under the Cooperative Education system or other schemes, such as for trainee teachers, requires huge resources and has become increasingly difficult as numbers grow.

UL has developed an excellent network of local and regional partnerships with other economic, social and cultural actors. These partnerships have likewise been based on concrete dialogue and activities, and the spirit of these has permeated most areas of the university, resulting in a healthy view of the relevance of higher education, the need for a variety of perspectives, and a general openness to the external world. All of these are essential in developing a sustainable and institution-wide quality culture. The team gained an impression however from the UL senior management that the university needed to use its external resources and partners better in terms of developing and implementing strategy.

4. Governance and management

The principal governing body at UL is the Governing Authority (GA). The GA has 34 members and, as with the other Irish universities, its composition is defined in great detail in the 1997 Universities Act. The GA membership includes representatives of different categories of UL staff, a number of external representatives, two representatives from the Students Union and one postgraduate student. However, the recent OECD report recommends a general reduction in size of such governing authorities at all Irish universities, and proposes a maximum of twenty members, a majority of which should be lay members, that is from outside the university. The UL SER also raises the issue of the current large size of the GA. The EUA review team was surprised to find such a big GA and wondered how effective a body this size could be in ensuring the strategic oversight

and governance of a modern university in a rapidly changing national and international context.

The 1997 legislation also gives an overview of the GA's formal functions; as in other universities with such a body, these are essentially supervisory. It might prove useful for UL to revisit these basic functions of the GA, since the EUA team learned that much time in GA meetings tended to be spent on operational rather than strategic matters.

A specific issue which was mentioned in the SER and brought to the attention of the EUA team was the current practice of interview panels for the recruitment of new staff at UL being chaired by external members of the Governing Authority. The EUA team considered this practice rather unusual and feared that it may already have led to situations where the recruitment of senior scientists applying to UL has been jeopardized; in any case the GA should remain free to act in case of an appeals process and therefore should not chair the recruitment process itself.

UL also has an Academic Council which likewise has certain governance responsibilities. The composition and business of the Academic Council are laid down in the Universities Act and follow a traditional academic governance model.

While the EUA team respects the Academic Council's academic responsibilities for all courses offered at UL, it was unsure of the complicated procedures for the development and approval of new academic courses. The process appeared to be very slow and cumbersome. The team learned that a very large number and variety of courses are offered at the university, and that each course should have a course board and director, although until recently some of these course boards may not have existed on a systematic basis. In some fields, the number of such courses, boards and directors greatly exceeds the supervisory capacity of the Head of Department or Dean. Many people at UL appeared to think that it would be a good idea to reduce the number of courses but to allow increased flexibility in creating variations within a course, and also for the names of courses, so as to be able to respond in more creative and rapid ways to needs expressed by society and to the interests of students, without overburdening the governance and management processes.

The strategic plans of most universities have a very important impact on academic issues. UL is currently in the process of preparing a new such plan, for the period 2005-2010. To secure a wide consultation with the academic community, as mentioned in the SER, the EUA team was of the opinion that there was a need for a more participatory process in preparing this plan. In particular, it appeared that it would be useful to include the Academic Council in various preparatory stages before the new plan is finalised and the Governing Authority when the draft strategic plan is ready. This would help in ensuring a better balance between the executive and governing bodies, as well as between the needs of management and those of collegiality. Such an approach would also certainly help concerning the necessary ownership and implementation of the plan. There is certainly a need for the next strategic plan to remain central in decision making at all levels.

As highlighted several times in the self-evaluation report and by senior UL representatives during the visits, there is scope for improving communication across the whole university. This has been a goal of the senior leadership for several years already, and many initiatives have been started, but apparently the challenge persists. To the EUA team, there appeared to be a number of aspects to improving communication, all of which are important in developing a better common understanding of priorities between the senior management and the academic staff. One of these could be to emphasise the direct meetings between senior management and the Department level. While recognising that the President has met with each department to source input to the strategic plan, such meetings continue to be important in the phase of drawing up and starting to implement the new plan. Another could be to encourage better student engagement at the level of courses, which will in turn oblige staff to respond to university-wide initiatives. Linking undergraduate students to the UL intranet might assist here. A third, as suggested elsewhere in this report, is to ensure a more explicit link between resource allocation and strategic outcomes, which may encourage staff to pay greater attention to university issues. Better communication between the leadership and the university would in any case also improve the possibilities of creating further tools for the implementation of strategy and change.

A more precise division of labour between central senior management and decentralised College and Departmental management would also appear desirable. It seemed to the EUA team that the current budgeting procedure was complicated and created several layers of funding applications and discussions which were not all necessary. For example, all permanent vacant positions are recentralised by the central authorities, and several special development funds should be applied to at central level.

These initiatives are understandable, but it should be possible to find a formula for the medium-term allocation of numbers of positions to Departments. It should then be easy to find out which units of the university automatically should keep a vacant position at a given time. This would obviously not remain unchanged indefinitely, but would vary according to strategic priorities. It is likewise normal to have central funds, but these should have a significant amount of money in order to justify a university-wide competition. There seemed in general to be many rather small funds for similar overall purposes controlled at university level. The amount of effort implied in applying to multiple funds for very small amounts of money appeared to the team to be wasteful. The team was aware that decentralised entities also had some funds for e.g. staff development. The team would encourage the university to see how better long-term strategic use could be made of these various funds.

Generally speaking, the team agrees with the statement in the SER, repeated several times by senior management and departmental level staff during the visits, concerning the need for a better resource allocation model across UL. There appeared to be scope for improving the link between resource allocation and the implementation of strategy, and likewise between resource allocation and outputs, at College, Department and individual levels.

5. Quality monitoring and quality management

Background

The 1997 Universities Act requires all Irish universities to create an internal quality assurance system. This law also gives the overall framework for this system:

- evaluations should be conducted at regular interval and not less than once in ten years
- all Departments and, where appropriate Faculties, and any service provided by the university should be evaluated
- teaching, research and the provision of other services should be the subjects of evaluation.

The Irish universities have collectively, through IUQB, devised a common framework to ensure that their legislative obligations are met and that the evaluations are undertaken in a useful, improvement-oriented and systematic way, working towards an internal quality culture at all universities across the country. The EUA team commends the framework the Irish universities have put in place and the belief that autonomous universities should take primary responsibility themselves for the quality of the work they are doing, as expressed in the 1997 Act.

Process

The EUA team admires the efforts at the University of Limerick to create a well functioning quality review process for academic Departments and service units across the university. For the academic Departments, this process is based on the IUQB framework and, as in the other Irish universities, is based on an initial self-assessment by the Department in question and a subsequent peer review. The Department should then respond to the report written by the peer review team and draw up an action plan to address the issues raised and to ensure ongoing quality improvement.

Unlike the other Irish universities, the service units at UL follow the ISO 9000:2000 process framework, which is seen by UL as having a greater focus on service and being more customer-oriented.

The quality review process at UL commenced in 1998 and is therefore seven years old now. The process is managed by a dedicated Quality Support Unit, reporting to the Vice-President Academic and Registrar, and to the Quality Steering Committee, a subset of the Deans' Council. The pace of work has increased from reviewing two units per year at the start to six units in the 2003-04 year. The schedule of units for review seems to have been based on a more or less voluntary basis, with those units most willing to come forward being reviewed during the first years of the process, while the "less voluntary" units are now being addressed. According to the information provided to the EUA team, 14 out of a total of 25 academic departments had been reviewed by the end of 2004, and one of these had already had a follow-up review. Two reviews had also been undertaken for Mary Immaculate College. According to the same information, it did not appear that any

of the 13 UL service units had been through the ISO 9000:2000 process at the time of the EUA visits.

The quality review process has reached across many parts of the university so far and become both reasonably visible and well known in a short space of time. It has also, importantly, been linked to quality assurance mechanisms and procedures which existed prior to the 1997 Act and which continue to be an important part of the university's quality assurance process. One very positive factor appears to be the emphasis on a supportive approach to quality assurance, as indicated by the establishment of a university Centre for Teaching and Learning and the good work since undertaken in this field. Another very positive feature of the process at UL is the effort made to involve all categories of staff. This has been one of the reasons for the relatively high impact on quality awareness and its contribution to creating a quality culture at the University.

Other quality assurance mechanisms

Alongside this formal quality review process, the EUA team was also informed of the other main quality assurance mechanisms at UL. One of these is the traditional external examiners system, which is obligatory for all taught programmes and research theses. In the opinion of the team, the culture of using such external examiners in a structured and systematic way is a good one in that it can help secure national and international benchmarking of curriculum, student performance and examination procedures. Of course, the usefulness of the system depends on the quality of the external examiners invited to come to UL, and the university should continue to satisfy itself that those invited are indeed representative of the universities and academic programmes against which UL would like to benchmark itself in the relevant disciplines.

Another important internal quality assurance mechanism is the initial approval of new courses at UL by the Academic Council. As already mentioned however, the procedures for this appeared to the EUA team to be rather slow and cumbersome. It should be possible to provide equal levels of quality assurance while at the same time allowing for the faster and more flexible approval of courses.

Once approved, monitoring the ongoing quality of the course depends to a large degree on the Course Board, which should ensure each course is kept up to date, relevant to needs and expectations and that standards are maintained. The EUA team heard of many Course Boards which were obviously doing their job well and ensuring high quality in their subject areas. The team also learned that some such Boards had only very recently been created, and that others had not, in the opinion of the Departments themselves, been as active as would have been desired.

In some academic areas, programmes are also accredited by the relevant professional bodies. This introduces an extra externally-driven quality management dimension to the framework, which however is not explicitly linked to the internally-led quality review process, although many aspects of the process are similar. It may be useful for UL to

explore what synergies could be achieved, e.g. in terms of timing and documentation, between professional accreditation processes and the quality review process.

The formative evaluation of teaching is essential for effective quality monitoring. The team learnt that this system is currently being developed at UL and is supported by the Centre for Teaching and Learning. This form of quality assurance is undertaken on a voluntary basis only so far, although growing numbers of staff have shown their interest in participating in this activity. The team considers that the basis for this important system is now in place at UL and could be developed further and become of wider benefit, both concerning the number of courses monitored, and by placing the evaluation of these lectures and modules in a wider disciplinary and educational setting within the College or university. The team recommends that UL should now move from an optional system to one where this is accepted as standard practice for all teaching staff.

Student influence on quality

One of the major channels available for students to contribute to discussions about maintaining and improving quality in the basic activities of the university is through a system of clearly mandated student representatives at the level of each class. Many universities have these, and while the system can be difficult to maintain given the large number of classes and the rapid turnover of representatives, it remains an essential mechanism for ensuring formal and informal student feedback and communication at grass roots level.

The team was pleased to learn that this system of class representatives also exists at UL, and that the system was widely known and recognised as useful by both students and staff. The team also learned however that this system does not function fully at UL, in so far as it was informed that there were only “class reps” in slightly more than 50% of all classes. On verifying with students during the visits, it also transpired that several of these class representatives did not know what their duties were, and furthermore several of them did not know why they had been elected. The team is therefore of the opinion that the status of “class reps” should be improved through initiatives from the university leadership, in agreement with the Student Union, to improve the relevance and visibility of these positions and to ensure that these representatives really can contribute to discussions on quality at the level of Course Boards and Departments. The team was pleased to learn that some training for “class reps” had recently been carried out in order for them properly to fulfil their roles, and would encourage greater efforts in this sort of activity.

Course Boards are of course another possibility for student influence and student feedback on the basic activities of the university. Based on its findings over the two visits, the team believes that UL needs to strengthen the role and expectations of students in these Boards. It might be a good idea to generalise the situation which exists in some Departments and Colleges where the “class reps” also act as student representatives on the Course Boards. The team was informed that where this is already the case, it has

helped ensure that there are open channels for feedback from classes and courses to the responsible Course Director and other actors.

Another classical method for obtaining student feedback on teaching and pedagogical activity is through student questionnaires. However, the EUA team discovered that, although many such questionnaires had been administered, these were only used by a minority of the teaching staff, and that this was normally done in conjunction with the formative evaluation of teaching under the guidance of the Centre for Teaching and Learning. The team would encourage UL to take steps to ensure that regular student evaluation of teaching becomes an integral part of the university's system for monitoring quality, and that this takes place for all courses and modules as soon as can feasibly be organised.

Suggestions for the future

During the EUA review visits at the University of Limerick, the team formed the impression that the quality review system functioned well, but was also experiencing some growing pains. To overcome some of the challenges which the system as a whole would appear to be facing, and to ensure that it moves more resolutely to the promotion of a sustainable quality culture, the EUA team would concur with the UL SER in stressing that there is a need for more pro-active strategic management of the quality assurance efforts. The team therefore recommends the following initiatives concerning the quality assurance system:

- Establish a schedule for all remaining Department and unit reviews for the next three years. This should include the service and administrative units also;
- Develop a system to ensure that there is a quick and visible response from the university leadership immediately following an external review. This is important for both the Department and the leadership, helping to encourage rapid and effective follow-up by the Department, and ensuring that the key issues arising from the review are fed into critical management issues;
- Ensure clear understanding about the responsibilities for follow-up and quality improvement after evaluations. These responsibilities and their various levels should, according to the guidelines shown to the EUA team, be made clear in the Department's action plan following the peer review; however, the team learned that this was not always the case and that greater clarity would be helpful. As a general principle, the team considers that the main such responsibilities should lie with the Department or unit reviewed, but some will obviously also be linked to other parts of the university, including service units and possibly the executive leadership. Quality cannot be a closed or narrow affair, but must also pervade critical management issues.
- Secure more precise terms of reference for the peer review teams, in order to avoid unrealistic recommendations. The EUA team was informed of

recommendations which were difficult to implement because, for example, the context regarding resources had not been well understood;

- The EUA team found that the small UL quality improvement fund put aside for follow-up after the review could, in certain cases, distract attention from the real purposes of the review process and the responsibilities of the Department. While the availability of resources for the implementation of recommendations and ongoing quality improvement is certainly an important issue, the size of this fund and the few apparent connections between the outcomes of the quality review and the process for the allocation of resources from the overall university budget would suggest that an alternative and more powerful strategy for funding long-term quality improvement activities is needed.
- In connection with the above, the team felt that the university would benefit by creating more explicit links between the various developmental initiatives underway across UL and the outcomes of the quality review process. Clearer links between the results of quality review and e.g. staff development opportunities or course innovation would help strengthen Departmental ownership of the quality review process.
- Given that many academic programmes at UL involve more than one Department, or sometimes more than one College, the current focus of the quality review process on individual Departments may result in issues that are important to programmes not being adequately addressed during these evaluations. There may also be a need for external review teams to make hard choices about the future of some programmes, whether to recommend they be closed down or substantially modified. UL should therefore examine what options it has for undertaking reviews not just of institutional units but of programmes.
- The EUA team felt that there was a need to ensure that everybody at UL is aware that developing an institution-wide quality culture is much more than having a dedicated Quality Support Unit. The danger of having a well functioning and effective quality office is that it may be seen by some academic or service units as responsible for the quality process and its outcomes, whereas these Departments or service units themselves should be firmly so. A good practice recently initiated which could help avoid such possible tendencies is that Heads of recently reviewed Departments now make reports to the Deans' Council to ensure that the outcomes of the review of each unit are widely known across the university and feed into strategic discussions. This also seemed to be an excellent way to ensure wide understanding of the issues, while keeping the Department in the centre of the process.

6. Teaching and research

The team saw clearly that there is a growing awareness of the importance of research across all parts of UL, and that this has resulted in rapid developments in a number of key areas. During the period 1998-2003, the UL research budget more than tripled, and several high performing research centres were created in fields of strategic priority for both the university and for wider regional and national development. Research has an increasingly important role in the UL Strategic Plan. University-wide structures have been put in place to encourage this research ethos and guide the development of the research agenda, including the essential issue of postgraduate programmes and training for young researchers. The team agrees with this successful promotion of the research role and obligations of the university.

The team learned that UL monitors its research performance against the goals outlined in the Strategic Plan, and uses a set of ten metrics in assessing this performance. The team would encourage UL to build on these metrics and use them also as the basis for annual research performance indicators, to gain a more systematic overview of research activity across the entire university, and to identify areas for special attention, encouragement or consolidation. In the opinion of the review team, publication activity should be given an even more important role in the assessment of research performance than currently appears to be the case.

The team would like to stress that if the focus on the research agenda is to continue to be successful, and if UL is to maintain its reputation for excellence in undergraduate teaching programmes, then the implicit links between high quality teaching and research will need to be made more explicit over the coming years. Teaching must continue to be given as important a role as research in staff promotion policies, and the best researchers should not be taken completely away from teaching activities but should maintain some duties in their home Department. The alternative is that the university runs the risk that research will benefit at the cost of teaching, and that graduate teaching will benefit at the cost of undergraduate teaching.

The team felt that the growing role of post-graduate students in developing research capacity and outputs at the university needed greater recognition, and that in some areas, special attention could be paid to the conditions in which these young researchers are working. Both UL and wider Irish society have a strategic interest in increasing the numbers of post-graduate students and their research capacities and skills, but the team came across a number of instances at UL where promising young researchers felt rather isolated, even within some of the larger Colleges. Greater critical mass could be encouraged by creating specific opportunities for postgraduate students to meet, to present their work to each other, and generally to be integrated into the scientific and research community at UL.

The team was informed by several groups of students that the space and the number of books in the Library were insufficient. While this is a common complaint in universities, it may have long-term implications at UL given the changing profile of the university, the

changing nature of educational demand, and UL and national strategies to increase post-graduate student numbers in both taught and research programmes. The EUA team would also like to draw attention to the fact that further development in information technology will certainly be an area of expenditure for the new few years at UL, as indeed in all other universities.

The review team had a very informative meeting with a range of UL stakeholders and partners. These partners were proud of their links to the university and very aware of the university's contribution to the regional economic, social and cultural life. The stakeholders supported the growing awareness of the importance of research at the university, but were clear at the same time that the university should continue to serve the wide range of needs in business and industry across the region. In this respect, the review team would encourage UL to continue its policy of strategic engagement with regional stakeholders, and to maintain a leading role in strengthening research and development activities with these partners. In particular, the team would encourage continued strategic cooperation with the Limerick Institute of Technology.

As suggested in the SER, there is a need to improve the statistics and overview of research activity at the university. The team also felt the need for enhanced institutional analytical capacity regarding UL itself: benchmarking best practice, reconnaissance, etc. This should build on and bring together in a more strategic way the many fine information gathering and analytical initiatives already underway across different fields of the university, making such information available as one form of strategic input to aide decision making by governance and management bodies.

7. Staff development

The most important resource for the sustainable improvement of quality in any university is its staff. For this reason, a coherent staff development policy is essential in a long-term approach to quality. While collective actions have been undertaken in the past, and most of the existing quality assurance mechanisms at UL operate at the collective level, the EUA team learned that the systematic monitoring of an individual's performance was not possible until recently.

Under new collective agreements affecting all Irish universities, the team would like to support UL's plans, as mentioned in the SER, to hold individual staff performance and development talks between each member of staff and the head of the relevant Department, concerning research and teaching performance. As already mentioned in this report as well as in the SER, the team would like to stress that teaching as well as research and service to society should all be important factors in staff promotion policy.

However, due to tradition, the research and teaching performance of individual staff members is not currently known to most heads of Department or Deans. In the team's opinion, this creates a situation in which it is rather difficult for the Head of Department to fulfil his or her duty in inspiring the staff and promoting quality across the Department.

The new system involving performance and development talks will necessitate training in these skills for heads of Department. This, together with the need for being pro-active in promoting the Department's activities, calls for several training initiatives for heads of Departments and Deans. The Human Resource department should, together with the Centre for Teaching and Learning, develop initiatives to meet these emerging needs. The team learned that some initial training for heads of Department was in the process of being developed, and would like to encourage this.

A fully integrated management information system is also a precondition for the Human Resource department, Deans and senior management to operate effectively and act quickly when opportunities and needs arise. The team was informed that UL currently does not have such a system. The team therefore agrees that the university urgently needs a specially tailored management information system, and encourages those already developing this system to ensure it meets the wide strategic needs of the university.

8. Recommendations

In terms of the quality review process

- Establish a schedule for all remaining Department and unit reviews for the next three years.
- Ensure that the regular student evaluation of teaching becomes an integral part of the university's system for monitoring quality.
- Ensure that there is a quick and visible response from the university leadership immediately following an external review.
- Secure more precise terms of reference for the peer review teams, in order to avoid unrealistic recommendations.
- Examine options available for undertaking reviews not just of units but of programmes.
- Explore what synergies could be achieved between the quality review process and professional accreditation processes in selected areas.

In terms of quality improvement

- Ensure clear understanding about the responsibilities for follow-up and quality improvement after evaluations.
- Create greater flexibility in resource allocation to provide positive stimuli for change.

- Merge several of the current small funds into a reduced number of larger funds, in order to reduce effort in applying to multiple schemes, and link the use of these funds more explicitly to the implementation of university strategy.
- Create more explicit links between the various human resource and investment initiatives and the outcomes of the quality review process.
- Move from an optional system of formative teaching evaluation to one where this is accepted as standard practice for all teaching staff.

In terms of governance and management

- Ensure that the Academic Council can contribute to the development of the next Strategic Plan and that the Governing Authority are consulted when the draft strategic plan is ready.
- Improve the status of student class representatives and their involvement in quality management.
- Examine options for these class representatives to serve on Course Boards also.
- Allow for increased flexibility in creating variations within Courses, including a simplification of the overall number and variety of Courses on offer at UL.
- Put in place a specially tailored management information system to meet the wide strategic needs of the university.

9. Envoi

The EUA team would like to thank the University of Limerick once again for its kind and generous hospitality, and for opening its doors to the team in such an honest and friendly way. The team has seen a vibrant university with healthy ambitions and good results, and was in constant contact during its visits to Limerick with many charming and enthusiastic staff and students who were proud of their university. The team admires the quality assurance system in place at the university, and has put forward a number of recommendations which it hopes can be used to develop this system further, so the university can benefit fully from the big initial investments which have already been made. The team saw that the University of Limerick has been through a period of formidable development during its relatively short existence to date, and is convinced that it shows high potential to continue and surpass these admirable achievements. The team wishes the university every good luck and success with this further development.