



Report of the Quality Review Group to the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

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The UL Quality Review Process

The University of Limerick (UL) follows an established process for quality assurance (QA) and quality improvement (QI) in line with that originally developed jointly by the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB), the latter whose functions are now carried out by Quality and Qualifications Ireland ([QQI](#)). The review process involves an approximate seven-year cycle during which each unit works to improve the quality of its programmes and services and undergoes a rigorous self-evaluation prior to a quality review by internationally recognised experts in the relevant field.

The common framework adopted by the Irish universities for their QA/QI systems is consistent with both legislative requirements and international good practice. The process itself evolved as a result of the Universities Act, 1997, in which the responsibility for QA/QI was placed directly on the individual universities. The process now complies with the [Qualifications and Quality Assurance \(Education and Training\) Act 2012](#), as amended by the [Qualifications and Quality Assurance \(Education and Training\) \(Amendment\) Act 2019](#). The UL Quality Support Unit (QSU) website (www.ul.ie/quality) provides details on the process.

Academic units are reviewed against international standards as described in the document *Quality Review Process for Academic Units*, 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 report and responds to the recommendations of the QRG, devises plans to implement them and reports implementation progress to the University Quality Committee and UL senior management.

The recommendations made by the quality review group (QRG) form the basis of a quality improvement plan (QIP) prepared by the QSU for the unit under review. Once the site visit is over, the unit sets about evaluating and implementing the recommendations, as appropriate.

Approximately seven to nine months after receiving the QIP template from the QSU, the head of unit provides a summary overview of progress to the university's Quality Committee. Committee members are afforded the opportunity to discuss and evaluate progress.

Approximately 18 months after receiving the QIP template, the head of unit, Provost and Deputy President, Dean (where relevant) and Director of Quality meet to formally review progress and to agree on any remaining actions to be taken.

Summary Details of the faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

The [Faculty of Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences](#) (AHSS or 'the Faculty') is one of four UL faculties. AHSS came into existence as the College of Humanities in 1979 along with three other colleges. At that time, Academic Council devolved a number of functions to the colleges, including the initial stages of programme accreditation. Led by a dean, the college in its initial days was the only organisational division with which staff were aligned. Over time, a number of disciplinary or multidisciplinary departments emerged, each with its own head, who reported to the dean. In 2010, the

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term 'college' was replaced with that of 'faculty', and the nomenclature expanded to 'Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences'.

Today, AHSS comprises seven academic units: three schools ([Modern Languages & Applied Linguistics](#), [English, Irish & Communication](#) and [Law](#)), three departments ([Politics & Public Administration](#), [Sociology](#) and [History](#)) and the [Irish World Academy of Music and Dance](#). AHSS also houses two additional units: the [University of Limerick Language Centre](#), which specialises in teaching English to speakers of other languages; and [Aonad na Gaeilge](#), which is UL's Irish language support unit.

There are currently 186 members of staff working in the Faculty: 134 academic, 25 teaching, 15 support, 11 research and 1 technical. There are 3,720 students (3,000 undergraduate, 400 taught postgraduate and 320 research).

Reference to 'the Faculty' includes reference to both the Faculty Office and, collectively, the academic and affiliated units that comprise the Faculty of AHSS. The Faculty Office, which comprises the Executive Dean, Faculty Manager, assistant deans and a number of support staff, is the key unit for supporting the Faculty.

What binds the Faculty together, despite the very great diversity of degree subjects and combinations, is a common concern with humanity, with society, with people in the past, present and future – how they live together, how they express themselves, how they communicate, how they reach decisions and govern themselves, what they care about and value. The Faculty's mission statement is "*Creating knowledge and a better world*".

The AHSS mission, strategy and programmes align well with the mission of UL: we aim to offer distinctive and pioneering programmes and to be strongly connected to our community. A commitment to empowerment through education is core to the Faculty, particularly in terms of our commitment to social justice across all our programmes and many of our research activities and our specific strategic focus on equality, diversity and inclusion. As the faculty with the highest participation rate in Erasmus+ in UL, AHSS makes a very substantial contribution to the University's aim to be truly international.

Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

The Quality Review Group appreciates the warm welcome extended to it by the University of Limerick and the exemplary professional support and guidance which it has received at every step of the review process. Covid-19 restrictions required the present review to be undertaken entirely remotely. This created the need for additional technical/professional support in respect, inter alia, of the virtual platform. The latter proved itself fit for purpose and allowed discussions and deliberations to proceed as smoothly as would have been the case under pre-pandemic circumstances.

The introductory briefing sessions in advance of the visit with the Review Coordinator and Director of Quality were extremely helpful and provided a strong and secure basis for our subsequent work. Similarly, the opportunity to meet with senior officers of the University was valuable from the point of view of the QRG's appreciation of the wider institutional strategic and operating context.

The QRG is grateful to the Faculty of AHSS for its production of a detailed, thorough, well-presented and evidence-based self-assessment document (SAR). Requests for additional information and data both before and during the visit were dealt with swiftly and most efficiently.

The QRG noted a transparent appreciation of the Faculty's strengths together with an admirable candour in addressing areas of concern. This enabled a constructive, two-way dialogue between the QRG and UL colleagues from the very outset. The SAR proposes a range of enhancements, all of which the QRG found to be sound and which it endorses.

Considerable thought had clearly been given to the composition of the various groups with which the QRG interacted, such that the 'right' people were in the room to provide informed opinion and nuance, be they academic and teaching staff, professional support staff and members of academic services, or a good cross-section of taught and research students from a wide range of programmes and stages.

Students expressed a generally high level of enthusiasm and satisfaction with the content of their studies and the learning resources at their disposal, together with a strong appreciation for the support they receive from what is clearly a dedicated and committed body of staff. Students and staff articulated clearly the benefits which the Faculty's academic research brings to its teaching programmes.

There is strong evidence that the Dean and the whole Faculty Office team of academics and professional support staff are making good progress in their ambitions to enhance the mission of the Faculty and its academic units. Putting 'people power' behind a range of activities is adding academic value and enhancing efficiency and effectiveness. The Faculty Office models 'ways of working' horizontally across disciplinary areas and has established itself already as a platform which can be built upon for the future and will prove valuable in addressing the various recommendations of the present report.

QRG Commendations and Recommendations

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

1.	The successful navigation of multiple structural changes in the Faculty and leadership, which have created spaces for differences associated with disciplinary practice.
2.	The successful management of increased student numbers, with evidence of responsiveness and flexibility to external demands in relation to developing new or adapting existing course offerings.
3.	The high-quality study programmes and course offerings available to students, especially the Coop work placement programme which makes UL an attractive option and enhances employability.
4.	The compelling and well-articulated mission that captures the essence and diversity of the Faculty and expresses its identity.
5.	The very positive student attitude towards staff in relation to quality of teaching, dedication, flexibility and responsiveness, particularly in the current context of Covid-19.
6.	The proactive response to Covid-19 and the cancellation of the Erasmus+ programme, with the development of new modules designed to replace international study learning outcomes.
7.	The tangible commitment of the Faculty to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) efforts, including the appointment of the Assistant Dean for EDI in 2019, a position that does not exist in any other faculty in UL.
8.	The successful application for a Bronze Athena SWAN Award, showcasing good practice within the faculty to address gender inequality and representation, with significant staff and student representation from each academic unit on the AHSS Athena SWAN self-assessment team.
9.	The unique offerings of taught postgraduate programmes in the Faculty, attracting a new cohort of home students who have not previously attended UL.
10.	The strong sense of team spirit amongst the Faculty and a sense that senior management is approachable and available to all those working in the Faculty.
11.	The welcome development of structured PhD programmes as a way of ensuring high quality research with appropriate engagement with research ethics and research integrity.
12.	The imaginative, innovative and progressive leadership of the Dean and the Faculty Office team across a range of areas, including generating research opportunities, such as the 'quiet time' initiative.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

Level 1 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
1.	Work with the university to prioritise the development of a Faculty-wide workload allocation model (WAM).	This should focus on inputs and responsibilities rather than research outputs that are only loosely linked to inputs. It should not be based on 'time' as a unit and should take account of different pedagogic practice in the different disciplines. It may be useful to link the WAM to finance. Transparency must be a key goal. This should also include clarity about the different work requirements of management roles which clearly vary based on the size of the academic unit.
2.	Prioritise the development of leadership and management capacity as part of succession planning.	There is very limited evidence of prospective strategic planning of leadership needs. Identifying potential academic leaders and providing them with opportunities for development and building peer-networks across the university would be a fruitful approach to addressing this gap.
3.	Address the clear perverse incentives associated with externally funded research.	Where an individual is a member of a research Institute, the return to the Department and Faculty in overheads is very limited, particularly where the Institute is not located in the Faculty. This is highly problematic. Funding for research appears to benefit the individual grant-holder at the expense of their colleagues in their academic unit and the Faculty as a whole. An approach to the distribution of the grant that recognises the opportunity costs that are created by a member of staff being funded to do research rather than teaching needs to be addressed to ensure equity, sustainability and not reinforce a research active/non-active split.
4.	Provide clear descriptions of the responsibilities of different grades in terms of service to the University, Faculty and academic unit as well as research and teaching.	Senior academics need to share more of the management burden within departments and across the Faculty. For instance, PDRs could be conducted by members of the professoriate rather than solely by line managers. Taking significant management roles in the Faculty should be part of the expectation of being a senior academic. Senior academics should expect to be a resource for mentorship, both formally and informally.
5.	Develop clear and transparent key performance indicators (KPIs) for research.	KPIs should be internationally benchmarked, reflect different research cultures that vary by discipline and include academic publications (taking account of authorship) engagement and impact beyond

		academia as well as grant capture. They should also reflect differences of expectation in relation to academic grade and experience.
6.	Consider ways of better encouraging a research culture across the Faculty that is aligned to a vision and set of strategic objectives.	Research appears to be almost entirely a product of the interests of individual scholars. A strategic approach to research, identifying priority areas with access to limited resources to develop expertise and national and international networks, would be beneficial. This should be reinforced through clear mentorship, and guidance within departments should be coordinated at Faculty level. The availability of support within the Faculty at pre- and post-award phases would be beneficial to the development of greater research intensity.
7.	Consider how best to ensure high-quality and engaged PhD supervisors.	Attendance at training workshops and CPD on an annual/biennial basis should be a requirement. Workshops should provide an opportunity for supervisors to learn, share challenges and best practice and reflect on their own experiences.
8.	Develop more systematic efforts to enrol PhD students/postgraduates into an academic culture.	'Tacit knowledge' of how to act and what it takes to be an academic and researcher should be made explicit – and be part of more structured career guidance for PhD students.
9.	Develop a programme for PhD students that engages with their future employability.	A structured approach to career guidance for PhD students, including consideration of careers outside of academia, is needed to address in part the challenge of the continued expansion of PhD student numbers despite the scarcity of academic posts.
10.	Ensure that all PhD students complete training in research ethics and integrity as well as research methods.	All PhD students should be required to complete training in research ethics, research integrity and research methods. Current arrangements are significantly at odds with international standards.
11.	Revise and refresh the Faculty's ambitions with respect to internationalisation and its position in the light of Brexit.	The Faculty is well poised to be more visible and networked internationally and across Europe in terms of research and student/staff mobility and recruitment. The alliance of humanities, social sciences and the arts provides a distinctive opportunity.
12.	Work with the University to create a co-ordinated approach to the recruitment of international students both at undergraduate and postgraduate level to achieve existing goals.	This approach should have a foundation in market research and include surveying current international students to understand what USPs the Faculty offers and where significant market opportunity lies, such as Brexit. A review of taught postgraduate programmes should be undertaken to assess their fitness for purpose in the context of strategic ambitions.

13.	Prioritise issues that are barriers for the Faculty to achieve the Athena SWAN Silver Award.	To ensure the granting of the Athena SWAN Silver Award, significant changes will need to be made to address issues of inequality, particularly gender inequality. Career progression issues regarding administrative staff are more prevalent at this award level. Alternative solutions to these issues may also need to be examined. Continuing to engage with the network of EDI practitioners/HEIs submitting the same application would be useful.
14.	Formalise mechanisms for gathering and reporting EDI output.	Currently there are significant gaps in information regarding the implementation of EDI initiatives that can point to concrete change occurring. Work on the ground should be carried out with surveys, focus groups and student inductions to gain feedback from students regarding current EDI issues. Published analytics will also bring heightened awareness to new initiatives. A more structured means of communicating the work being done should also be developed.

Level 2 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
1.	Introduce terms of reference for the Faculty Board.	The Faculty Board is a key body within the governance structure of the Faculty. At present, it lacks a clear focus or set of objectives.
2.	Consider the position/role of the Language Centre in relation to the strategic objectives of the Faculty and the University.	The current role of the Language Centre is poorly defined, as is its visibility in the University. As a consequence, there is a tension between commercial and academic activity, and there is also a need to better understand the specific conditions/constraints under which it operates. If members of the Centre are active scholars, then it can make a contribution to broader Faculty objectives.
3.	Identify the optimum balance between the number of undergraduate and postgraduate students and ways of achieving this.	The Faculty should engage staff and stakeholders on the balance of undergraduate and postgraduate numbers and the implications for the profile and ambitions of the Faculty as a research-intensive, comprehensive institution. Establishing an international Strategic Advisory Board could be a vehicle for strengthening the international benchmarking of UL's primary activities and help in identifying the key strategic choices.
4.	Consider how to ensure relevance of Coop placements to academic departments and to the academic studies of students.	For more vocational subjects, placements seem to be appropriate, but the match is less apparent for other disciplines. Enhanced dialogue between academic staff and the Coop Office will help in identifying more diverse and relevant placement providers.
5.	Work with senior UL management to consider the optimum term of office for Head of Department/School.	The length of the Head of Department/School term appears to act as a disincentive to Faculty members to apply for Head roles. In order to increase the interest in these roles, a shorter period may be more appropriate. Research support, either during or following the term of office, should be considered.
6.	Consider how better to integrate teaching staff in the Faculty, recognising their particular expertise.	Including teaching staff in programme development and enhancement of teaching and learning strategies is essential. Teaching staff should have resources and access to CPD, mentorship and opportunities for career progression.
7.	Devise a research leave mechanism across the Faculty.	Predictable and extended periods of time to pursue research are essential. There are approaches that are resource neutral that can operate within departments. Such approaches should require clear evidence of a research plan, commitment to outputs and the development/submission of a research proposal and should include reporting requirements.

8.	Formalise the 'buddy system' for outgoing Erasmus students.	Reluctance on the part of some students to participate in the Erasmus+ programme has been exacerbated as a result of Covid-19. A formal process should be created to encourage students to engage with peers who have previously availed of the Erasmus programme or studied abroad.
9.	Ensure Faculty-wide engagement with EDI activities.	Leadership within the Faculty and its academic units should ensure that members recognise the importance of EDI and the Athena SWAN Award. Wider 'buy-in' from male staff should be actively encouraged, and the values of EDI training should be recognised and highlighted as essential CPD. EDI training should be part of new staff induction and mandatory for all staff and a prerequisite for promotion. EDI should be a standing agenda item in Faculty and academic unit meetings.
10.	Increase collaboration between Faculty members to formalise strategies for transnational education (TNE) partnerships.	Sole TNE initiatives are taking place based on the connections of individual staff members with other universities, but these are working on an ad hoc basis. These initiatives need to be implemented at Faculty level to build resilient relationships with partnering universities to prevent reliance on key staff members.
11.	Work with the University to address the particular challenges of timetabling across a large campus.	Timetabling challenges compromise the opportunities to make changes to improve the quality of the learning and teaching experience. Experience during Covid-19 may suggest blended learning solutions to partially alleviate these challenges.
12.	Work with the University and the trade union to reconsider the purpose and nature of the PDRS.	The PDRS serves as a mechanism to record and evaluate performance but also to consider career aspirations, progression and development. These are two very different issues. Combining them and having them undertaken by a line manager may compromise the opportunity for open discussion of all these aspects.

Appendices

A Membership of the QRG

Prof. Frank Finlay (chair)	Dean of Cultural Engagement, School of Languages, Cultures and Societies, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures, University of Leeds, UK.
Prof Åse Gornitzka	Vice-Rector for Research and Internationalization, Professor of Political Science, University of Oslo, Norway.
Ms Anna Henderson	Digital Marketing and Web Executive, The Bar Council of Ireland.
Prof Jonathan Tritter	Professor of Sociology at Nord University, Norway and Visiting Professor at Aston University, UK and a Docent at the Sociology Department, Helsinki University, Finland.
Mr Adrian O'Higgins	Barrister-at-Law, Law Library, Dublin.
Ms. Ailish O'Farrell (Recording secretary)	Technical Writer

B Membership of AHSS Quality Team

Prof. Helen Kelly-Holmes	Chair / Executive Dean
Ms. Rina Carr	Deputy Chair / Faculty Manager
Prof. Máiréad Moriarty	Assistant Dean, International
Dr. Scott Fitzsimmons	Assistant Dean, Academic Affairs
Dr. Niamh Nic Ghabhann	Assistant Dean, Research
Dr. Lydia Bracken	Assistant Dean, Equality, Diversity & Inclusion