Report of the Quality Review Group

to the

Information Technology Division

Review dates	10th to 13th May 2021
Issued by QSU	17th May 2021
UL QSU Website	www.ul.ie/quality
Unit Website	www.ul.ie/itd
QQI Website	www.qqi.ie

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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, 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.

All units are reviewed against quality assurance standards as described in the tailored quality review guidelines, which is available on the QSU website. The planned schedule of quality reviews 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 and formally 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, Vice President Academic Affairs & Student Engagement, Deputy President Chief Operations Officer and Register or Vice President Research, Dean (where relevant) and Director of Quality meet to formally review progress and to agree on any remaining actions to be taken.

2   Summary Details of the Information Technology Division (ITD)

The Information Technology Division is the central IT Services function at UL. We are responsible for supporting, maintaining and developing the information and communications technology of the University, in support of the University's Strategy as articulated in UL@50 (see https://www.ul.ie/UL_Strategic_Plan_2019-2024_Web.pdf).

In addition to maintaining and developing the university's network and communications infrastructure, including the campus data centre facilities, ITD maintains a suite of enterprise applications and software systems that are critical to the teaching, learning, research and administrative goals of the institution. Our customers comprise all members of the UL community, including staff, students, faculty, support departments and researchers.

The IT Division is part of the Chief Operating Officer (COO) portfolio of the University and the Director of ITD reports to the COO, who is a member of the UL Executive Committee. The IT Division itself is a division with 82 FTE staff. The Director of ITD is the divisional head and is supported by a Deputy Director ITD. The ITD management team members report to either the Director or Deputy Director of the Division. Each of these line managers leads a section (i.e. an IT Services Capability).

Education Technology Section: Responsible for the IT Services associated with the use of Teaching and Learning in UL

Enterprise Architecture and Security: Responsible for leading the IT Architecture and IT Security services to the campus community

Business Intelligence and Reporting Systems: Responsible for leading the solution design and implementation services for new Business Intelligence and Reporting requirements for the campus community

Service Delivery: Responsible for the seamless delivery of IT support services to staff and students incorporating the customer service desk, student IT support, network operations, data centre infrastructure services

Technology Solutions: Responsible for the operation of user authentication services and aspects of cloud infrastructure operations.

Project Management and Business Engagement: Responsible for Project Management of large IT projects. Also includes 2 Business Engagement partners whose responsibility it is to work with designated divisions and faculties to assist with solving IT issues and identifying IT solutions to meet their strategic and management requirements.

Enterprise Solutions: Responsible for IT Services, both projects and support, associated with key University systems such as the Finance Systems, Human Resources systems, various key administration and document management platforms. Within Enterprise Solutions there is a sub-team called Academic Services responsible for the IT Services (both Operations and Projects) associated with the Student Records Administration and other student admin systems.

Vendor Management: Maximise the value and service levels that UL achieves with its IT vendors.

The **QMS and Quality Manager:** Is dedicated to ensuring that the Division's focus on Quality Management is sustained and continually improved. The administration of the associated governance around the QMS and the maintenance of the external accreditation is also delivered upon.

The **Office Services** Team: Responsible for providing administrative support to the Director and Deputy Director of the Division. The Office Services supervisors also have responsibility for the line management of

the University Postal Services, the operation of the University Print Shop and running of the main University reception services. The inclusion of the Reception and Post Room services within the IT Division is a pre-existing organisation structure that has pertained since the early years of the University's history.

3   Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

3.0   Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

The Quality Review Group (QRG) appreciated the conditions under which the review of the IT Division (ITD) was carried out. The QRG would like to thank ITD for its welcome and the Quality Support Unit for its support before and during the virtual visit.

The QRG based its work on the self-assessment report (SAR) and the appendices provided by ITD, as well as extensive material supplied in response to QRG requests. The SAR was very informative and honest in its appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of ITD and provided a good basis for the discussion with staff and students. The meetings during the virtual visit were frank and informative. All UL participants contributed to the open and productive discussions. Despite some of the limitations inherent in the online format (for instance, smaller groups), the QRG is confident that it was able to triangulate evidence and focus on some of the key features of ITD.

The staff members of UL with whom the QRG met expressed support for ITD's work and praised the quality of its leadership and staff. They commented positively on the changes that had been introduced by the current ITD leadership, notably in the areas of student records and teaching and learning. Much to the appreciation of the campus community, the pre-COVID investment in IT infrastructure allowed the University to pivot smoothly to online operations in March 2020.

COVID-19 has certainly brought home the importance and centrality of IT, but UL staff recognise that achieving strategic goals in this area and stepping up to a digitalised university will require improving digital literacy on campus and ensuring appropriate conditions for the optimal and strategic use of IT in all activities. This entails a review of the resources, the governance arrangements and the risk register at university level. Furthermore, a review of the administrative processes across UL that require digitalisation could benefit from mobilising the assistance of IT colleagues located across the University.

Undergraduate and postgraduate students were appreciative of the support they got from ITD. However, they expressed the need to be better informed about the resources available from the division, notably through an orientation session, more visible training opportunities, partnership with key players such as the library, and targeted communication based on social media.

The external stakeholders commented positively on the expertise and leadership in ITD and the excellent partnerships that ITD maintains with them, based on a suite of specific SLAs. They also noted the necessity for ITD to be vigilant about security issues, develop data analytics skills and training opportunities and increase project management capacity within the division.

ITD staff members have considerable expertise in their respective areas and are self-reflective on the division's strengths and areas for improvement. Stage 2 of the ITD strategy will need further definition as well as a review of the structures and governance within ITD to ensure that these are fit for purpose. An important element of Stage 2 should address the engagement of ITD with the campus community including strengthening communication about ITD's activities and providing support for research and UL's administrative activities.

There has been a historical underspend on IT at UL. This underspend has been partially addressed by Stage 1 and the proposed Stage 2 investment of the UL IT strategy. However, the University leadership should note that many UK universities are now further accelerating their digital transformation due to the pandemic and increasing spend on cybersecurity because of several successful cyberattacks in the HE sector.

Digital transformation can lead to significant benefits for the University, as long as it is viewed as an investment rather than a cost that is competing with other budgets (academic or support). A more positive

approach would be to consider funding of the digital transformation as an investment in improving teaching, research and the staff and student experience. This approach may lead to an increased IT budget, but the increase is more likely to be linked back to the primary objectives of UL.

As IT expenditure moves away from CAPEX (buying hardware) to OPEX (SaaS and services), it is likely to require an increase in OPEX expenditure. However, as CAPEX will also decrease, like-for-like IT spending is likely to remain flat when viewed over a more extended time period.

Finally, it will be important to ensure appropriate alignment of the revised UL strategy and the upcoming digital strategy of the University with Stage 2 of the IT strategy.

4   QRG Commendations and Recommendations

4.1   Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

1.	The strong team dynamic within ITD, the expertise of the staff and the quality of the leadership.
2.	The enthusiasm of the staff to embrace change and to contribute in any way possible to the strategic objectives of UL.
3.	The development of UL's first IT strategy, UL Enable, and the successful implementation of Stage 1.
4.	The smooth pivot to enable the University's Covid-19 remote teaching and working response, made possible by the successful delivery of Stage 1 of the IT strategy, with one leading academic describing ITD as '*a pandemic star performer*'.
5.	The great progress made by ITD with limited resources in a short number of years, leading to its being described as '*more professional, more proactive and more forward-thinking*'.
6.	The widespread recognition from UL staff and students of ITD progress in recent years with feedback such as the following: *They are great, they are always there for us.* *Quick to respond and quick to find a solution.* *They are agile, adaptive and have a can-do attitude.* *I really value their openness, honesty and communications.*
7.	The shift made in recent years from backend to application and business engagement roles as a result of outsourcing infrastructure.
8.	The very strong emphasis on quality and process, which has created a quality culture across the team, demonstrated most recently through successful recertification of ISO 9001.
9.	The successful implementation and use of the TOPdesk quality management system, the management of the change impact brought about by the system and its use as a funnel to initiate process improvements.

4.2   Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.2.1   Level 1 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
1.	Work with senior management to strengthen and diversify the IT Governance Group by evolving it into a Digital Governance Group, promoting it to a sub-committee of the Executive Committee. Consider including the voice of the students and other stakeholders.	Digital & technology will increasingly underpin teaching, research and professional service delivery. Therefore, there must be a strong digital voice at the strategic level. That voice should be representative of the broad stakeholders of the University and must include digital and technical professionals.
2.	Work with senior management to consider including ITD on key University research committees.	The partnership between ITD and teaching and learning has been successful. A similar process should be established on the research side.
3.	Work with senior management to complete the digital strategy as a matter of urgency to ensure that Stage 2 of the IT strategy is delivering to the right priorities and underpins the strategic goals of the University.	The IT leadership has constructed Stage 2 of the IT strategy to create the capability and capacity to deliver against anticipated requirements and institutional objectives. However, the institutional strategy, digital strategy and research strategy are incomplete or non-existent. Ideally, the IT strategy would align with these strategies, and the IT leadership could have greater confidence that its proposals for Stage 2 would deliver against strategic expectations.
4.	The expanded Executive Committee, including the ITD Director, was effective in guiding UL through the pandemic business continuity incident. Consider at senior management level whether there is now an opportunity to leverage this broader talent pool to help shape the UL future by involving its members in the strategy workshops.	To ensure alignment with all strategic development, all major players should be represented.
5.	Work with senior management to secure a digital innovation fund for 'fail fast, learn fast' projects to be developed in partnership with teachers and scientists, which might lead to new competitive advantage for UL.	Before reaching the stage where it would be possible to make a business case, new ideas might need some experimentation to validate them and get a better understanding of the desired outcome. A fund for this first stage could help to develop ideas for better research and teaching.
6.	Work with senior management to complete an overall review of the IT-related resources across the whole	It is recognised that there are significant resources which are closely aligned to IT functionality with reporting responsibility outside of ITD. ITD should

	campus (including subsidiaries) to determine the reporting lines and whether these should be moved to central ITD or maintained locally within the departments, or whether a matrix model might be appropriate.	have a legitimate interest in all IT spend and cybersecurity regardless of where IT is delivered and existing reporting lines. In the interim, virtual teams could be formed, consisting of people from local IT and ITD people under shared local and ITD management.
7.	Work with senior management to increase the capacity of Business Engagement partnerships and business analysts in ITD.	Business Engagement (BE) partners have provided a vital link between ITD and the user community. However, there are currently only two employees operating in this capacity. There is, therefore, a risk that important stakeholders are not getting the support needed to articulate their requirements and issues. Digital transformation is likely to deliver significant benefits for the University, but UL can only achieve this through a strong partnership between the University stakeholders and ITD. BE partners and business analysts can create and significantly strengthen the partnerships between ITD and stakeholders.
8.	Enhance ITD's service offerings for researchers, engaging with influential researchers and starting in non-technical faculties/institutes where support would be welcomed. The QRG recognises that additional capacity and more expertise within ITD may be required to facilitate this.	ITD could provide much value to UL by offering more support to researchers, such as: • Data management tools for research data and large storage facilities at low prices • Advice on high performance computing • Support of researchers in using new artificial intelligence and machine learning techniques • Organising cafés on R and Python.
9.	Leveraging existing communications channels as suggested by students, develop and implement a comprehensive stakeholder engagement and communications strategy to improve dialogue between ITD and UL stakeholders.	While significant improvements have been made, there are still significant gaps to be addressed, notably in UG/PG provision. ITD should collaborate with University stakeholders like the Students' Union, the library and the faculties to build strong lines of communication. It is important that stakeholders be aware of service updates, security threats, workshops and training, and more. Having a communications representative within ITD would be especially important to ensure that all channels of communication are streamlined.
10.	Working with other key stakeholders, develop and implement a digital skills programme for all staff and students at UL, building on existing resources such as workshops and other information sources.	For campus-wide implementation of the digital strategy, it is important that all stakeholders have baseline digital literacy, so that no unit gets left behind due to a lack of digital and IT skills. Building on the success of new approaches to learning & teaching and new ways of working at UL, ITD should engage with key stakeholders such as HR, the library and the Students' Union to put in place:

		• A generic digital skills programme for all students and staff, • Role-related digital skills training for staff, to be delivered in collaboration with HR.
11.	Continue to seek the appointment of research business partner(s) as stipulated in Stage 1 of the IT strategy.	A strong collaborative approach between ITD and research would be beneficial in ensuring that research IT and digital needs are met across UL. This could also have the effect of leveraging campus-wide IT resources.
12.	Re-evaluate the current structure in ITD to establish if resource allocation is optimised to meet current and future requirements.	The pace of technological change and the increased demand for digital services that will come as part of the IT strategy, Stage 2 and/or the digital strategy will require flexibility and agility within ITD.

4.2.2   Level 2 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
1.	Consider transferring the post room and reception desk from ITD in order to focus on the delivery of IT and digital.	Working with HR and others and using existing frameworks, this should be feasible.
2.	Work towards mitigating risks in application support caused by single points of failure due to limited staff.	Backup in support might also be found outside ITD by making agreements with IT teams in faculties/ institutes or with IT teams of other universities.
3.	Review internal processes within ITD, particularly in relation to IT support via the service desk.	It was noted that some cohorts of users were frustrated by the current support structure. The planned merging of the student and staff service desks is to be welcomed and should be progressed and completed.
4.	Conduct a review on how to automate the production of ITD's comprehensive suite of KPIs.	It was noted that many of the KPIs are currently generated manually. If these could be produced automatically, it would assist in freeing up resources to focus on the analysis of information. This should be considered in conjunction with the Business Intelligence (BI) team.
5.	To continue the shift of focus in ITD from being internally oriented, expand the Quality Management System (QMS) to facilitate a more holistic and outward-facing perspective.	Much of the ISO certification has an inward focus and expanding the QMS to include an outward view would have considerable benefits for ITD as well as across UL.

Appendix One

A Membership of the QRG

Andrée Sursock (Chair)	Senior Advisor, European University Association, Belgium
David Edwards	Former Director of IT, Cardiff University
Carolien Besselink	Former Director of IT, Utrecht University the Netherlands (2012-2020)
John Murphy	Director of Digital Technologies, Nottingham Trent University
Roberta Harrington	Student Representative
Braonán Gardiner	Operations and Process Accountant, Finance Division, UL (internal Representative)

B Membership of ITD Quality Team

Name	Title
Anne Geoghegan	Office Services Manager
Liam O'Reilly	Director
Brendan Dore	Deputy Director
Brendan Lynch	Head, Enterprise Solutions
Brian Sexton	Head, Technology Solutions
Brian Walsh	Vendor Manager
Edel Gissane	QMS Manager & Quality Officer
Maria Linnane	Head, IT Service Delivery
Padraig Hyland	Head, Education Technology
Rosie Coffey	Head, Enterprise Architecture
Sharon Ahern	Post Room Supervisor