



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Quality Review of the Student Affairs Division

The University of Limerick (UL) follows an established process for Quality Assurance (QA) and Quality Improvement (QI). This involves a seven-year cycle during which all Support Departments develop a quality management system, and undergo a rigorous self-evaluation prior to a quality review by internationally recognised experts in the field.

The process itself has evolved as a result of the Universities Act, 1997 in which the responsibility for QA/QI was placed directly with the individual universities. The UL Quality Support Unit (QSU) web site provides an elaboration of this process and the state of progress.

The review process is designed to satisfy the requirements of the recent Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, meet the expectations of QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland) and most importantly, assist support departments in meeting their obligations to maintain an effective QMS (quality management system). The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) require all institutions to develop formal quality procedures designed to achieve continuous enhancement of quality.

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1.0 Background

1.1 Legislative Framework

The University of Limerick, in common with all the universities in the Republic of Ireland, falls within the Universities Act, 1997. This Act specifies the responsibilities of universities in Ireland for Quality Improvement and Quality Assurance. Section 12 stipulates that, 'The objects of a university shall include - ... to promote the highest standards in, and quality of, teaching and research'.

Section 35 (1) of the Act further requires that each university Governing Authority 'shall...require the university to establish procedures for quality assurance aimed at improving the quality of education and related services provided by the university'. The Act provides a framework for the universities to develop their quality processes. Section 35 requires each university to review the quality of the work of all faculty, academic Departments and service (including administrative) Departments on a ten-year cycle. In particular 'The procedures shall include ... assessment by those, including students, availing of the teaching, research and other services provided by the university'.

Although each university is free to develop its own procedures in fulfilling its obligations under the Act, close co-operation has been achieved through the co-ordinating role of the Irish Universities Association Quality Committee, (IUAQC). Accordingly, the universities have developed a framework comprising a set of common principles and operating guidelines for quality improvement and quality assurance. These principles and guidelines have been integrated into each of the universities procedures, which ensure coherence through the university system, while maintaining the autonomy of each university and its individual institutional culture.

More detail is available at <https://www2.ul.ie/pdf/181038187.pdf>.

1.2 Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)

Quality and Qualifications Ireland was established on 6 November 2012 under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012. The new Authority is being created by an amalgamation of four bodies that have both awarding and quality assurance responsibilities: the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB). The new Authority will assume all the functions of the four legacy bodies while also having responsibility for new or newly-statutory responsibilities in particular areas.

The role and general functions of QQI incorporate the previous functions of FETAC, HETAC and the NQAI in relation to the maintenance and development of the National Framework of Qualifications, the validation and awarding of qualifications, and the monitoring and review of providers. QQI also has responsibility for the external quality review of the universities; a function performed previously by the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) in conjunction with the Higher Education Authority (HEA). In addition, the authority has been assigned some new functions. It is responsible for the development and implementation of a register of programmes leading to awards in the NQF. It will also establish a Code of Practice and International Education Mark for the provision of education to international learners.

1.3 The Quality Review Process

The common framework adopted by the Irish universities for their Quality Assurance/Quality Improvement systems consistent with both the legislative requirement of the Universities Act 1997 and international practice comprise the following stages:

1. Preparation of a self-assessment report by the unit taking into account feedback from students and customers.
2. Quality (Peer) Review involving external experts, both nationally and internationally, who have visited the Department, met the students and studied the Self-Assessment Report.
3. Quality Review Report, made publicly available by the Governing Authority of the university, incorporating the reactions and quality improvement plans of the Division and University.
4. Continuing improvement through implementation within the resources available to the university.

More detail is available at www.ul.ie/quality

1.4 Committee for the Establishment of Quality Management Systems

The Vice President Academic and Registrar has overall responsibility for implementation of Quality Assurance/Quality Improvement policy and implementation at the University of Limerick. Implementation is carried out by the Director of Quality. In 2006, the Deans' Council established the Committee for the Establishment of Quality Management Systems (CEQMS) to oversee the development of quality management systems across the university and to provide support for the review procedures.

The first round of reviews for support departments took place between 2005 and 2008. Copies of the review reports are available on the [QSU website](#).

In 2006, the CEQMS confirmed an earlier decision by the university to implement ISO9000 as a quality management system (QMS) in all support departments. The committee decided, however, that a UL bespoke QMS would be more widely acceptable and developed a suitable template with the assistance of external quality experts. This system is described in the document "Quality Management Systems – Standard Framework for Support Departments".

The second round of reviews is scheduled to take place between 2013 and 2016. The review will take account of significant developments in the design and implementation of quality management systems across the University since the first round of reviews. As a consequence, the reviewers will now expect to see a fully functional QMS which is seamlessly embedded into department operations and drives decision making processes.

2.0 The Student Affairs Division

Introduction

The Student Affairs Division (SA) provides services and supports to existing and prospective students of the University of Limerick (UL). The division's mission statement is as follows:

The multidisciplinary team of the Student Affairs Division provides a wide range of professional services that aim to create a positive and successful learning experience for students at UL. This is achieved in partnership with all faculty, staff and other stakeholders.

The provision of "an outstanding and distinctive experience for every one of our students to enable them to become knowledgeable, skilled and confident graduates" is a strategic goal of both UL (Pioneering and Connected: University of Limerick Strategic Plan 2011–2015) and SA (Student Affairs Division Strategic Plan 2011–2015). To help achieve this goal, SA assists students to develop intellectually, socially, emotionally, ethically, morally and spiritually. Comprising 10 distinct units, SA is UL's largest support department. While the division provides a range of administrative and support services to the entire UL campus and is responsible for a variety of large-scale university operations, including orientation, graduations and policy and protocol development in relevant areas, its main focus is on enhancing the student experience and supporting students' holistic development.

Structure of the division

The work of SA can be grouped around three broad service areas, or pillars, as reflected in the division's customer charter and organogram. While the pillars are used to reflect some commonality of purpose among groups of units across the division and to assist in guiding customers to the relevant service, they are not intended to create a formal structure as SA is striving to become a more integrated and cohesive division. The three pillars are (A) student administration, (B) student supports and (C) student specialised supports. The 10 SA units are as follows:

- [Access Office \(Socio-economically Disadvantaged\) \(C\)](#)
- [Admissions Office \(A\)](#)
- [Arts Office \(B\)](#)
- [Chaplaincy \(B\)](#)
- [Community Liaison Office \(B\)](#)
- [Counselling Service \(B\)](#)
- [Disability Support Services Office \(C\)](#)
- [Mature Student Office \(C\)](#)
- [Student Academic Administration \(A\)](#)
- [Student Health Centre \(B\)](#)

Mission

SA's mission is to create a positive and successful learning experience for students at UL by providing them with a wide range of professional services. The division provides these services on the premise that the services are an integral component of higher education that they must be student-centred and that students are partners and responsible stakeholders in their own education. With an annual budget of €3.5 million, SA continually strives to ensure that its services and supports are integrated with the academic mission of the university, which is "To be a distinctive, pioneering and connected university that shapes the future through educating and empowering people to meet the real challenges of tomorrow". The division strives to take a holistic approach to the integration of higher education resourcing, both inside and outside the classroom. The SA strategic plan has enabled the division to realise its unity of purpose and direction and has improved service integration and clarity of focus on its mission.

See also http://www2.ul.ie/web/WWW/Services/Student_Affairs

3.0 The Follow-up Process

The Quality Review process occurs on an approximately seven-year cycle at the University of Limerick. An average of six Departments is reviewed annually. Once the Quality Review report is finalised, the Department concerned immediately sets about planning its response to the issues raised therein.

The self-evaluation process is intended to be a reflective exercise in which a Department/Division should identify many of its strengths and weaknesses and develop plans to strengthen and grow as appropriate. Quite often, the Quality Review Group (QRG) will reinforce these issues and may identify areas of concern that were overlooked. In many cases, the QRG will also highlight the strengths of the Department and encourage faculty and staff to take advantage of these.

After the division and the university have been given time to respond to the issues raised; the Quality Review Group's report will be made available to the wider community through the University's web site. Normally, the report is available within the University less than four weeks after the QRG visit. Responses and plans for action are incorporated into the report and are subject to the approval of the Executive Committee.

Presentation to the University's Governing Authority usually follows within six months of the QRG visit. The Governing Authority will publish the Quality Review report, including reactions and plans, immediately following approval.

It is expected that a review of progress in implementing recommendations and investigating issues raised would occur quarterly for the two years following the Quality Review Visit. Progress Reports will be published as deemed appropriate.

Date	Action
Date of Review	Department is issued with Quality Review report and required to prepare reactions and plans for Quality Improvement as appropriate. The report is circulated to all members of Management Committee for comment.
Date of Review	QRG Report, incorporating reactions, is presented to UL Executive Committee for discussion, as appropriate.
+ 2/3 Months	Reactions and plans incorporated into the Quality Improvement Action Plan and circulated to GA Strategic Planning and Quality Assurance Committee. QRG Report with Responses and Quality Improvement action Plan are tabled at GA-SPQAC meeting for discussion.
+ 1 Year	Director, Dean, Vice President Academic and Registrar and Director of Quality discuss progress with resolution of recommendations and outstanding items are referred to Executive Committee and Governing Authority as appropriate.

4.0 Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

In the view of the Quality Review Group (QRG), staff throughout the Student Affairs Division (SA) are committed to providing high-quality support services. The self-assessment report (SAR) was drafted by a small self-evaluation team informed by input from a number of professionally facilitated workshops involving staff from all units within the division. The resulting document was clearly written and informative, providing the QRG with a sound basis for its deliberations. Staff who met with the QRG took ownership of the SAR, engaged willingly in discussion and expressed the view that the implementation of the quality management process and preparation for the review had helped to bring the various units within the division closer together.

SA provides support to both prospective and existing students of the university in a range of ways, with units in the division grouped around the three broad areas of administration, pastoral care and student special support. While the division does not deliver all aspects of the University's strategic objective relating to the student experience, it is clearly central and plays a key role in the achievement of this goal.

Necessary and continuing developments, such as widening participation from under-represented groups and increasing the recruitment of overseas students, rely for their success on the continuing availability of specialised support for growing numbers of students and on fast response from admissions and timetabling systems to different and more flexible patterns of education. These developments have led to pressure on the division in many areas and, whilst students and other stakeholders who met with the QRG were clear that, for the most part, they received excellent service from the units within SA, there is an urgent need to create time for strategic activity. Activity should focus on reviewing and streamlining processes, introducing appropriate technology and prioritising activities that are essential to delivering the university's strategic objectives. This will allow a satisfactory level of service to be maintained without initial recourse to an increase in staff resource.

The review process must be supported by maintaining and further enhancing effective communication within the division and between the division and its stakeholders. This should be considered in particular both with respect to the spread of good practice and to discussion at an early stage of the likely impact of proposed university initiatives on the provision of SA services.

5.0 The Report of the Quality Review Team

5.1 Current State of Development of the Division's Quality Management System (QMS)

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

- 5.1.1 The engagement of SA staff and their commitment to the QMS.

- 5.1.2 The division's responsiveness to the customer and its focus on service provision in the development of the QMS.

- 5.1.3 The sharing of best practice within the Irish higher education sector.

- 5.1.4 The clearly defined QMS team with effective leadership.

- 5.1.5 The progress made on the development of the QMS in preparation for this review.

- 5.1.6 The use of the quality management process to engage and develop staff, breaking down barriers between the units within the division.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

- 5.1.7 Continually benchmark against international comparator institutions to identify opportunities where best practice can be explored and utilised. (Examples include engagement with the SITS community and the Association of University Administrators and desk research on university websites.)

- 5.1.8 Develop a more systematic approach to evaluating activities that should be discontinued.

- 5.1.9 Develop metrics and KPIs to enable close monitoring of activities and development of the QMS and to inform discussion with stakeholders.

- 5.1.10 Ensure that process inputs and outputs which may cross unit and divisional boundaries are fully identified.

- 5.1.11 Ensure processes are effective in delivering institutional goals.

5.2 Customer Focus

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

- 5.2.1 The individual and personalised care and professionalism in the way staff address student needs.

- 5.2.2 The willingness of the division to respond to feedback from customers.

- 5.2.3 The development and deployment of the Student Affairs customer charter.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

- 5.2.4 Review the types of queries received by units and move to a more proactive service provision, where common queries are pre-empted and queues reduced.

- 5.2.5 Develop a divisional student communications plan to proactively tailor and coordinate messages and processes for students, including signposts to other services, both internal and external.

- 5.2.6 Ensure that feedback mechanisms to all customers are in place for matters they have raised. Examples of good practice include those of the following universities:
[Nottingham Trent University](#)
[Plymouth](#)
[Southampton](#)
[Derby](#)

- 5.2.7 Focus on the development of the website from the audience (rather than the unit) perspective to ensure a coherent user experience.

- 5.2.8 Ensure a uniform approach to training for conflict management to support staff in dealing with front-line customers.

- 5.2.9 Involve students proactively in the review of processes and service provision to ensure their needs are prioritised, perhaps through focus groups or use of the class representative system, alongside regular institution-wide surveys to support trend analysis.

5.3 Leadership

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

- 5.3.1 The engagement of the teams by unit heads in the review of processes and the identification of opportunities to improve service provision.

- 5.3.2 The commitment of staff to the work of the division, with a clear focus on service delivery and enhancement.

- 5.3.3 The effective communication of strategic policy developments to staff throughout the division.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

- 5.3.4 Consider the structure of the division and, in particular, the number of direct reports to the director with a view to allowing her the space to influence more effectively at a strategic level within the university, and to reflect this in leadership of the division.

- 5.3.5 Establish frequent opportunities for cross-unit collaboration to secure feedback from operational staff, perhaps by instituting a rolling programme of short, monthly, informal divisional staff get-togethers (at which attendance could alternate).

- 5.3.6 Engage actively at a strategic level and influence policy development through membership of university committees.

- 5.3.7 Evaluate resource allocation across the division and second staff to other areas to meet peak demands and to facilitate staff development.

- 5.3.8 Ensure, at university level, that service departments are involved more actively at the earliest stage in the approval process for new programmes, to enable resource implications to be addressed effectively.

- 5.3.9 Ensure, at university level, that service departments are involved at the earliest stage in discussions on policy change that impacts on service delivery.

5.4 Involvement of Staff

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

- 5.4.1 The very strong evidence of the commitment of staff to delivering an excellent service.
-
- 5.4.2 The real progress that has been made in increasing the involvement of staff in the development of the QMS. This was evident through the cross-divisional quality team, the preparatory workshops and the internal audit process, amongst other initiatives.
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Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

- 5.4.3 Maximise opportunities for synergies and cross-training. There are significant synergies between various aspects of the division. A number of options for maximising these could include:
- a) One person to represent the division on school visits to cover a number of aspects (e.g., HEAR and DARE).
 - b) The redeployment of staff within the division to cover peak periods.
 - c) Rotation of staff within the division to enhance understanding of different aspects of SA services and to promote career development.
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- 5.4.4 Involve staff in structuring the series of informal meetings throughout the year as recommended in 5.3.5 under Leadership.
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- 5.4.5 Build further on the engagement and commitment of SA staff to the QMS with a view to seeking opportunities for cross-unit enhancement.
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- 5.4.6 Identify opportunities that allow all staff space to consider the job they do, including the aspects that are adding most value, those that are adding least value, better ways of doing things and what should be discontinued.
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5.5 Continual Improvement

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

5.5.1 The recognition that the concept of continual improvement is a cornerstone of the quality policy and quality documentation, and the inclusion of this concept in all sections of the SAR.

5.5.2 The embedding of continual improvement at unit level in SA, both formally and informally.

5.5.3 The central tracking by the quality team in the quality improvement action plan of all continual improvement recommendations from multiple sources.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

5.5.4 Evaluate for effectiveness the different methods of continual improvement currently employed to ensure that only those giving optimum results are utilised.

5.5.5 Assign individual responsibility and closure timelines for actions listed in the quality improvement action plan.

5.5.6 Consider the further use of student expertise as a resource in continual improvement projects.

5.5.7 Review regularly the self-audit process to ensure it remains a driver for continual improvement.

5.6 Process Approach to Services Provided

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

- 5.6.1 The clear, distinct identification and definitions of both key business and QMS processes which provide a sound structure for SA operations.

- 5.6.2 The impressive QMS documentation, with specifications governing the support QMS processes confined to one clear document per process and the maintenance of lower-level guidelines controlled on the SharePoint site at unit level.

- 5.6.3 The recognition by the division of the need to use technology and IT resources to meet changing customer expectations and in the context of constrained financial circumstances.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

- 5.6.4 Adopt process mapping as a guide to process operations, to identify links with internal and external processes and to aid the monitoring of performance in terms of metrics.

- 5.6.5 Update the document control procedure to include approval and authority for the publishing of division-related material on the web.

- 5.6.6 Establish rigorous testing and support for new processes which impact the student experience, whether initiated by SA or another division, before launch.

- 5.6.7 Involve stakeholders, including students, in the design and review of processes.

5.7 Systematic Approach to Management

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

- 5.7.1 The commitment and unity of purpose within SA to maintaining a systematic approach to management which supports the division in delivering quality services.

- 5.7.2 The high level of co-operation achieved between the individual units within the division.

- 5.7.3 The openness of staff in acknowledging areas for improvement that remain to be addressed.

- 5.7.4 The clearly defined and documented quality management process which supports the systematic approach to management.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

- 5.7.5 Update the risk register and highlight risk exposures (high-level risks) which may have an impact on the successful implementation of the new strategic plan.

- 5.7.6 Ensure that the division contributes to the development of the new UL strategic plan and that this is synchronised with the division's strategic direction.

- 5.7.7 Prioritise and streamline collaborative activities in line with the division's strategic objectives.

- 5.7.8 Ensure that a mechanism exists whereby risks are managed effectively, either by the division or in conjunction with university management where that is appropriate.

- 5.7.9 Ensure that university relationships and processes are effective in addressing high-level risks and delivering strategic objectives.

5.8 Factual Approach to Decision Making

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

- 5.8.1 The review of service provision by the Counselling Service and the introduction of a structured programme to address increased demand for the service, rather than a simple increase in 1:1 appointments.

- 5.8.2 The introduction of different modes of communication with students to ensure effective engagement.

- 5.8.3 The responsiveness of individual units in reviewing and changing their processes as a result of issues experienced.

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

- 5.8.4 Develop more structured mechanisms to collect and evaluate stakeholder feedback, prioritise actions and communicate outcomes back to stakeholders.

- 5.8.5 Establish ownership, oversight and accountability for student data management and student data quality at divisional level.

- 5.8.6 Analyse systematically the effectiveness of different communication channels including the website and use of social media.

- 5.8.7 Enhance the use of robust factual information to influence and prioritise decisions made at divisional and university level.

5.9 Supplier, Partner and Community Relations

Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

- | | |
|-------|---|
| 5.9.1 | The HEAR, DARE and President's Volunteer Award initiatives. |
| 5.9.2 | The excellent working relationships developed by members of SA with staff across the whole of the university and with external agencies. |
| 5.9.3 | The breadth and depth of community engagement and activity in which SA staff are involved. |
| 5.9.4 | The initiation of a 10-year review of community engagement by the Access team to evaluate the relevance of activities and identify those which might be discontinued. |

Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

- | | |
|-------|--|
| 5.9.5 | At university level, identify the owner and responsible lead for supplier engagement for the Student Records system. |
| 5.9.6 | Identify all key suppliers and associated business risks, with clear ownership and measures for mitigation of those risks. |
| 5.9.7 | Identify opportunities within the division where collaboration would streamline the use of resources for community engagement activities, for example sending one member of staff who can represent a number of areas to an event. |

Appendices

A Membership of the Quality Review Group:

Prof. Gaynor Taylor (Chair)	Quality consultant, formerly Deputy VC, Leeds Metropolitan University, UK
Ms. Terry Forristal	Quality Systems Specialist, Analog Devices
Mr. Owen O'Doherty	Health & Safety Manager, Bord na gCon
Ms. Ailish O'Farrell	Technical Writer, Limerick
Ms. Alison O'Regan	Learning, Development & Equal Opportunities Manager, Human Resources Division, University of Limerick
Mrs. Emma Potts	Director of Student Administration & Services, University of Oxford
Ms. Esther Williams	Director of Student Administration, University of Bristol

B Membership of the Department Quality Team:

Anne Hickey (Team Leader)
Nuala Cullimore
Rhona McCormack
Patricia Moriarty
Susan O'Donovan

C Contact

The Quality Review Group was given the opportunity over three days to talk to the department Quality Team both formally and informally. Meetings with staff, postgraduate & undergraduate students and others were scheduled as group sessions. The Review Group was given the opportunity to meet all staff during a visit to the facilities of the department and this was most helpful.

All the meetings provided extremely useful additional information to support the SAR.