



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK
O L L S C O I L L U I M N I G H

**Report of the Quality Review Group
to the
University of Limerick Student Life**

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UL QSU Website	www.ul.ie/quality
Unit Website	www.ulstudentlife.ie/
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](#). 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 recommendations of the QRG, devises plans to implement them and reports implementation progress to a Governing Authority subcommittee and UL senior management.

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

Approximately six months after receiving the QIP template from the QSU, the head of unit provides a summary overview of progress to the university's Governing Authority Strategic Planning and Quality Assurance (GASPQA) sub-committee. GASPQA members are afforded the opportunity to discuss and evaluate progress.

Approximately 12 months after receiving the QIP template, the head of unit, Vice President Academic Affairs & Student Engagement (VPAA&SE), Dean (where relevant) and Director of Quality meet to formally review progress and to agree on any remaining actions to be taken.

2 The University of Limerick Student Life

The [University of Limerick Student Life](#) (formerly UL Students' Union) is the representative body for all students at UL. Founded in 1972 by the 113 students who started at NIHE that year, the union's initial objective was to work for the rights of students to a fair and equitable third-level education system in Ireland. Officers worked in a voluntary capacity in the early years of the union, but over the last 46 years, the organisation has evolved into the professional body it is today.

The union comprises two separate entities: UL Student Life and UL Student Life Trading Limited. UL Student Life is an unincorporated body and UL Student Life Trading Limited is a public limited company. The UL Student Life Management Committee is currently in discussions with the union's auditors and solicitor with regard to changing its legal status to a company limited by guarantee. There are advantages and disadvantages to this course of action, and a decision to do so or not will be made within the next 12 months.

In 2014, as part of its strategic planning process, UL Student Life's student representatives and staff defined the union's mission and vision to reflect current student needs and take into account the array of services that had evolved over the course of 42 years through learning, expansion and growth. The work that began in 2014 culminated in the production of the union's first-ever strategic plan – *Taking Giant Steps* – which covers the period 2016 to 2020. As defined on page 10 of the plan, UL Student Life's mission is to:

- Represent students and ensure their voices are heard and action is taken
- Advocate on student issues
- Engage students so that they can relax, party, play, succeed and live life to the full at UL
- Assist students with services and supports they need most while at UL
- Connect with students to advise and inform on the issues most relevant to them

Also on page 10 of the plan, the UL Student Life vision is defined as follows:

As an integral part of the University and overall student experience, the Students' Union wishes to see a student experience that continues to place students at the heart of all University policies and activities and where students are actively involved and supported in creating and shaping their student experiences.

Although the UL Student Life constitution specifies the union's aims and objectives, these were redefined during the strategic planning process as 31 objectives spread across four pillars of work. The redefined objectives are listed on pages 12, 14, 16 and 18 of the strategic plan.

UL Student Life is in the process of updating the constitution to reflect the new objectives (and many other items) for presentation and formal adoption at the 2019 annual general meeting (AGM).

The UL Student Life logo is the Wolf, and UL students are our wolves (the 'Wolfpack'). We are proud to have a strong and inclusive Wolfpack and endeavour to cater for all student needs.



The last four years have seen significant growth, not only in the size of the Wolfpack but also in terms of staff numbers and the demand for our services. Our membership has grown by 14% in the last two years alone.

As outlined in its constitution (appendix 1.2, page 3), UL Student Life membership comprises:

1. Students who are registered as Plassey campus UL students
2. Members of the UL Student Life Executive
3. Full-time UL Student Life staff for the duration of their employment (non-voting members)
4. Honorary members (cannot vote or stand for election)

3 Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

The Quality Review Group (QRG) wishes to thank the University of Limerick (UL) and University of Limerick Student Life - formerly UL Students' Union - for their support and hospitality during our visit. We especially wish to record our appreciation of the outstanding support and guidance provided by Professor Gary Walsh and the Quality Support Unit without which our work would not have been possible.

The General Manager of UL Student Life manages the operations of the union, which delivers a wide range of services to students, including a student centre and the administration of clubs and societies. The full-time staff work in partnership with and support three elected sabbatical officers, the President, the Deputy President/Welfare Officer, and the Vice President/Academic Officer. The QRG met with the management and full-time staff of UL Student Life and with the elected officers, as well as stakeholder representatives, for discussions based on the self-assessment report (SAR) prepared for us by UL Student Life. In all of our engagements, we were met with friendliness, a willingness to deal fully with our queries, and an eagerness to use the quality review process as a lever for further development of the union.

The QRG found the UL Student Life SAR to be a clear and thoughtful review of the work of a busy and committed students' union. We wish to express our appreciation of the effort involved in the report and in providing us with all the additional detail that we requested. We also wish to note the fact that UL Student Life requested inclusion in the UL quality review process although, as an independent entity, it had no obligation to do so. This is in keeping with the union's sincere quest for excellence that we found during our visit.

The students and other stakeholders we spoke to commended the range and quality of the services provided by UL Student Life. They particularly emphasised the great improvement in the organisation of the union, and its capacity to deliver services, during the term of the present General Manager. Overall, we found a very impressive and highly developed union, which is enhanced by its commitment to further development in the coming years.

The role of UL Student Life is evolving, with increasingly complex demands for support and representation from a growing and diverse student population. In addition, the union is now an intrinsic part of UL's suite of student services. In effect, the university and union are partners in the creation of the overall student experience of higher education and in the recruitment and retention of students. While the union must remain independent of the university, we believe the very real partnership that exists should be formally recognised.

The UL Student Life Strategic Plan 2016-2020 reflects the need for development, for which it provides an invaluable framework. The successful implementation of the strategic plan to date, especially the delivery of new sports facilities and the soon-to-commence construction of a new student centre, is evidence of the effectiveness of the planning and implementation process.

The level of student engagement (voting in elections, participation in Clubs & Societies) in UL Student Life is high by national and international standards. Student empowerment is, however, a constant challenge, particularly where major strategic projects that require stability and continuity of purpose to come to fruition are being undertaken. We share the union's conviction that the democratic voice of the student members must be the ultimate determinant of the direction of UL Student Life, and we believe that constant attention is required to ensure that this remains the reality.

Our recommendations reflect issues that were raised with the QRG and that we identified, and they are directed at supporting the further development of an already very impressive students' union.

We recognise that there are tensions between UL Student Life and the UL Postgraduate Students' Union (PSU). We express the hope that both unions, in consultation with UL, will work collaboratively to resolve these tensions in the best interest of the students they serve.

4 QRG Commendations and Recommendations

4.1 Commendations

The QRG commends the following:

No.	Commendation
1	The deep commitment to the value of student engagement demonstrated by UL Student Life and its role in enhancing co-curricular student life.
2	The desire of UL Student Life to improve its operation as evidenced by its request to participate in the UL quality review process.
3	The drawing up and delivery of the UL Student Life strategic plan.
4	The strong participation in Clubs & Societies by students who obviously value this resource.
5	The hard work of UL Student Life staff and student officers to establish a stable organisation.
6	The high level of representation and engagement by the sabbatical officers at university-level meetings.
7	The stability and management improvement of UL Student Life as evidenced by the complimentary feedback given to the QRG by external stakeholders.
8	The good external engagement of UL Student Life with the Association of College Unions International (ACUI).
9	The unique projects that directly address specific student needs, such as the food pantry and mobile union.
10	The excellent work of the sabbatical officers in representing students on so many committees, as well as maintaining strong relationships with staff and other stakeholders.
11	The extensive student engagement on social media and email, with clear evidence of users accessing the student centre.
12	The recruitment of the new Student Information & Support Co-ordinator to take on more serious and specialised casework and to provide support to the sabbatical officers, freeing them up to spend more time engaging with their constituents and working on their campaigns.
13	The clear focus on delivery of enhanced services and support to students, as evidenced by the expanding range of services offered, the planned development of a new student centre and the delivery of impressive new facilities.
14	The involvement of external expertise and networking to support the management team's efforts to apply best practice.
15	The responsiveness of UL Student Life to collaborating with services for students, such as the NSTeP programme, which is a particular strength in relationship fostering.

16	The keen attention of the union to successfully building international relationships.
17	The concerted efforts of UL Student Life to build external relationships with the local community, with <i>Meitheal na Mac Léinn</i> patrols (MnMs) an excellent means of addressing issues that can emerge from socialising on campus and the nearby environs.

4.2 Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.2.1 Level 1 Recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
1	Reinstate the Board of Trustees, led by the UL Student Life President alongside elected student officers and key members of staff and Student Council.	<p>Implementation of this recommendation must occur to ensure successful implementation of other recommendations in this report.</p> <p>The current structure (Management Committee) eliminates direct student oversight of UL Student Life. A board of trustees returns strategic direction, management and governance to students, and returns day-to-day operations to the UL Student Life full-time staff.</p>
2	Rewrite the Student Life vision statement and add organisational values.	<p>The current vision does not match the rebranding of UL Student Life and could better express the role of Student Life, covering advocacy, representation, student engagement, leadership development and the vital role UL Student Life plays in student retention and recruitment.</p> <p>Organisational values provide a framework for decision making, programmes and services, while also providing checks and balances. Two values that we feel are vital to the success of the organisation are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.) Equity, diversity and inclusion 2.) Student empowerment.
3	Make provision for two additional elected officers, specifically a Communities Officer and a Clubs & Societies Officer.	The recruitment of at least two more sabbatical officers (one of which has remit for Clubs & Societies) would alleviate the pressures placed upon elected officers and would rebalance the current configuration which is heavily weighted in favour of full-time paid staff. This would also serve to underline the value of the core principles and processes of the union.
4	Develop a Student Life Advisory Board, structured to ensure that students comprise at least fifty percent of the group and that student advocacy and representation are not lost.	<p>It is important to maintain and build relationships with key university partners, including Buildings & Estates, Finance, Student Academic Administration, the PSU, Sports, Counselling and other key partners, while helping to avoid duplication of services.</p> <p>An advisory board is not a decision making body, but intended to enhance collaboration, communication, information sharing and to build support for union programmes and services.</p>
5	Exercise caution against changing the legal status of Student Life to a company limited by guarantee.	Consider the adverse impact of changing the legal structure on the democratic and membership functions. When organisational governance is resolved via the

		Board of Trustees, the need to think of changing the structure should diminish.
6	When developing the new constitution, ensure that officers and staff are working together to improve governance and enhance democratic structures, and balance the functions and decision-making powers of committees to ensure that the delegated authority to manage operational functions sits with the General Manager.	This work needs to be jointly owned in order to deliver a constitution that both preserves the student-led approach central to a democratic students' union and protects the dignity and rights of staff.
7	Review the staff structure, especially in relation to supporting the sabbatical officers, to create a membership/democratic services function.	Separating the operational/functional areas from membership/democratic services will create more clarity for all, with overarching functions such as finance, HR and communications having a central enabling role.
8	Develop a partnership agreement between UL Student Life and the University of Limerick.	A partnership agreement will enhance understanding and clarify ownership/responsibilities for both UL Student Life and UL. Examples of relevant areas include response to and resolution of cases, maintenance, counselling, academic support, institutional support, capitation increase, GDPR and vital student services.
9	<p>Develop and deliver a communications strategy using the Marketing & Communications function as an enabler to support all areas within the union.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop an annual communications plan/calendar, building in capacity for reactive messages/campaigns. • Support student officers with expertise from the Marketing & Communications function to enhance their democratic roles. • Evaluate communications and report back to Student Council on the effectiveness of all communications. 	UL Student Life has already made progress to research and develop a communications strategy. Some interim plans are required for all areas to ensure effective communications. Using analytics will help to support more effective messaging, ensuring that relevance and reach are supporting engagement.
10	Conduct a communications audit and, based upon the outcomes, develop a communications charter in order to institute transparent and effective communication processes internally (between staff and sabbatical officers), externally (between UL Student Life and the PSU) and between UL Student Life	Transparent communication and trust are at the core of building sustainable relationships, especially in organisations where key personnel change relatively frequently.

	and the broader UL community outside of the senior executive.	
11	Plan for timely, tailored sabbatical officer training and induction to be delivered in a sustained and evidence-based manner.	Recent training has not always been chronologically logical, which has meant that important insights came too late for sabbatical officers. Training should be on-going, address skill gaps and be tailored to individual officers and their roles and skill sets.
12	Develop a plan to integrate Equality, Diversity and Inclusion into the Student Life framework.	The current strategic plan, with the exception of objective 3.1, does not effectively address equality, diversity and inclusion and demonstrate the shared responsibility for these values.
13	When developing the new strategic plan, ensure that this is developed within a values framework with values identified by all stakeholders through surveys, focus groups and any other relevant means.	If this values work is undertaken, it will give the union an effective structure for values-based decision making within this framework. This will improve accountability and transparency, empowering both officers and staff.
14	Develop or procure a digital database for advocacy/casework.	A digital database would help to professionalise casework management and the anonymised statistics would provide evidence to inform casework, advocacy and campaigns.
15	Consider employing another advocacy caseworker and expanding both caseworkers' remit to support students through academic appeals/complaints/discipline casework while working closely with the Welfare and Academic officers.	An additional advocacy caseworker would free up officers to be more strategic and fulfil their representative roles, ensuring they are not operating outside of their areas of expertise. It would also give students a more specialist service and mitigate organisational risk and conflict of interest in casework.
16	Work with the university to ensure that academic representation cases cannot be ignored and agree a framework to ensure that cases are concluded appropriately.	UL Student Life is best placed to deliver academic representation for students. There is evidence to suggest that there is inconsistency between the responses of different faculties. This recommendation is linked to the previous one around casework.
17	In the light of GDPR, as a matter of urgency, seek a data-sharing agreement with the university to ensure that UL Student Life can represent students effectively.	It has been possible to deliver a data-sharing agreement in other universities and unions within GDPR guidelines, so there should be no reason for this to remain a stumbling block at UL.
18	Establish clear attendance expectations for internal, formal and informal meetings, and in the case of formal meetings when there is a clear reason for holding these, ensure that agendas are issued in advance and that minutes/action points are distributed.	The QRG is not persuaded of the value of formal weekly meetings as time is required to prepare and follow up on these. Informal catch-ups can be more useful and an open-door policy can be of more value in sorting out any issues.

19	Develop procedures to increase transparency and accountability at Student Council.	To improve democracy and student engagement in Student Council, agendas and minutes should be emailed directly to students, the sabbatical officer and the faculty representative (following a GDPR resolution agreement with the university), and councillor voting records must be made easily available to students.
20	Develop clearer descriptions of the respective roles of full-time and elected officers to facilitate effective team working.	Sabbatical officers serve for a short period, usually a year, and confusion about the practical functioning of the union is possible, especially for new officers. Written guidelines would help to dispel any confusion, to the benefit of all.
21	Ensure that the UL Student Life President is invited to all senior team meetings and is included in all decision making in UL Student Life.	While the turnover in presidents can make this challenging to achieve, clear processes will help.
22	Engage an external facilitator to engage with UL Student Life to do a needs audit regarding Dignity and Respect in the Workplace and institute a Dignity and Respect policy in UL Student Life.	All staff and sabbatical officers should complete Dignity and Respect training, in order to foster a collegiate culture based on transparent communication and trust.
23	Provide independent professional coaching for sabbatical officers.	Coaching needs to be provided by independent executive coaches, free of any relationship with UL Student Life staff, in order to build the trust of the sabbatical officers and to provide them with an agenda-free and safe forum within which to test their ideas and develop their skill sets.
24	Engage an external facilitator to work with UL Student Life and the PSU to develop a new model of working (facilitated by a restorative ethos) that is empowering and fair to both, the outcome of which is protected by an MoU that addresses services duplication and financial fairness.	There are clearly residual issues since the formation of the PSU. Continued differences do not serve well the organisations or the students they serve. Transparent communication and trust are at the core of building sustainable relationships, especially in organisations where key personnel change relatively frequently.

4.2.2 Level 2 Recommendations

	Recommendation	Commentary
1	Make the rebranding of ULSU to Student Life a communications focus.	Communications must focus on communicating the change effectively to students and must reassure them that the political and representative aspect of a union has not been lost in this change.
2	Strategically prioritise university committee involvement of elected	Elected officers attend meetings at more than fifty committees. This detracts from their ability to lead

	officers by identifying meetings that bring the greatest benefit to Student Life.	the organisation strategically. Develop a system and reporting structure that allows for staff and/or Student Council members to attend meetings and to report and provide updates to elected officers.
3	Identify opportunities and develop a plan with key university partners to support students beyond the first year experience.	Considerable effort and resources are given toward supporting the first year experience. Officers and stakeholders did not feel that students were well supported after their first year.
4	Use targeted marketing for the sub-brands of UL Student Life, student engagement and the four Student Life areas: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Student Representation 2. Clubs & Societies 3. Events & Engagement 4. Student Centre. 	The Student Life brand is in its infancy. There is a lack of understanding by stakeholders of the terms “Student Life” and “student engagement” and of the related benefits and skills development connected to co-curricular involvement. The suggested order, with the student centre as the final piece, is proffered to promote recognition that the centre itself is the conduit through which all of the union activities occur. It is not the primary focus per se, and the marketing should reflect this.
5	Develop a plan to incorporate the Student Life mission, vision and values into the visual experience of the new student centre.	The new student centre will provide many opportunities to share, market and build familiarity around the mission, vision and values of Student Life.

Appendices

A Membership of the QRG

Mr. Tony Buckley (Chair)	Head of Corporate Affairs, Revenue (Retired)
Mr. Geoff Combs	Executive Director, Campus Centre & Events, University of Massachusetts
Ms. Audrey-Clare Burns	Chief Executive, Students' Union, University of Stirling
Ms. Christine Pungong	CUSU-GU Welfare and Rights Officer, University of Cambridge
Prof. Patricia Mannix-McNamara	Head of Department, School of Education, University of Limerick
Ms. Ailish O'Farrell (Recording Secretary)	Technical Writer, Limerick

B Membership of Student Life Quality Team

Martin Ryan	General Manager
Adele O'Carroll	Head of Facilities, Supports and Services
Paul Lee	Head of Student Engagement
Gillian O'Gorman	Head of Leadership and Presentation
Barry Costello	Head of Finance and Marketing