

University of Limerick - June 2006

– Progress Report, EUA Quality Review.



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

The EUA Review Team complimented the University of Limerick on the quality systems established and provided some valuable suggestions as to how these might be integrated into university processes. The university has evaluated these suggestions and many have been integrated into the University's draft Strategic Plan. The responsibility for preparation of the EUA Self Evaluation lay with the Deans' Council and it has also taken responsibility for the implementation of the recommendations of the EUA Review of Quality Systems at the University of Limerick.

The University has now completed first cycle of quality review visits of academic departments. The last report from the first cycle will be published before the end of 2006. It is now planned to review and update processes and supporting documentation incorporating the recommendations of the EUA. Furthermore, the Irish universities are working together to revise the sectoral approach described in the "CHIU Framework Document" and it is appropriate to consider how this may impact on internal revisions. In some cases, it will be advantageous to delay internal changes pending the outcome of sectoral debate.

The University has recently made significant changes to the manner in which it approaches quality reviews of non-academic departments (support departments). Quality reviews (QMS audits) of both the Library and Student Academic Administration have tested this new system and in both cases the system worked very satisfactorily. The University promotes the key quality concepts of "customer care" and "continuous quality improvement" and strives to improve processes, systems and techniques particularly with a view to improving the effectiveness of student learning opportunities, research and the university environment. The EUA Review has made a very useful contribution to this on-going process.

Recommendations

In terms of the quality review process

- (1) Establish a schedule for all remaining Department and unit reviews for the next three years.

Progress: The University has put in place a schedule for the next seven years. This schedule will complete the first cycle of reviews of academic departments, carry out second cycle reviews of a number of academic departments, and complete the first cycle of reviews of support departments.

STATUS: Completed and closed

- (2) Ensure that the regular student evaluation of teaching becomes an integral part of the university's system for monitoring quality.

Progress: Regular student evaluation is in place. The University is exploring ways in which the linkages between the evaluation of modules, programmes and academic departments may be strengthened.

STATUS: Completed and closed

- (3) Ensure that there is a quick and visible response from the university leadership immediately following an external review.

Progress: Following a review, a Department incorporates its responses into the PRG Report and the Head of Department makes a presentation to Deans' Council followed by discussion. The PRG Report is considered as a separate agenda item at Executive Committee with a subsequent report back to Deans' Council. The PRG Report is considered by Governing Authority prior to publication. The University is currently exploring ways of deepening the engagement of the Governing Authority with these reports.

STATUS: Completed and closed

- (4) Secure more precise terms of reference for the peer review teams, in order to avoid unrealistic recommendations.

Progress: The University resists over-constraining the Peer Review Group (PRG). The briefing to the PRG has now been extended to include discussion of constraints applying at university level. The PRG is asked to identify problems where resource deficiencies are a significant contributor, particularly where benchmarking against other similar departments overseas indicates that under-funding is a problem.

STATUS: Completed and closed

- (5) Examine options available for undertaking reviews not just of units but of programmes.

Progress: The seven universities conducted extensive research and benchmarking exercises during the development of the system described in the CHIU 'Framework' document. The current system is based on a review of departments, faculties and services as described in the Universities Act (1997). This will continue to be the backbone of the system. Many of the programmes at UL are systematically reviewed by the department and/or course board and some by external accreditation agencies. An investigation into a systematic programme review scheme is under way and proposals will be presented to Academic Council when this work is completed.

STATUS: Under review

- (6) Explore what synergies could be achieved between the quality review process and professional accreditation processes in selected areas.

Progress: The quality review process currently focuses very successfully on the department while professional accreditation generally focuses on taught programmes. These processes have some overlap but formalised linkages have not been successful during trials. The topic will not be explored further at this time.

STATUS: Completed and closed

In terms of quality improvement

- (7) Ensure clear understanding about the responsibilities for follow-up and quality improvement after evaluations.

Progress: Academic departments are now required to submit their QI Action Plans to Deans' Council and a system for annual progress reporting is being integrated with the established annual reporting cycle. These QI Action Plans are strategic in nature and publication would undermine UL's competitive advantage.

STATUS: Completed and closed

- (8) Create greater flexibility in resource allocation to provide positive stimuli for change.

Progress: The University is committed to the introduction of greater flexibility in resource allocation. The model for allocation of faculty posts is currently under review. The University's new Strategic Plan proposes a move towards a system of devolved budgetary control so as to enable rapid response to new needs and initiatives.

STATUS: Completed and closed

- (9) Merge several of the current small funds into a reduced number of larger funds, in order to reduce effort in applying to multiple schemes, and link the use of these funds more explicitly to the implementation of university strategy.

Progress: The University has substantially increased its strategic initiative funds for 2005/6. Further rationalisation of competitive funding opportunities is being pursued as a priority. It is recognized that the important contribution of the Quality Improvement Fund Allocation Committee (QIFAC) is not simply as a source of funds but as a valuable means of focusing energy on specific QA/QI topics.

STATUS: Completed and closed

- (10) Create more explicit links between the various human resource and investment initiatives and the outcomes of the quality review process.

Progress: There is an acknowledged need to integrate the outcomes of quality reviews into resource allocation and staff development. Closer linkages between staff development and quality review outcomes have been put in place.

STATUS: Completed and closed

- (11) Move from an optional system of formative teaching evaluation to one where this is accepted as standard practice for all teaching staff.

Progress: A majority of faculty are now regularly involved in the process. There is considerable evidence that mandatory evaluation would have a negative impact. The demand for these reviews already places a very heavy burden on the limited resources available. The revised Faculty Promotions Scheme has created a stronger link between promotion decisions and teaching evaluations.

STATUS: Completed and closed

In terms of governance and management

- (12) Ensure that the Academic Council can contribute to the development of the next Strategic Plan and that the Governing Authority are consulted when the draft strategic plan is ready.

Progress: The draft Strategic Plan is now in the final consultation phase. Academic Departments and Deans' Council have been very involved in the development of the new plan and now all faculty and staff are involved in a final round of consultations. Governing Authority will be presented with the final draft during 2006.

STATUS: Completed and closed

- (13) Improve the status of student class representatives and their involvement in quality management.

Progress: The University acknowledges the importance of class representatives both as important avenues of communication and as sources of advice on University issues. They already play a role in selection of suitable students to meet Peer Review Groups. The University is working to support and strengthen the class representatives system and exploring means by which their status can be enhanced.

STATUS: Completed and closed

- (14) Examine options for these class representatives to serve on Course Boards also.

Progress: The University recognises the need for Course Boards to be constituted according to a common framework and to conduct their affairs according to consistent guidelines. The inclusion of class representatives on Course Boards and their role in systematic course review is currently optional and will be strengthened.

STATUS: Completed and closed

- (15) Allow for increased flexibility in creating variations within Courses, including a simplification of the overall number and variety of Courses on offer at UL.

Progress: This recommendation is accepted and UL has made moves in that direction. A number of courses will be reviewed during the next five years, both with a view to examining their economic viability and rationalization of structures. UL students have benefited from the wide choice offered by the range of undergraduate programmes on offer. The modular system and cumulative credit systems facilitate student mobility, both internally and internationally, and this will be further enhanced by the adoption of the ECTS system.

STATUS: Completed and closed

- (16) Put in place a specially tailored management information system to meet the wide strategic needs of the university.

Progress: Systems already exist in Student Records, Finance, and Research. The new system in the Human Resources area is close to fully functional. Integration of these systems into a single management information system is now regarded as a very high priority.

STATUS: Completed and closed