

Institutional Review Report 2020

University of Limerick



QAI REVIEW

CINNTE 

Foreword

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is responsible for the external quality assurance (QA) of further and higher education and training in Ireland. One of QQI's most important functions is to ensure that the QA procedures that institutions have in place are effective. To this end, QQI carries out external reviews of higher education institutions on a cyclical basis. This current QQI cycle of reviews is called the CINNTE cycle.

CINNTE reviews are an element of the broader quality framework for institutions composed of Quality Assurance Guidelines; each institution's Quality Assurance Procedures; Annual Institutional Quality Reports (AIQR); and Quality Dialogue Meetings (QDM). The CINNTE review cycle runs from 2017-2023. During this period, QQI will organise and oversee independent reviews of each of the universities and the institutes of technology.

Each CINNTE review evaluates the effectiveness of the QA procedures of each institution. The review measures each institution's compliance with European standards for QA, its regard to the expectations set out in the QQI QA guidelines or their equivalent and adherence to other relevant QQI policies and procedures. CINNTE reviews also explore

how institutions have enhanced their teaching, learning and research and their QA systems and how well institutions have aligned their approach to their own mission, quality indicators and benchmarks.

The CINNTE review process is in keeping with Parts 2 and 3 of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015) and based on the internationally accepted and recognised approach to reviews, including:

- the publication of terms of reference;
- a process of self-evaluation and an Institutional Self-Evaluation Report (ISER);
- an external assessment and site visit by a team of reviewers;
- the publication of a review report including findings and recommendations; and
- a follow-up procedure to review actions taken.

This QQI CINNTE review of the University of Limerick was conducted by an independent review team in line with the terms of reference in Appendix A. This is the report of the findings of that review team. It also includes the response of University of Limerick to the report.

The Review Team

Each CINNTE review is carried out by an international team of independent experts and peers. The 2020 institutional review of University of Limerick (UL) was conducted by a team of six reviewers selected by QQI. The review team was briefed, and received training from, QQI on 3 February 2020. The Chair and Coordinating Reviewer undertook a planning visit to University of Limerick on 4 February 2020. The main review visit was scheduled to take place from 23-27 March 2020. However, as a result of public health restrictions put in place in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, a site visit was not possible, and the main review visit was rescheduled as a virtual visit.

In collaboration with the institution and review team and, based on the experiences garnered during a pilot virtual institutional review visit, QQI produced a set of operational guidelines in respect of the virtual visit to UL and a revised visit timetable was agreed.

A full schedule of stakeholder meetings was held with the review team between 19 and 29 August 2020, during which the full review team met students, staff and external stakeholders. The timetable for the visit is appended to this report (see Appendix B).

Due to conflicting engagements, two of the original review team members were unable to participate in the virtual review visit, and QQI is grateful to Oliver Vettori and John O'Brien, who agreed to join the review team in June 2020. A briefing was held for both of these review team members via MS Teams in July 2020.

The efficacy of the virtual review process was confirmed by the review team chair on behalf of the review team in the oral feedback report provided to UL on the final day of the virtual visit. The president of UL, on behalf of the institution, confirmed the institution's satisfaction and confidence in the robustness of the process.

QQI acknowledges the engagement, commitment and work of the review team and of UL in planning, preparing for and implementing the virtual review process.

CHAIR – BERT VAN DER ZWAAN

Bert van der Zwaan is Emeritus Professor of Biogeology at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. Trained as a paleontologist, his main research interest involved the impact of climate change on the extinction of marine faunas. Early in his career, he initiated many interdisciplinary research programmes and he was later director of the Darwin Center for Biogeology. Through this work he became interested in the (regional) impact of universities on innovation. He has been lead-PI and CEO of Climate KIC, one of the first Knowledge and Innovation Communities of the EU, dealing with adaptation to climate change. He became dean of the Faculty of Geosciences in 2006 and was Rector Magnificus (Vice Chancellor) of Utrecht University from 2010-2018. He recently stepped down as president of the European League of Research Universities (LERU). Bert van der Zwaan has held numerous positions inside and outside of academia, and (co-)authored many research papers, including recently on higher education. He is the author of the book, "Higher Education in 2040" (2017).

COORDINATING REVIEWER – GEMMA LONG

Gemma Long is the Head of Education Quality and Policy at the University of Cambridge. Previously, she spent seven years working at the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in a number of roles including assistant director of the Concerns Scheme, working on International Quality Reviews, and more recently as the Lead Officer for Wales. She is experienced in the design and implementation of higher education audit methods, working with students and peer reviewers. In early 2019, Gemma was appointed to the Accreditation Board of the Education Workforce Council in Wales. She has an MA in Education from the University of Bath, a BSc from Cardiff University, and has published a book chapter on the quality assurance of academic libraries.

INTERNATIONAL REPRESENTATIVE – OLIVER VETTORI

Oliver Vettori is Dean of Accreditation and Quality Management and Director of Programme Management and Teaching and Learning Support at WU (Vienna University of Economics and Business). He holds a doctoral degree in Sociology/Organisation Theory from the University of Vienna and is a Research Associate at the Institute for Organisation Studies (also at WU Vienna).

Dr Vettori has been working in higher education management and research for more than a decade now, as a reviewer, trainer, researcher and expert in more than 45 different countries on four different continents including work for EUA, ENQA, UNESCO IIEP, ASEAN-QA, EU-SHARE and various other agencies and higher education institutions. He serves on the international Editorial Board of Quality in Higher Education and on the Steering Committee of the EUA European Teaching and Learning Initiative.

LEARNER REPRESENTATIVE – JAMES LARKIN

James Larkin has a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and Mathematics from Trinity College Dublin and a Masters in Global Health and Development from University College London. He has worked as a research assistant with several organisations, including the Irish College of General Practitioners and the Centre for Health Policy & Management in Trinity College Dublin.

James received a Collaborative Doctoral Award in 2018 to pursue a PhD in RCSI and conduct an evaluation of the economic impact of adhering to clinical guidelines for patients with complex multimorbidity. As part of his PhD he is enrolled in the SPHeRE programme.

QUALITY ASSURANCE EXPERT – JANET ALLEYNE

Janet Alleyne is currently Head of Quality Enhancement at Ulster University where she has been instrumental in developing and implementing the university's innovative approach to quality monitoring designed to deliver targeted interventions and positively reward excellence and to enhance both

the learning experiences of students and the working lives of staff. The impact of this approach to improving performance was recognised when the University was shortlisted by Times Higher Education for the University of the Year Award.

Janet holds a MA in Philosophy from the University of St Andrews and before coming to Ulster worked in London in a variety of roles in government departments and quangos, mainly focused on investigation and policy development in relation to social security and health matters.

EXTERNAL REPRESENTATIVE – JOHN O'BRIEN

Professor John O'Brien is Founder and Director of The Food Observatory, UK. He is a former CEO of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland and former Deputy Head of the Nestle Research Centre (staff 650) where he led the Food Safety and Integrity Research Programme. His experience spans the international food industry from senior leadership positions in Groupe Danone (France) and Nestlé (Switzerland) to various consultancy and advisory projects in Ireland, Europe, Japan and USA. He has held lectureships at University College Cork and the University of Surrey.

O'Brien holds/has held non-executive directorships of several scientific and technical organisations including the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) (Washington), Institute for Food Safety & Health at Illinois Institute of Technology (Chicago), ILSI Europe (Brussels, as Chair), and Campden BRI (UK), Feeding Tomorrow (USA), and the Institute of Food Science & Technology (UK). He is currently a member of the Science Council of the Food Standards Agency (UK), where he recently chaired a Working Group on Global Food System Risks, and is a visiting professor and chair of the Advisory Board at the Nutrition Innovation Centre for Food & Health (NICHE) at Ulster University. He has served on academic external review boards/course validation panels at Wageningen University, Maastricht University, Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University. He has a PhD in Food Chemistry (University College, Cork) and an MSc in Toxicology with Distinction (University of Surrey).



Section 1



Introduction and Context

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Summary Information

The University of Limerick (UL) was founded as The National Institute for Higher Education, Limerick in 1972. In 1989, it was classified as the University of Limerick and became the first institution since the establishment of Irish independence to be newly designated a university. The university is one of Ireland's youngest.

UL has undergone relatively rapid growth. In 1989, the university had 3,490 students and in 2019, it had 15,269 students. The campus is situated five kilometres from Limerick City on 366 hectares of land, making it geographically one of the largest universities in Ireland. The university's age and location have facilitated the development of a range of modern cultural and sporting facilities. The university has four faculties, which have subsidiary academic units, namely (i) Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences; (ii) Business (Kemmy Business School); (iii) Education and Health Sciences; and (iv) Science and Engineering.

BRIEF PROFILE

The University of Limerick has pioneered several initiatives that are unique in the context of Irish education, including cooperative education. Under this initiative, students undertake a six to eight-month work placement. These placements take place across 30 countries in five continents. This may contribute to the high level of employment amongst UL graduates.¹

The university's current strategic plan, which is for the period 2019–2024, sets out a mission 'to build on the

expertise of our scholars in creating, harnessing and imparting knowledge for the benefit of our students and the enrichment of our community'.² The strategy is broken into five goals: i) Transforming Education; ii) Research Excellence; iii) Internationalisation; iv) Engagement with the City and Region; and v) an Operating Model of Continual Improvement.

Central to the university's strategic plan is its quality policy, which focuses on fostering a quality culture informed by international best practice.³ In recent years, UL's governance structure, which is a central component of its quality policy, has been restructured in response to reviews and complaints.

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

In 2020, Professor Kerstin Mey was appointed interim president of UL, becoming the first female president of an Irish university. In 2019, UL received a Bronze Athena SWAN Award. This speaks to a diversity of staff as well as a belief among staff that the university supports gender diversity. UL also supports ethnic diversity.^{4,5} This is reflected in the university's classification as a University of Sanctuary and in the significant proportion of non-Irish students enrolled at UL. Despite Limerick City's relative economic disadvantage in comparison with other Irish cities, students from socio-economically disadvantaged communities are underrepresented in UL's student population.⁶ This is something that UL has ambitions to address.⁷

The review team evaluated UL during a period of uncertainty due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The

1 https://www3.ul.ie/careers/careers/stugrad/summary_2018_results.shtml

2 https://www.ul.ie/UL_Strategic_Plan_2019-2024_Web.pdf

3 https://ulsites.ul.ie/executive/sites/default/files/exec_quality_policy_may_2019.pdf

4 https://www.ul.ie/equality-diversity-inclusion/sites/equality/files/Athena_SWAN_Survey_Report_Jan2019.pdf

5 https://www.ul.ie/equality-diversity-inclusion/sites/equality/files/Athena_SWAN_Survey_Report_Jan2019.pdf

6 https://www.tcd.ie/medicine/public_health_primary_care/assets/pdf/Trinity-deprivation-report-11-2019.pdf

7 https://www.ul.ie/UL_Strategic_Plan_2019-2024_Web.pdf



pandemic presents a major challenge for the university in a range of areas such as finance, teaching arrangements and internationalisation. **The review team commends UL on the resilience and dynamism shown in its response to Covid-19. This was clear from its ability, evident across the organisation, to overcome the difficulties associated with Covid-19.** This is in particular a compliment to all staff and students, who are working under considerable pressure and still managing to deliver

high quality teaching. Staff are considered to have performed well throughout the crisis.

In the last decade, UL has had to respond to funding deficits and employment controls in the wake of the financial crisis in Ireland. Moving into the next decade, UL will have to manage challenges and opportunities associated with the economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic and the establishment of technological universities.



Section 2

Institutional Self-Evaluation
Report (ISER)



Institutional Self-Evaluation Report

The Institutional Self-Evaluation Report (ISER) report is well presented with a clear structure and appealing layout. Evidently, much time and effort were dedicated to presenting the university and its approach to quality in the ISER. The overall project management plan and the briefing materials for the project team suggest a strategic approach to the entire review process. The additional material in the appendices was informative and helpful. **The review team commends all interview partners for the frankness and openness of the interviews, and the speed with which additional information, if requested, was produced. This is a sign of positive engagement with the review process.**

The methodology and process for preparing the ISER, a 40-page document, was integrated within the university's overall institutional quality review project management plan, starting in March 2018. A 21-member self-evaluation team was formed in late 2018 and chaired by the Assistant Dean (Academic

Affairs) of the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, who is also a member of Academic Council. The self-evaluation team was composed of 16 staff members (representing the four faculties, support departments and the university's Governing Authority) as well as five students, including the presidents of UL Student Life (UL's students' union) and the Postgraduate Students' Union, as well as an international student. A steering group guided the ISER team, which was supported by the Office of the Vice-President Academic Affairs and Student Engagement, members of the Quality Support Unit (QSU), and a technical writer. The university's Executive Committee, Academic Council, Management Council and Governing Authority (GA) reviewed and noted a first draft of the ISER in June 2019. The final ISER was submitted to QQI on 16 of December 2019.



The self-evaluation process was supported by data drawn from pre-existing surveys and additional student and staff focus groups. Pre-existing surveys included data from external examiners and international students, although these sources were used only to a limited degree. It is important to note that a number of external stakeholders were neither involved in, nor consulted during, the ISER process, mirroring the general lack of systematic management of stakeholder perspectives at UL that was evident to the review team during the main review visit.

The final ISER was shared with the campus community via the university's intranet. A project website kept members of the university informed of the overall review process. Additional communication (memoranda, e-mails) raised awareness of the ISER among university staff and students.

The recommendations from the 2012 QQI review were clearly taken into consideration and the university's response to most of the recommendations are presented transparently, though the review team also noted that not all recommendations have been fully realised, e.g. with regard to employer engagement.⁸

The entire self-evaluation process appears to have

been approached in the spirit of enhancement. A good ISER reflects the university and reveals with great clarity its weaknesses as well as any planned enhancements. **The review team commends UL for the involvement of many internal stakeholders in the self-evaluation process. The ISER provides a coherent picture of the university in spite of the many challenges experienced during its drafting.** UL's evaluative attitude is demonstrated by the many proposed enhancements that were identified during the process. These planned enhancements are clearly detailed in the report, and, in its concluding section, the ISER lays out 12 themes under which it categorises the planned enhancements (together with findings from the compliance assessment exercise). To a large degree, however, the report focuses on the university's achievements and success stories, and planned enhancements seem to be geared towards optimising QA processes rather than towards addressing the areas for improvement that those processes have unearthed. This is very much in line with the review team's observation that the quality assurance (QA) and quality enhancement (QE) parts in the report are weakly linked, as they were found to be in reality during the main review visit.

8 e.g. Recommendation 6.23, 'Stimulate entrepreneurship by bringing employers into the classroom and involving them in curriculum development.'







Section 3

Quality Assurance/Accountability

Objective 1 – Current Quality Assurance Procedures

Objective 2 – Quality Enhancement

Objective 3 – Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression

Objective 4 – Provision of Programmes to International Learners

Quality Assurance/ Accountability

Objective 1 – Current Quality Assurance Procedures

OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF QA PROCEDURES

UL's approach to quality assurance and quality enhancement is described in its Quality Policy, which also outlines the university's plans for fostering a quality culture. The document offers a list of what UL calls its "primary institutional quality mechanisms and processes", although the policy does not explain these in detail. A quality manual complements the Quality Policy, which functions as an overview document that contains hundreds of links to additional policies, guidelines and reference materials.

Several support units, specifically the IT and HR divisions, have ISO 9001:2015 quality standard accreditation and have implemented quality

management systems (QMS) based on this standard. According to the ISER, each unit has designated individuals with responsibility for quality within its own QMS, whereas the institutional level framework is supervised by the Quality Support Unit (QSU). The first part works well in practice, and the review team found good examples of units trying to identify and solve problems, although the link to the overall framework was not always perceived by the review team as strong. A reason for this could be found in one interviewee's verdict that "the institutional system is very much geared towards external accountability". However, **the review team commends the university for the way it has connected the different quality teams and for how it fosters good practice exchange on various levels, so that others can benefit from creative solutions and so that the overall discourse on QA is kept alive.**



Overall, UL has developed an impressive array of QA procedures for various purposes, with clear process descriptions and plenty of documentation that demonstrates that the procedures are taken seriously in the daily life of the organisation. However, neither the ISER nor the supplementary documents provide an overview of what the overarching QA system looks like and how different structures and processes fit together, beyond listing them. Effectiveness of QA procedures seems to be inferred from the fact that UL is doing well in various rankings and from the sheer number of actions that can be found in enhancement plans and similar documents. UL states that, in 2018 alone, support unit quality improvement plans (QIPs) cumulatively recorded 457 new enhancement action items, of which 426 were implemented; however, inferring effectiveness from a number alone is deceptive, as the figure provides no information on the form, priorities and extent of those actions.

Whether the system *per se* is effective is difficult to assess, as some of the biggest recent changes/improvements, such as the recent structural changes related to the university's governance, seem to have originated outside of the formal QA system. Further, the review team received no information on how the various action and improvement plans (for programmes, units etc.) are related to each other, nor do the documents offer insights into the cost-benefit-ratio of the system or the underlying concept of impact.

In general, the review team found that the complexity of the QA and QE systems should be reduced based on a careful re-evaluation of which elements are necessary and which are, possibly, superfluous. Reducing duplication and simplifying processes improves clarity, and more articulated lines of accountability should help to prevent QA and QE from becoming a burden. Strengthening the QE part of the system beyond good practice exchange and quality improvement plans could be helpful in this regard.

LINKED PROVIDERS

As a Designated Awarding Body, UL collaborates with two linked providers, Mary Immaculate College and the Garda College. A linked provider framework regulating the two institutions' relationships with UL was adopted in 2019 and builds on previous work regarding the alignment of linked providers' QA with

that of UL. Within the framework, the university takes responsibility for the quality of the linked providers' awards and for the protection of linked providers' enrolled learners. The framework covers procedures for (a) establishing relationships with prospective linked providers and procedures, (b) for approving the quality assurance and enhancement procedures of a recognised linked provider, and (c) procedures for monitoring and reviewing the QA procedures of recognised linked providers. The document appears to be sound and sufficiently detailed. Partner-specific agreements are documented in memoranda of understanding, which – according to UL – are periodically reviewed. The framework is relatively new, so it is difficult to assess its effectiveness and how it adds value; however, the QSU homepage transparently displays AIQRs for both linked providers for the past two years as well as an institutional review report for Mary Immaculate College from 2017. The UL institutional review of the Garda College is scheduled for 2021. The AIQRs are detailed and provide good evidence of the quality processes in place at Mary Immaculate College in particular, but the ISER does not contain any information on the effectiveness of the entire approach, which, to the review team, appears formulaic. Stakeholders in the linked provider institutions were surveyed with regard to their experiences on the joint QA efforts, but the low response rates to these surveys limits the usefulness of the resulting report. Less than half of those surveyed responded, and the responses are difficult to analyse. It was agreed by UL that the survey of 11 members of senior management in the two linked providers was an unsatisfactory means of assuring the quality processes between the institutions. A more active, formal approach to the analysis of the quality processes between the university and its linked providers is recommended.

The review team's interviews with linked providers during the main review visit showed that the relationship between UL and linked providers is a positive one, characterised by mutual respect. It is worth noting, in the words of one interviewee, that it is perceived as a "formal relationship nested in a network of informal relationships". This was mirrored in the review team's finding that the way QA was organised differed between the two linked providers, in particular concerning the more informal elements.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT OF QA (INCLUDING PROCEDURES FOR THE APPROVAL AND REVIEW OF LINKED PROVIDERS)

QA GOVERNANCE

The ISER states that, very much in line with the Universities Act 1997, the Governing Authority (GA) holds overall responsibility for all affairs of the university, including QA. The GA consists of a variety of internal and external stakeholders, representing students and staff as well as wider society. The GA has five subcommittees, none of which specifically focuses on QA, but all of which are tasked with quality-related issues. The GA also appoints the President and the Chief Executive Officer of the university. The Executive Committee, which is chaired by the President, has responsibility for developing strategic policies and procedures, monitoring the university's performance, and ensuring the efficiency and effectiveness of all major processes. A rather large Management Council advises the Executive Committee on strategy and supports strategy implementation. Last but not least, responsibilities for academic affairs at UL lie with Academic Council. Since the last review in 2012, UL has undergone a number of structural changes, including on the level of the Executive Committee. Relevant changes include the creation of two new senior management roles (Vice-President Academic Affairs and Student Engagement [VPAASE]), and Deputy President (Chief Operating Officer and Registrar); the restructuring of several administrative units; and the introduction of new subcommittees within the Executive Committee, most notably, the Quality Committee and an Education and Student Experience Committee.

The management representatives whom the review team met from across the different bodies were all clearly engaged in, and highly driven by, an ambition to support UL's enhancement. Managers were evidently united in their focus on the student learning experience at UL and on the importance of accommodating students' needs. **The review team commends UL's vibrant, inclusive community, in which staff and students feel very much at home, and at the same time feel challenged to reach their potential.**

Various interviews suggested, however, that UL's governance of QA and QE mirrors the complexity of an institution that is still young and has grown quickly, with many overlapping responsibilities as well as a few gaps. The ISER does not explain in detail how each body is involved in governing the overall QA system. Internal stakeholders were at variance in their understanding of how responsibility for various aspects of QA is managed, with some referring to particular aspects as being a shared responsibility, and others, a divided one. There is no overall chart of the university's QA system that shows how the different components are interlinked and who holds responsibility for each component. On a related note, UL's Quality Policy declares that each employee bears responsibility for quality and lists a number of bodies and individuals that share responsibility for QA and QE at the institutional level, although not beyond. A document outlining the day-to-day responsibilities for QA offers only marginally more information, in particular with regard to actual operational responsibilities. It is unclear if the information in this document derives from any official documents. A quality team leaders' forum seems to foster good practice exchange, but it is unclear how the forum supports the overall QA system or what status it has in terms of overall QA governance. Accordingly, **the review team recommends that there be a clear line of accountability for QA, including the ultimately accountable person, who should be the VPAASE.**

As shown above, there is a variety of different bodies that are evidently regularly engaged in considering strategic issues and questions of quality, yet in these efforts the decision-making bodies and committees are decoupled from each other, leading to a risk of losing sight of the bigger picture. The ISER does not make clear the degree to which governance and structural changes are informed by QA procedures and how the university monitors whether changes resulting from QA are effective. In the ISER, UL states that the maintenance of its institutional governance and organisational architecture is a primary institutional quality mechanism, but no details of this mechanism in practice were provided in the ISER or during the main review visit.

The review team found that, overall, the QA and QE system functions in a top-down manner. The review team also noted with admiration that, at the level of faculty and school, there is great willingness and



capability to assume greater responsibility for QA. **The review team recommends re-analysing the QA and QE system to obtain a more balanced top-down/bottom-up attribution of responsibilities, which, in the view of the review team, will lead to greater engagement and ownership from all involved.**

COMMUNICATION

Academic staff confirmed, in the supporting materials as well as in interviews during the main review visit, that the university structure was overly complex and that responsibilities were often unclear, pointing out that UL's strength has for a long time been "people rather than procedures, documents and structures". The review team noted that there is a considerable communication issue at all levels of the university, most evident between the GA and the EC, and between the EC and the university community, although interviewees acknowledged that communication had improved during the Covid-19 crisis. However, they also stated that overall dissatisfaction with communication might originate from a misunderstanding of what it means to communicate effectively: disseminating information (from sender to receiver) appears to be the dominant format for communication in the university, whereas staff and students indicated that reports and minutes are often too long and detailed to be effective. More dialogue-oriented formats and alternative ways

of creating and sharing information (most notably with the help of aggregated data and quantitative information) could be helpful. **The review team recommends that special efforts be undertaken to improve communication where needed as soon as possible, and that the lines of transparent and timely internal communication be strengthened. Identifying the less effective elements of UL's communication architecture might be a productive first step. This will help the university to make progress and implement the Strategic Plan in the difficult times ahead.** The review team also recognises that, for each dialogue to work, all partners need to be willing to work together in defining what information is relevant to whom, which channels to use and in what way.

STRATEGIC PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT

According to the ISER, the Strategic Plan is a primary example of mechanisms that drive QE. The university's strategic development is guided by a strategic plan that spans a five-year period; the current plan covers the period from 2019-24. Each faculty and unit develops its own plan to support the achievements of its overall goals. One major strategic objective centres on the implementation of significant changes to teaching and learning at UL. The ISER promises that UL will develop a high-level implementation plan and performance framework to ensure in the near future that objectives are aligned, targets identified,

and actions completed, yet the ISER does not offer sufficient information on how the monitoring of previous strategic plans was conducted or what role QA played in the process. The Strategic Plan offers suggestions for how success in each objective might be measured, but without targets or exit values it is difficult to assess what the university would regard as a satisfying outcome at the end of the five-year period. UL showcases its revised strategic planning process as an example of QE, emphasising the increased flexibility and stronger links with resource allocation, as well as the role QA plays in the revision; however, the rationale behind the improvements, and the reason why resources are not yet linked to the strategic goals, remain opaque.

During the main review visit, the review team found that the Strategic Plan's implementation process was understandably impeded by the Covid-19 pandemic. But uneven progress in various areas of strategy pre-dated this, and it was unclear during the main review visit whether the Strategic Plan would be enabled to come to full fruition – and how the EC would determine if it was a success. The review team concludes that, in spite of the many good elements of the Strategic Plan, it is too high-level and possibly too ambitious, certainly given the impact of the Covid-19 crisis. **The review team therefore recommends that the university reconsider the Strategic Plan and adapt it in the light of present circumstances before the faculties start to develop their own plans in earnest. The university needs to develop processes for strategic planning that are sufficiently clear and flexible to set a high-level course, while facilitating faculties, schools and departments to build their own aligned plans.**

Given that UL was unable to clarify during the visit how the EC would monitor progress and how the impact of the plan would be observable in qualitative and quantitative terms, **the review team recommends that the university, in adapting the Strategic Plan, ensure that the adapted version is considerably less high level and more detailed than the present one, and that it identify a clear time line with well-defined goals. It is important that measures of success be well articulated and goals clearly prioritised, while maintaining a high level of flexibility and agility in the planning process, as the pandemic continues to disrupt 'business as usual'.**

PROGRAMMES OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING

UL has clearly articulated processes for programme development and approval. Programmes are developed within one of the 28 academic units before proposals are put to faculty boards, where they are considered by academics, and representatives of students and support divisions. Programme proposal templates require proposal documentation to specify the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) level; the volume of credits as a proxy for student workload; the ways in which it is intended that the programme be coordinated and delivered; and the cooperative placement requirements that are mandatory for all UL-taught undergraduate programmes. Proposals approved by each faculty board are forwarded to the Academic Programme Review Committee for approval and then to Academic Council, all of which takes place under Academic Council's committee architecture. Student representatives are involved in programme design and approval through their participation in faculty boards and in Academic Council. This programme approval process allows for the robust scrutiny of proposals and the involvement of significant stakeholders in the development of programmes – here, the involvement of support units is particularly noteworthy. Separately, programme proposals are also received – and must be approved – by the President's Executive Committee. These separate processes mean that there is duplication in UL's QA of programmes of education and training.

The university's Procedures for Processing Programme Proposals state that new programmes must conform to UL's Strategic Plan, but it is unclear how the university ensures this alignment in practice; to go towards remedying this, the programme proposal (and revalidation) template(s) might benefit from a section addressing this. While the university's programme approval procedures are similar to those of many other universities, UL could further improve its alignment with the QCI *Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines* by involving external expertise in the programme development and approval process. This aspect of the programme development and approval process is discussed in further detail below.

The university's admissions procedures are set out in its Handbook of Academic Regulations and Procedures and described for prospective students

on the undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) prospectus websites and other pages. The university updates the handbook annually so that procedures remain fit for purpose. PG research students are admitted once their application to study has been approved by the PG Research Committee. Upon admission, students have an orientation week, which helps them adapt to life at the university. Enhanced pastoral monitoring arrangements for UG students during their first seven weeks indicate a desire to support students in their personal and academic development. The enhanced arrangements include welcome addresses, introductory guidance on programmes, peer guidance from existing students about studying at UL, formal enrolment, health and wellbeing support, and study skills support. The university reviews its admissions data annually.

The Business Intelligence Systems unit provides students' progression data and completion rates for the purposes of both internal and external reporting; at a programme level, this data is monitored through annual programme monitoring, and for PG research (PGR) students, at research review panels. Informally, academic units monitor students' engagement through their use of the virtual learning environment, which enables the identification of students that may need more support.

The university recognises student achievements through its assessment procedures, which are described below under 'Assessment of learners'. UL also has a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policy, which commits to recognising prior accreditation, certified learning, and other ways that students can demonstrate the prior achievement of competencies for the awarding of credit and exemptions to parts of programmes, as appropriate. Programme directors assess applications, and can request interviews with prospective students, for the purpose of RPL. The university actively meets with admissions staff from other universities to consider recognition criteria and uses the National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC) to determine the equivalence of overseas qualifications.

The university principally reviews programmes annually through a robust programme review process. The Annual Programme Review Committee (APRC) evaluates the annual reviews, as do faculty boards and programme boards. The Academic Programme

Review Policy envisages that reviews consider enrolments, student performance, completion rates, student survey data, and external examiner reports; in practice, the sample seen by the review team features little data on, for instance, student success and retention, and, additionally, there is scope within the process for further enhancement by including consideration of equality and diversity data. The lack of data included in the reports seen by the review team suggests that those engaged in programme reviews might not be receiving the programme data reports that they should expect. Each programme's annual report informs each faculty's annual report to APRC, and programme and faculty reports are approved, sometimes with conditions, at Academic Council, which then develops a university action plan. A 'Minor Changes Process' may arise from the Annual Programme Review process, with changes formally approved at Academic Council. The university has a periodic review process for academic units but does not periodically review programmes beyond the process described above.

The ISER describes the process for approving or revising programmes as rigorous, whereas staff describe the process as tedious, and difficult to understand and operate. Although the review team commends UL for the thorough design of these processes, it has questions concerning their effectiveness, particularly given the staff's negative views of the process. The review team notes that the processes are long, document-heavy and complex, and that they do not discriminate between major or minor revisions. **The review team recommends that the university modify the programme approval and revision processes with the goal of inspiring more enthusiasm among staff, although it is acknowledged that designing a lighter and more inspiring process should not be at the expense of its thoroughness. Moreover, the review team recommends that the university devolve minor revisions to faculty boards, with the aim of making the process leaner and of delegating responsibility to the front line.**

UL has plans to conduct five-yearly reviews using external academics, employer and graduates, reporting to APRC, then Academic Council. This is a process that it is continuing to develop. The university has not initiated its mechanisms for periodically reviewing programmes, which means that, currently,

the university does not have any mechanisms for reviewing programmes that involve third parties, as expected by *QQI Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines*. However, the review team did hear an isolated example of a programme being reviewed with the input of employers, as well as confirmation of how useful this had been, which suggests there is some good practice to be shared. Meetings with academic staff revealed an appreciation for what the QA systems aim to do, but there was frustration with its overlap with the QA reporting required by various accreditation bodies. There was also a sense of frustration with the mechanisms for obtaining programme and student data for evaluation purposes, the timeliness of receipt of such data, and with approval processes for programme modification (including a desire to see the latter devolved).

In terms of monitoring, the university has mechanisms for responding to exit surveys, where patterns in particular programmes are revealed over a number of years, and escalation reports sent to the VPAASE. Over 80 programmes have professional accreditation and are subject to monitoring and review by the relevant professional bodies.

Research degrees are awarded by Academic Council in accordance with procedures specified in the Handbook of Academic Regulations and Procedures. The university has assessed its compliance with *QQI Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Research Degree Programmes*, and this exercise resulted in a QIP.

STAFF RECRUITMENT, MANAGEMENT, AND DEVELOPMENT

RECRUITMENT

Recruitment is at the heart of the quality policy of any research university. UL operates extensive recruitment policies and procedures for research scholars, research staff, and academic staff. These procedures prescribe precisely the operating policies of recruitment and hiring. They give greater consideration to the highest academic ranks, but there are also extensive procedures regarding junior staff. The protocols prescribe a lengthy process, which presumably takes a long time, and consumes a considerable amount of staff energy. This could hinder the organisation in swiftly and efficiently filling vacancies.

In the procedures, and at all levels of recruiting and hiring, there is a strong emphasis on academic quality, and all academic staff are expected to shoulder considerable teaching obligations. UL encourages scholarly activity to strengthen the link between education and research, fostering a research-led educational ethos at all levels of the curriculum. But it was unclear to the review team how core elements of the teaching strategy, such as engaged learning, inform the recruitment procedure. The same is true of the university's aim to enhance digital teaching, embedded in a high-tech learning environment, which is a cornerstone of the Academic Transformation Initiative. Both of these require a completely different pedagogy compared to traditional teaching, and, in conversations with staff and students, the review team found that considerably more expertise is needed in this respect. Thus, it appears that the university needs to recruit not only for academic competence, but also for the specific skills stipulated by the Academic Transformation Initiative, in which many intended changes to teaching and learning are described, in order to successfully realise the strategy. The review team noted that, in another important area of UL's strategy, internationalisation, recruitment is aligned with the achievement of this goal, since consistent attention is given to recruiting the international staff needed to create a truly international environment.

The reduction in state funding of Irish universities following the financial crisis of 2008-11 has had a significant impact on the number of research staff employed by UL. The student-staff ratio is 21.4:1 which is significantly higher than the OECD average of 17.3:1, but similar to the Irish average of 20.8:1. More importantly, given the limited resources available, the university has until recently found it difficult to attract talented researchers from outside of UL in many areas, which could pose a problem for the future development of its research programmes.

MANAGEMENT

UL has a Performance Development Review System (PDRS), which includes annual reviews that aim to ensure that individual staff members reflect on their performance, receive feedback and improve where necessary. The system is comprehensive and, on paper, a powerful instrument to discuss both ambitions and possibilities.



The review team noted that, before the implementation of the PDRS, reviews of staff performance varied considerably between faculties and schools. Consequently, UL has a weak overview of staff performance, and this will remain the case for the foreseeable future, since PDRS will not operate at full scale for some time, and it is unclear when a full-scale online system will be in place. The review team found that initial experiences of the PDRS were positive and junior staff in particular welcomed the opportunity to express wishes and thoughts regarding progression and performance. There is some urgency here since the review team noted dissatisfaction among senior staff in particular regarding progression and promotion.

The review team notes that, on paper, there is balance in the way that research, teaching and services are periodically reviewed. If done well, this guarantees both that each staff member has a balanced workload, and that teaching and research are evenly divided among staff in each department, with good oversight from heads of department, who are responsible for the PDRS reviews. The further implementation of PDRS could be very helpful, since senior staff especially noted the necessity for improvement. Academic role profiles clearly articulate the importance of teaching, and teaching portfolios

form a core element of academic staff progression and promotion. Teaching activity is a prominent element of the academic workload allocation policy and automatically forms a core part of UL's PDRS as applied to academic staff. It is unclear how well PDRS will perform in this respect. However, the review team finds that the PDRS is well articulated and designed, and agrees that, if properly used, it could form a powerful tool to manage both the quality of teaching, and the wellbeing and satisfaction of the staff. The review team emphasises that this is necessary, since during the main review visit it was evident that staff, while the whole very committed and loyal, were not entirely satisfied with either the effectivity of workload allocation or the current performance review process.

It is remarkable that the PDRS does not invite the views of relevant research directors as part of the reviews of research staff, thus missing the opportunity to assess research performance in a more holistic way. In this context, the review team welcomes the piloting of this approach in the Bernal Institute to overcome this potential shortcoming. It is also remarkable that in a well-organised university such as UL, in which there are extensive protocols for many processes, there is not a regular staff satisfaction survey. Such a survey, if carried out

properly and regularly, would enable managers to improve areas of evident weakness, identify good practice, and keep track of the departments that are not performing well and need more support. **The review team recommends that the university put in place a regular staff survey in order to improve on the performance of staff and thus quality. Such a survey would give timely signals of dissatisfaction to senior management, pointing to the issues on which policy and strategy should be focused.**

Any quality policy is dependent on the way in which an organisation is able to handle the issue of underperforming staff, both in teaching and research. Although there is a myriad of protocols and procedures, there is little evidence of how successful UL has been in this notoriously difficult area of staff management. The review team expects that the PDRS could also be helpful in this respect.

DEVELOPMENT

According to the Strategic Plan, teaching-related activities form a core determinant of resource allocation to academic units. Indeed, UL invested significant resources into its Centre for Transformative Learning (CTL) (formerly, Centre for Teaching and Learning), and offers, for example, annual teaching excellence awards.

The services offered by the CTL cover an impressive range of activities and, at first glance, place the teaching staff in a good position to continuously improve and develop. The review team was impressed with the CTL's activities. For example, the review team notes with approval the voluntary teaching evaluation services that collate student feedback on individual members of staff and provide this as quantitative and qualitative data. Teachers can compare their scores against local staff averages. Heads of department can see their aggregated departmental data.

The CTL seems to be a cornerstone in the university's strategy to realise a central role for high quality teaching. The CTL was reviewed in 2018 and newly positioned in 2019. This seems to be timely, given the ambitious changes in the teaching programmes envisaged by UL for the near future. The review team notes with approval this consistent policy in which strategy and changing practice go hand-in-hand.

However, the review team noted with some concern that, despite its repositioning – and compared with other services on offer – the CTL is not as strongly equipped to address two central elements of UL's ambition. The first is to support the emphasis in UL's strategy on the creation of research-led teaching, which leads simultaneously to engaged learning. The pedagogy of such a programme is completely different from traditional face-to-face teaching and requires considerable changes in the competencies of staff. In this respect, only limited support appears to be provided by the current selection of CTL modules on offer.

The second element, which may be of even more concern for the near future, is UL's need to develop a more blended programme of support containing a considerable amount of online learning. This also requires a different set of skills and pedagogy compared to traditional teaching. A significant proportion of staff have little experience in online teaching and have negative feelings about the move to blended learning. It is therefore urgent that UL staff receive training in this area and are provided with access to modules to support them in adapting easily to these new ways of teaching, without compromising quality. Clearly, the newly established Learning Technology Forum (LTF) plays a crucial role here, but, at present, the unit functions primarily as a best practice forum to connect interested staff. In view of the disruptive speed with which international higher education is being forced to adopt blended and online teaching, and in view of the Covid-19 pandemic, **the review team recommends that UL rapidly build further on the promising first steps taken in 2019 with the establishment of the Centre for Transformative Learning, both by making the necessary investments and stimulating these new technologies.**

Overall, the review team found that there were sufficient facilities for continuous professional development, although, in practice, opportunities for teaching staff with more precarious contracts are limited. In addition, interviews revealed that, for staff in general, the capacity of the CTL has at times in the past been limited. This supports the notion that the CTL should be strengthened in order to play a central role in the further development of UL's teaching staff.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The review team notes with admiration that UL has dealt with the Covid-19 crisis with speed and efficiency. In this crisis, UL has shown itself to be a well-organised, strong organisation that delivers teaching programmes of consistent quality. Yet, the question is whether UL has sufficient IT resources to respond to the greatly increased demand for digital delivery of modules, and – perhaps even more critically – whether it has the capacity to realise its learning goals through the use of online or blended teaching instead of face-to-face teaching. As already noted, a significant proportion of staff have little experience of online teaching and many have negative feelings about the move to blended learning.

UL comprises four faculties and 28 academic departments and schools. Overall responsibility for the academic faculties resides with the faculty executive deans, who report to the President and the VPAASE. Each dean is supported in their role by heads of academic schools/departments, a faculty manager, an assistant dean of academic affairs, an assistant dean of research and an assistant dean of internationalisation. All academic members of a faculty, together with student representatives, comprise the faculty board, which meets regularly to discuss academic matters, such as proposals for new programmes.

The review team found it a great pleasure to talk to staff and students and it met many committed members of staff with a great understanding of teaching and of the needs of students. As mentioned above, staff perceive the university's strength to be its people more than its procedures. This finding supports the review team's commendation of the university's inclusive community.

UL follows a well-established and well-documented procedure for approving new programmes. UL claims that active and collaborative learning forms a central element of its teaching, learning and assessment strategy. The review team noted that, in practice, this ambition sometimes appears to be a struggle, certainly for those staff who are not well trained in this respect.

Academic staff are required to provide details to the students of the learning outcomes associated with their modules and programmes, indicative grade

descriptors corresponding to each grade, the criteria on which assessment is to be based, the minimum performance standard, the weighting allocated to each assessment instrument associated with the module and repeat assessment instrument(s) associated with the module. The review team considers that the information flow in this respect is adequate.

The ISER describes the annual monitoring process, which mostly deals with progression, and is thus based on a different set of criteria from those mentioned above. **The annual monitoring process has a clear scope and leadership, and the Associate Vice-President Academic Affairs is unambiguously responsible. As an instrument to detect flaws and areas for improvement, the annual review process is considered to be effective. The review team commends UL for implementing the annual review process relatively recently (in 2017/18) after an initial pilot.** It is less clear to the review team how planned actions to improve programmes or modules are subsequently followed up. However, the review team regards annual and periodic reviews as a significant improvement in closing the loop in quality assurance, since it also takes student feedback into account and formalises planned improvements by collating them in a university action plan.

Both programme design and annual review form the backbone of what one could describe as the 'top-down loop of quality assurance'. The review team considers this is well established through the clear rules laid down by Academic Council and approved by GA and associated procedures. However, the review team concurs with the view expressed in the ISER that procedures are top-heavy. **The review team recommends that UL revise the processes involved in programme design and annual review in order to identify the critical steps and remove the less important ones.** At the same time, ways could be explored to better support participation in the processes – for instance, using more digital methods facilitating responses, and offering assistance in design. This could enhance the staff's enthusiasm to continuously improve teaching programmes.

Overall, the whole process of quality assurance lacks adequate IT systems to support these complex QA processes. Even if these processes were slimmed down considerably, the urgent need for a more data-

driven management system would remain. The review team considers this is at the core of many of the university's problems, making procedures slow and inefficient, and sometimes even ineffective.

In addition to the top-down loop of quality assurance, a bottom-up one is needed to close the process. The latter involves gathering feedback and using it for improvement of the teaching programmes. UL has established an extensive set of relevant rules and practices. The annual monitoring process is a great improvement in this context, strengthening the QA process significantly, although, as noted above, it mostly monitors progression. The review team is, however, of the opinion that the weakest link in QA processes is student feedback.

Overall, most students are satisfied with the quality of their programme, and there is a variety of mechanisms through which students can provide feedback. However, surveys of domestic and international students and focus groups with students highlighted issues with both the feedback that students provide on their experience, and the feedback that students receive from lecturers. Students do not feel that their feedback is valued, and do not always have sufficient opportunities to provide it. In terms of the feedback they receive, many of the students that the review team met found that feedback on their academic work did not enhance their understanding. Students told the review team that they do not receive detailed comments on their work and that feedback is not prompt. One of the key



aims of UL teaching is to provide detailed academic feedback to the students, and this is crucial to ensure active and collaborative learning. Staff feel there is an issue with time and resourcing, both of which are essential to ensure that this central UL ambition and fundamental learning principle is realised. Moreover, staff highlighted that students need to be made aware of how the feedback they give informs teaching practice. The review team feels that this requires more attention, certainly given UL's ambition to gradually shift to more online learning, and to offer more blended teaching programmes. In these types of programmes, it is notoriously difficult to give sufficient personalised feedback to students. This is all the more urgent as the Covid-19 crisis might force UL to devise more blended modules at short notice.

The review team notes that UL recognises the issues in respect of student feedback and has worked hard to improve both its response rates and the impact of the feedback on the curriculum. The ISER notes that there may be survey fatigue among students, which has been identified at many other institutions. But here, as with the top-down loop of quality assurance, the dictum might be that 'less is more', and fewer, but very strategically chosen, surveys might generate a similar or even a better response. In meetings with the students, the review team was surprised to find another potential reason for the low response to surveys. Some students claimed that the surveys were not always anonymous and, in many cases, certainly in smaller groups, students were concerned that responses could be traced back to them. It is also surprising that students identified innovative practices to improve student response in some faculties but suggested that these were not adequately rolled out across the university. Moreover, it became clear in meetings that it is not general practice to identify at the start of a programme the improvements made based upon the surveys of the previous year (the 'you ask – we do' principle), which, in students' view, considerably lowered the incentive to respond to surveys, since they lacked confidence that their feedback would be used. From discussions with staff and students, it became clear that social media were rather systematically used as an informal feedback mechanism. The team suggests that UL should be transparent about this and develop clear policies in this respect.

Interviews with staff during the main review visit revealed that staff feel that they need more help and support in cases of negative feedback. Staff also suggested that commentary from students (potentially through focus groups), along with student surveys, can make surveys of teaching more meaningful. The review team notes that UL is aware of these problems and that they are highlighted in the ISER. The review team reiterates that it is important and urgent that the university find solutions to these issues.

Given the central position that student surveys have in the overall QA system, **the review team recommends that UL continue work with students to close the loop by improving student response rates, using all means possible, including new channels of communication, to renew enthusiasm for the process. In particular, the review team recommends that UL pilot, identify and follow up best practice in improving student feedback together with students, and, at the same time, work with students on how to address the feedback, including consistently reporting back to students on how their feedback is used and which changes have resulted from it.**

ASSESSMENT OF LEARNERS

The university's Handbook of Academic Regulations and Procedures sets out comprehensive procedures for academic assessment of taught programmes and the necessary underlying principles, broadly aligned to the *QQI Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines*. The handbook informs the conduct of assessment at all stages, from design through to awarding. The university recognises where students have met learning outcomes by awarding credits that are accrued until students are awarded a particular qualification. Most programmes are designed to include continuous summative assessment so that students accrue credits for their learning throughout the academic year. In addition, the university uses formative assessment to support students in their academic development.

The university clearly articulates the roles and responsibilities of those involved in assessment processes. Module leaders design the assessments and are responsible for marking and presenting marks to the relevant faculty examination board. These boards report to the Academic Council Grading

Committee (ACGC), which is accountable to Academic Council. The ACGC has processes for challenging marks, can amend marks, and ultimately approves them. The marks of finalists are considered by the Academic Council Examination Board, which determines students' classifications before reporting these to Academic Council, in order to ratify awards. The university also has procedures for addressing academic misconduct through a code of conduct and associated procedures.

Notwithstanding these appropriate arrangements for summative assessment and awarding, the assessment process has room for improvement. Student survey data shows that 67% of students found little or no connection with their assessments as a gauge of their academic progress, and only 45% received regular feedback on completed assessment. This suggests a systematic weakness in the academic feedback given to students, despite its fundamental role in their learning. The Handbook of Academic Regulations and Procedures does not specify how quickly work should be marked and feedback given to students, but, focusing on quantitative feedback only, the handbook does stipulate that modular grades should be released to students only after approval by ACGC; provisional grades are not provided. Meetings with students revealed that the timeliness of feedback on coursework was highly variable, but that some students were assisted in understanding what was expected of them through sight of the marking criteria and assessment rubrics. The review team heard that students are able to see their marked scripts and to ask questions on designated 'open days', which, while open and transparent, leaves some room for improvement in terms of proactively providing academic feedback to students.

The university's appeals procedures for students on taught academic programmes and research programmes leave room for improvement. The procedure for students on taught academic programmes allows students to request a recheck of their grades, but the procedure's accessibility is limited by a fee that must be paid, refundable if the recheck is successful. Consequently, the appeals process might not be fair for some students, which is contrary to QCI *Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines*, and the review team heard that the students' union had already raised concerns with the university deans about this. Further, the short time

period of two weeks in which students can request grade rechecks or appeals limits the accessibility of the process; students told the review team that, by the time they had asked for and received a disaggregated breakdown of their grades, this time limit had elapsed and they were unable to ask for their grades to be rechecked. Finally, a further limit on the accessibility of academic appeals is represented by the bar to students requesting a recheck of grades where the 'original assessment is not available'. This is a significant barrier to fair assessment, particularly if the unavailability of the original assessment is not the student's fault. No timescales are given for a regrade or an appeal for students on either taught academic programmes or research programmes, so there is limited evidence to confirm that they take place in a timely manner. **The review team recommends that the university ensure its appeal procedures are accessible, timely and fair to all students.**

The university makes good use of external peers in the assessment process. Module leaders consult external examiners on the appropriateness of assessments set each year, and external examiners can also be involved in viva voces and interviews for theses, and can arrange to meet with students in addition to attending exam boards in line with a role clearly specified in the External Examiner Policy. External examiners submit reports, based on an appropriate template of points for them to consider, to the VPAASE office, which are then considered by Academic Council. The time-limited appointment of external examiners for four years, with the possibility of one year's extension, maintains the independence of external examiners in this assurance process.

In line with its Quality Policy, the university uses external examiners to invite feedback not just on the appropriateness of assessment, but on the conduct and administration of the external examiner appointment and process itself. The vast majority of external examiners consider the process to be robust and efficiently administered. In 2019, the university added a question to the external examiner report templates inviting comments on the external examiner process – a sign of its willingness to gather data to continuously evaluate and improve. The significance of external examining is recognised at senior levels, demonstrated by the university's agreement with the Higher Education Authority to increase by 20% its number of international external examiners.

The university's arrangements for the assessment of research degrees are equally robust and diligently specified in the Academic Handbook. All doctoral students must attend research review panels and ultimately prepare a thesis and participate in a viva voce. The university uses external examiners appropriately in the award of research degrees, including one external with relevant experience on each examination panel. This external member must not be appointed from one of the university's linked partners. Like internal examiners, each external examiner must prepare a pre-viva report on the thesis and an exam report upon participating in the viva voce that explicitly discusses whether the research meets the doctoral criteria.

Complaints from students can provide a valuable source of feedback, and students at the university can raise a complaint through an informal or a formal process; any student unhappy with the outcome can appeal. However, similar to the issue in respect of student feedback noted above, students raising a complaint are unable to do so anonymously. Students of a linked provider that have a complaint must exhaust both the procedure of the linked provider and the university before they can apply to the Ombudsman, which may lead to a lengthy process. There are no timescales associated with the informal stage of the complaints process and the process, if fully exhausted, can take a long time – up to 18 weeks if the complaint has originated within the university itself, and longer if the complaint originates at a linked provider. Research students that have already submitted their theses are unable to submit complaints about their supervision, although there is no mention of this limitation in the Student Complaints Policy and Procedure. The university asserts that this remains appropriate, although the review team does not agree with the university's justification, since the policy curtails students' entitlement to complain at any stage in their university experience. It also limits the benefit the university could gain from student complaints.

SUPPORTS FOR LEARNERS

UL provides a range of supports for learners including academic support centres, health and career supports and a chaplaincy, as well as a programme to assist students in their transition to tertiary education.

Overall, supports for learners attract positive feedback from students. The Student Exit Survey showed that over the period of 2013-2018 facilities and welfare supports were rated highly. General positivity was reflected in meetings with students and it was evident from staff that support services worked well and collaboratively. However, the student survey highlighted a range of areas for improvement, including career advice, IT and academic support. The health centre is also an area of concern for students, who feel that more space is required. This is particularly important in the context of Covid-19.

Among international students, the iGraduate survey shows that international students have a positive impression of UL, with ratings that compare favourably with other institutions, both nationally and internationally. The careers service and international office received particularly high praise, which is reflected in awards received commending their work. UL demonstrates broad compliance with the *Code of Practice for Provision of Programmes of Education and Training to International Learners* in a self-audit document. However, students are relatively dissatisfied with the 'buddy system' which is not reflected in the self-audit. In addition, a large contingent of international students reported that they were unsure how to access several important services such as 'personal tutors' and 'student academic advisory' services. Nonetheless, **the review team commends UL for providing learner supports that are collaborative, comprehensive and ambitious.**

Part of the university's Strategic Plan is to improve access for non-traditional students. There is an Access and Widening Participation Policy; however, it is almost a decade old and – as acknowledged in the ISER – requires review. There is a range of supports available for non-traditional students. The Access, Disability Support Services and Mature Students' Office all promote and provide support. Additionally, UL provides – and is further developing – pre-entry activities, such as study clubs and mentoring programmes. These offer an avenue for improving the recruitment of students from disadvantaged groups, in which UL has historically underperformed. However, many of these access programmes are in receipt of external funding and therefore may not be sustainable in the long term. More sustainable funding should be sought for these programmes.

In relation to PGR students, UL aims to have publications accepted in advance of thesis submission for PhDs; however, this requires intensive supports that are not currently available in UL. A nascent PhD transformation project is in motion to address this. Poor supervision was highlighted as an area that had occasionally led to student withdrawal and there is no formal process for assessing the quality of supervision. The university should consider addressing this.

Covid-19 presents large challenges in terms of support for learners. This is reflected in survey results: a significant proportion of staff have little experience in online teaching and have negative feelings about the move to blended learning. The review team's interviews revealed issues with the IT infrastructure and addressing this needs to be a higher priority for UL. In addition, a significant minority of students used shared devices and spaces for their learning, and some describe their internet access as slow. These issues are likely to be particularly acute for disadvantaged groups and detrimental to their student experience.

INFORMATION AND DATA MANAGEMENT

The ISER refers to past shortcomings in the areas of finance, human resources and IT processes including the university's Student Records System. The university has provided a high-level summary of the ongoing programme of work agreed in response to those issues. Digital Transformation is one of four key themes identified in the university's Strategic Plan, but it is not discussed in the ISER section on Financial, Human Resources and IT Processes.

In the course of its quality assurance programme, the university generates large amounts of data, including assessment and survey data. The amount of management data generated and reported by the university is commendable. There is a high reliance on survey data with variable data quality, and it is possibly an underused resource at present. It may be possible to enhance data-driven quality improvement with lower volumes of higher quality data. The *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG 2015) note that information on the career paths of graduates is of interest. More detailed analysis in this area may be a valuable resource for the university.



The university has supplied a commendable amount of detail on the generation of data, but less information is available on the analysis of data and on the actions agreed in response to analysis. The university has access to statistical support and the expertise of the Kemmy Business School. There is perhaps an opportunity to exploit expertise in these areas: in view of the variable response rates and format of responses for surveys, there is an opportunity to look holistically at the data generated to determine if the current data quality/availability is fit for purpose and/or if the data analytics in place are appropriate. The Records Management and Retention Policy is impressive and commendable.

The perception of the review team is that the university sees the IT function as an operational and support function rather than a strategic asset. There is no designated chief information officer, and the role is fulfilled by the Deputy President, Chief Operations Officer & Registrar. There are many challenges facing UL's IT function and the Covid-19 pandemic undoubtedly makes the response to such challenges more urgent. Limited funding has clearly been a factor in delaying investment in improved IT and data services, and the necessity to update the IT strategy is also relevant. The sense that strategy for support services is seen as secondary to academic strategy should no longer be applied to IT. Strategic investment in appropriate IT systems should be elevated and accelerated to a primary goal for two main reasons: i) the Covid-19 pandemic has greatly increased the university's reliance on IT, and; ii) the lack of online systems is limiting the modernisation of business processes.

It was noted by the review team that there are multiple challenges associated with timely access to data by decision makers, the quality and usability of data, and documented follow-up actions. Many laborious data generation and curation activities are managed at a faculty/school/department level. However, the reliance on a local, versus a centralised, approach has a number of important consequences, one of which is that the university does not have central access to the status of its PDRS system, including staff training records, and securing access requires time-consuming calls and emails to recover the data manually. Heavy administrative workloads noted by some academic staff could also be addressed by IT tools and support for business processes that improve efficiency.

IT SECURITY

The review team was informed that the university takes IT security threats seriously, but that the challenge is complex. One approach cited is the raising of awareness within the user community, in particular with respect to privacy and General Data Protection Regulations. The IT Department has enjoyed ISO 9001 certification for the past 15 years. This is commendable but it does not give independent assurance of the security and integrity of IT systems compared with a dedicated standard (e.g. ISO 27001). The university is aware of the requirements of ISO 27001 and the challenges that full compliance would entail. For the present, it has elected to pursue its own measures and KPIs to protect its systems and data.

PUBLIC INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

The university's Marketing and Communications Division provides core learner information on academic programmes in UG and PG prospectuses which specify the NFQ level and titles of awards. Information about education provision is also prepared for specific audiences, such as international students, disabled students and mature students. Meetings with students revealed that they found such information and programme information accurate and useful. Additionally, the university is committed to providing employability information for each programme and prospectus information lists career prospects by detailing the typical careers or further study programmes student might enter into following each programme, but it could go further by providing employability statistics.

Students looking to transfer their studies to or from the university would find the Student Academic Programme Transfer Policy and the Recognition of Prior Learning Policy useful. The university also provides information about potential exit awards to students upon enrolment.

UL has a distributed approach to the management of its website with units responsible for their own pages. The QCI *Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines* specify that providers must have policies and procedures to assure the quality of information. While the review team received a mapping document specifying how the university aligns with the Guidelines, the university did not provide an account of how it assures the accuracy and appropriateness

of this information. The university acknowledged that assuring the quality of public information is an area for enhancement and that it needed to clarify responsibilities for the provision and assurance of different types of information.

Notwithstanding this weakness, the university has a demonstrable and noteworthy commitment to transparency. It publishes in full the details of its internal quality procedures and reports of many of its internal audit and quality assurance activities, such as quality review activity – its periodic review of academic and support units. Further, it publishes the action plans that arise from these reviews, making a respectable public commitment to implementing changes and being held to account for them accordingly. It also publishes data on module satisfaction surveys and student exit surveys.

The university acknowledges the need to enhance its communication with students on how it has responded to their feedback and – as noted above – this emerged from some students as a live issue during the review, indicating room for improvement, with student satisfaction ranging between 42 and 51% in this area. Conversely, the review team heard that the School of Medicine informed students of how it was responding to their feedback up to twice a year and so there is evidence of good practice to be shared. The extent of published information from the university's governance processes is limited and minutes of Governing Authority meetings or its sub-committees are unavailable. The university website provided in the Irish language is also more limited (e.g. QSU webpages unavailable). The review team welcomes the university's active planning to revise its website having established development teams and working groups, and its plan to use an online programme database.

OTHER PARTIES INVOLVED IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The university has two linked providers covered by a linked provider framework discussed in an earlier section of this report. The ISER refers to the work of the National Institute of Studies in Education (NISE) (a partnership of the university, Mary Immaculate College and Limerick Institute of Technology), which was established in response to the Sahlberg report (2012) on the provision of teacher education in order

to develop and sustain closer collaboration between partner institutions in the specific area of Education Studies.

The Shannon region has a long history of industrial development and excellence and the university plays an ongoing role in supporting businesses in the region. The university has stated its commitment to aligning its mission with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Local “third mission” activities are growing and there is a Government commitment to supporting local development via existing institutions. Limerick as a city has experienced impressive socio-economic development in recent years, but challenges remain. The impact of the university on the regional social environment merits further ongoing analysis. While it might be argued that new developments, including the approval for technological universities in the region and the Atlantic University Alliance, may supersede the need for the Shannon Consortium, the statement in the ISER that withdrawal from the Consortium “will have very little impact” was not supported by many of those interviewed during the review. The recent establishment of the Munster Technological University was not mentioned in the ISER and the university may wish to seriously consider the implications of the possible establishment of technological universities in the region, including opportunities arising from this development.

SELF-EVALUATION, MONITORING, AND REVIEW

INTERNAL REVIEWS

Internal quality reviews are conducted in a seven-year-cycle and framed by national legislation. UL is currently in its third cycle, which – according to the ISER – incorporates exercises that assess the extent to which the university complies with QQI *Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines* and a thematic review of cornerstone institutional QA processes. The Executive Committee (EC) approves the review process and schedule of each review and considers the review report. The EC's Quality Committee oversees the Quality Improvement Plan resulting from the review. Overarching issues are analysed and synthesised, showing first attempts of meta-evaluation.

UL makes use of benchmarking against national and international institutions in their internal review



cycles of faculties, academic units and support units, though the ISER does not provide any details on how it selects these or how it conducts the benchmarking exercises. Interviews informed the review team that the details of such benchmarking exercises are mostly left to the reviewed units, signalling the significant degree of autonomy units have in pursuing their own attempts at effective QA.

The university regularly monitors the internal review process via different mechanisms such as feedback from reviewers and the reviewed units, or post-review analysis. The ISER does not clearly explain all mechanisms and their impact, but the feedback surveys seem to play the biggest role. The ISER also gives examples of enhancements undertaken in the past based on such mechanisms. The majority of reviewers surveyed between 2015 and 2018 found the reviews (very) effective, with the share of very satisfied reviewers increasing over time. Overall, the university seems highly satisfied with its internal quality reviews. On the other hand, most feedback surveys the review team has examined allow only for limited learning, due to the way they are constructed.

PROGRAMME LEVEL REVIEWS

On a programme level, until 2016, the university evaluated programmes as part of the departmental quality review. Currently, UL's policy foresees that all taught programmes will be monitored annually by the programme boards and reviewed at least once every five years. The monitoring is supported by standardised templates and feedback data, and enhancement plans are drawn up annually at faculty level, and later aggregated on the institutional level, based on the findings of the course boards. The ISER says little of previous experiences of the process or its overall effectiveness, and interviewees during the main review visit had little to add on the topic.

The university has yet to implement new programme-level reviews, though it conducted pilots between 2016 and 2019. Academic Council adopted the review policy document in 2018. There is no information yet on the relationship between unit reviews and programme reviews, or on the follow-up phases beyond the action and enhancement plans.

QUALITY MONITORING

Quality monitoring is, in many ways, still in its infancy, and mostly focuses on quality improvement plans and survey data. In addition, systematic and regular surveys are mostly restricted to students, with some key perspectives (e.g. staff) surveyed irregularly and on an ad hoc basis, and other perspectives (e.g. employers, external stakeholders) surveyed only on the level of individual units and with limited scope. The monitoring of important parts of system-generated data (e.g. student retention, learning analytics) is hampered by the lack of suitable databases and IT infrastructure. **The review team acknowledges the recent developments towards building management and quality dashboards, yet recommends that the university make an even stronger effort to identify key performance indicators/key information for decision makers and actors on different levels, and further recommends that the university create the necessary database (potentially also through revised methodologies of obtaining and analysing data generated throughout the student life cycle or related to the university's different core processes) and IT (infra)structures and processes.**

RESEARCH

Headline data on research funding and partnerships are quite impressive, with research awards exceeding €247m during the four years from 2014/15 to 2018/19. The creation of 48 innovation partnerships and spinout companies signals an enterprising culture prepared to explore the commercial application of UL research. While the above inputs are impressive, there is little analysis in the ISER of research performance in terms of the quality of outputs. The number of research degrees awarded is modest and the university describes student numbers as “steady”. Research degree graduates depend on performance against several strategic goals, notably (though not exclusively) Research Excellence and Transforming Education. The feedback gathered from research students is less comprehensive than that gathered from UG students.

The university is commended for putting in place systems to support and guide the conduct of research that is of high quality and integrity. Research staff have access to appropriate training, policies and

guidelines. Furthermore, research staff can avail of facilities to record their publication output. However, the ISER does not contain a critical analysis of the effectiveness of available resources to support research quality. There is clearly pressure on early career researchers to devote time to writing research grant proposals, which leads to less time to develop teaching skills. The amount of research seed funding available to early career researchers is limited and may merit further attention in association with other universities and government agencies.

In the absence of structure diagrams, it is difficult to navigate the university's research infrastructure. At the level of the three research institutes, the strategic missions and research programmes are clear. It is less clear why there are 42 research centres and four research units. This question was not resolved during the review. Equally, it was not evident that measures are in place to manage research quality consistently in many different entities. There is an opportunity to put in place a quality monitoring system to oversee and provide fair and transparent benchmarking across different faculties/departments/institutes/centres/units. Although there is an institutional research strategy, it is evident that it is left to each unit/centre/institute to set its own strategic direction. During review discussions, the biggest challenge reported by staff was complexity and lack of a “joined-up” or “mapped” approach.

As the ISER points out, there is a challenge to measure and compare research outputs across different disciplines. A new benchmarking process would address this challenge. The ISER points to the future review of the quality of UL research institutes and faculties. There appears to be little planned at present to address research quality enhancement. With the exception of the Bernal Institute, there is little evidence currently of a determinative research strategy. The current approach to research quality is reactive rather than proactive: funding bodies demand and receive regular progress reports. A data-driven process to implement quality enhancement in research is hampered by the absence of a recent overall research peer review, the general lack of quality data on research, lack of connectivity between the PDRS and research output and long delays between obtaining data on research quality and taking follow-up action.

Objective 2 – Quality Enhancement

OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF QUALITY ENHANCEMENT

The university has succeeded in establishing a detailed quality assurance process and has policies in place for quality enhancement. On paper, an extensive number of principles underpin quality enhancement. UL has a Performance Development Review System (PDRS), which includes annual reviews that aim to ensure that individual staff members reflect on their performance, receive feedback and improve where necessary. The system is comprehensive and, on paper, a powerful instrument to discuss both ambitions and possibilities.

The review team notes that the university is trying to establish a strict follow-up process to monitor its Strategic Plan, as well as the way in which resource allocation is used to maximise quality and thus academic reputation. The aim to establish a quality ethos is clearly known to all staff and widely visible in all processes and procedures. In particular, the way most processes are described in detail, and the fact that there is a related procedure available for almost any process, gives the impression of a very well-regulated institution.

The review team suggests that the widely spread awareness of quality leaves room to counterbalance the top-down quality enhancement that is currently in place, and gradually shift towards a process that is more of a two-way, iterative one. In this context, the tailoring of the strategic planning process to a two-way process would be a significant step forward and would give more ownership of the system to faculties, departments and staff. This is supported by the fact that, in discussions with staff at faculty level or lower, the review team noted an attitude indicating that local management was felt to be very much in control and able to find solutions for their local QA and QE issues.

The ISER reflects that quality enhancement is less of a central issue than quality assurance. In many discussions, QA and QE appeared almost uncoupled and treated as different processes, whereas, in reality, they are intrinsically related. Systematic development of QE is needed, although the review team acknowledges that this will likely not be possible

until the current limitations on data are remedied. In order to obtain really meaningful and systematic enhancements, **the review team recommends that the university put in place a much more complete and online data management system that provides data to central administration, as well as faculties and schools.** In meetings with deans and assistant deans there was a consistent complaint about the lack of such data, which was felt to prevent the achievement of an overview of problems and, thus, the implementation of possible solutions.

The weakest link in the quality enhancement system seems to be student evaluation and feedback. The response rates are low and sometimes it was not clear how the feedback leads to changes to programmes. The annual review process would be a good instrument for following up on student feedback and subsequent improvements if it were more geared towards this issue: currently the annual review is mostly directed at student progression and less at consistent follow up of feedback.

EFFECTIVE PROCEDURES

According to the ISER, continually enhancing teaching, research and administrative activities is a core tenet of the university's Quality Policy, and UL has established a variety of procedures to achieve this goal. These are driven by various practical means at institutional and local levels, with responsibilities clearly allocated through the detailed description of all procedures. The university reviews these procedures annually by monitoring the outcome of the procedures and compiling a yearly action plan. The combination of an ambitious strategic plan, underpinned by annual and periodic reviews leading to recommendations and QIPs, which are tightly managed and monitored, could potentially lead to an effective system of overall quality enhancement.

Core to the university's quality strategy is the internal review process, which reflects national guidelines and is designed to have a strong enhancement focus. The internal review process includes the production of a self-assessment document, a peer-led site visit and the QIP, which is generated after the review report and is a key driver for QE across the institution. It is received by the Executive Committee's Quality Sub-

committee, which maintains oversight of progress, and this level of senior engagement with the review process underscores the university's commitment in this area.

Since 2016, the university has placed significantly greater emphasis on the implementation of QIPs, following an internal quality review to address the under-engagement in the QIP process of a particular unit during the second review cycle. The revised quality review guidelines comprehensively set out the post-review process and stress its importance. The QIP template, into which report recommendations are populated as actions, was revised to ensure that the implementation of the QIP is more tightly and transparently managed. In addition, the implementation of QIPs became more evidence-based: units under review must provide supporting evidence, along with the completed QIP, prior to the final QIP implementation review meeting. If the implementation of the QIP is considered inadequate at the final implementation review meeting, the process allows QSU to take various remedial activities, such as requiring the unit to re-engage with the entire review process with external oversight – and this has happened in practice. Collectively, these process modifications have made the assessment of QIP implementation more straightforward and have increased the extent to which QIPs are fully implemented. A result of this enhancement has been that – to date – no reviews in cycle three have required additional interventions. The review team agrees with this shift of emphasis to post-review implementation and finds it to be a significant step forward.

Every individual UL employee bears personal responsibility for the quality of their endeavours. As a corporate entity, the university is responsible for supporting and resourcing those endeavours. However, the multi-layered, multi-faceted and complex nature of the institutional quality architecture renders it difficult to outline individual roles and responsibilities comprehensively. The review team finds that the complexity of institutional-level QA and QE might blur these personal responsibilities.

The complexity of QA and QE is recognised by UL, which emphasises that, although the mechanisms for QA and QE are quite diverse, those with responsibility

for developing and reviewing institutional QA mechanisms should ensure that the mechanisms have clearly documented aims, scope or terms of reference. The list of recommended characteristics that define an effective QA and QE mechanism demonstrates UL's awareness of the complexity. It recommends that clear language be used in, for instance, internal quality reviews, and that clear communication be ensured along the various levels of responsibility, starting with personal responsibilities.

As with the overall strategic planning process, where the university has adopted a more iterative procedure, **the review team recommends that the university strengthen the role of bottom-up feedback by using staff and student feedback, and that the university give this feedback a more prominent position in the quality architecture.**

ALIGNMENT OF INSTITUTION'S MISSION AND TARGETS FOR QUALITY

The Strategic Plan articulates ambitious aspirations together with some measurable outcomes. In the context of alignment with quality targets, the salient elements of the plan are the five goals (Transforming Education, Research Excellence, Internationalisation, City and Region, Operating Model) and four key themes (Transforming Education, Digital Transformation, City and Culture, and Health and Wellbeing).

The Strategic Plan includes the following measurable outcomes:

- 25% increase in student registrations;
- 33% increase in level 9/10 enrolments;
- increased impact of research publications (from 34% to 50% above global citation average);
- 50% increase in spin-outs;
- 100% increase in non-EU student registrations;
- 20% of students spending at least one semester of study abroad;
- maintaining access of non-standard entrants at 30% while increasing overall student registrations;
- improving gender balance at full professorial level from 27% to more than 40% women.



The social and economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic will undoubtedly impact on the attainability of some goals and it is not too early to re-evaluate the targets.

The ISER and most of the supporting documents present an impressive body of well-organised information. However, the trackability of targets and evaluation of alignment across documents is challenging and impaired by the lack of supporting maps/diagrams. Thus, there is a lack of clarity on how the different quality processes fit together. In particular, there is an opportunity for closer alignment between the Strategic Plan, the Mission-Based Performance Compact, the university's Annual Institutional Quality Reports (AIQR) and the ISER. It is expected that goal alignment would also be evidenced in annual planning documents used by operations, faculties, departments, institutes, research centres, and research units. The institutional workload is undoubtedly formidable and will be challenged further by social, political and economic developments. Clear assignment of priorities for action and implementation of a strong project management culture would support decision-making when faced with the challenges of changing

resources and external pressures. The review team was informed during meetings with staff that both the HR function and IT division had obtained accreditation to ISO9001:2015. This is important evidence of the university's commitment to quality; however, neither the ISER, the Institutional Quality Manual nor AIQR 2020 referred to these quality processes. It is desirable to ensure alignment of the different quality processes at the university, to share the learnings from audits with quality personnel in other functions, and to ensure cross referencing in supporting documents, including quality manuals.

The university's AIQRs provide an impressive amount of detail on quality processes, including staff meetings. A greater emphasis in each document on identified quality issues by analysis coupled with agreed follow-up actions would support improved alignment between successive AIQRs and the ISERs designed for periodic review. The tracking of progress against the university's Strategic Plan and annual objectives could be more visible in the AIQR. This would transform the AIQRs into living self-critical progressive documents rather than merely fulfilling a compliance process.



INNOVATIVE AND EFFECTIVE PRACTICES FOR QUALITY ENHANCEMENT

The university's Quality Policy, which was introduced in April 2019, defines Quality Enhancement (QE) as referring to:

'initiatives taken to improve the fitness for purpose, functional excellence and effective implementation of the target activity.'

QE is related to all areas of activity and covers teaching, research and administrative services.

The ISER lists a wide range of mechanisms that contribute to QE and it provides a number of case studies to demonstrate how QE activities have worked in practice.

One feature of the university's overall approach to QE is its commitment to student engagement. This is evidenced not just through the extensive use of surveys, but also through student involvement with major university projects such as the redesign of the Glucksman Library, which was opened in autumn 2018. In that instance, students were involved in evaluating new library furniture and the Library Building Design Committee included two student members. In meetings with students, the review team explored the theme of engagement further and, while there was evidence of considerable survey fatigue, students did recognise that opportunities existed to provide feedback. As noted previously, students expressed some dissatisfaction with the time it took to resolve issues and the communication in response to issues raised by students. However, the library was

highlighted as an example of a service that was very responsive to student feedback.

The review team also learned that the library conducted a biennial survey of users, the outcomes of which are externally benchmarked both regionally and internationally. Through this survey, students had identified recurring issues with availability of study space and the library had introduced changes to resolve this. Subsequent survey outcomes had confirmed the effectiveness of this resolution.

The ISER provides information on the use of student surveys as a means of garnering student opinion and using this to inform improvements. One such example is the annual exit survey of successful PGR students used to identify areas where regulations require review or where it could improve information to this group of students. This is commendable and, while response rates are modest, the information generated by the survey has clearly been beneficial. The university may wish to consider extending the survey, with appropriate amendments, to include current students and those students who withdraw during the year. This will ensure that the widest possible range of views is captured and enable a timely response to any issues encountered by students who are still progressing through their research studies.

As discussed elsewhere in this report, the evolution of a more sophisticated data strategy will be key to enabling the institution to assure itself of the effectiveness of its quality enhancement activities.

Objective 3 – Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression

IMPLEMENTATION OF ACCESS, TRANSFER AND PROGRESSION

UL has evolved commendably detailed policies on access, transfer and progression and communicates these to students through the Student Handbook. Taken together, these present students with appropriate flexibility in terms of non-standard entry, recognition of prior learning, opportunities to change programme and award exit points which recognise achievement.

The review team recommends that the university clarify its objectives in relation to access and diversity, to which the policies already in place are related. In order to satisfy itself of the success of these policies and the achievement of its objectives in this regard, the review team further recommends that the university consider developing an appropriate data set that will allow it to monitor trends in student entry, progression and achievement.

ACCESS

ESG 2015 emphasises the importance of clearly stated access policies that are consistently communicated and applied. More detailed guidance is provided in QQI's *Policy and Criteria for Access, Transfer and Progression in relation to Learners for Providers of Further and Higher Education and Training*.

The university provides its policy on RPL – formal, informal and experiential – on the UG Admissions webpage and in the Student Handbook. In addition, there is a separate guide provided for mature applicants for places on UG programmes that includes a detailed statement of the admission arrangements for each programme and the number of places reserved for mature students. A one-year Mature Student Access Certificate further supports mature student access to the university.

The RPL policy is explicit in terms of the parameters set and students can use it for admission or the award of credit or exemptions, but it does not allow for RPL for complete awards. Exemption may be gained from two-thirds of a programme, with the remaining credit being completed at the final award level. There is a

clear procedure for the application of RPL, although some of the terminology used may be obscure to a new applicant to higher education. The process provides for an appeal stage, which is appropriately independent of the original decision. Data provided by the university indicates that few students make use of RPL for entry to the later years of a programme with advanced standing, with only 27 students having availed of this facility in 2019/20.

In the ISER, the university highlights its commitment to responding to the needs of vulnerable students through its designation as a University of Sanctuary and plans to review how to support the recognition of entry qualifications and appropriate RPL arrangements for refugees who wish to access or return to higher education. There is much to commend in the approach taken by the university in relation to the development and communication of clear RPL policies and its recognition of the need to review the policy and ensure it remains fit for purpose for an ever more diverse demographic.

To work towards widening access, UL plans to appoint a new primary access coordinator.

The review team recommends that the university clarify its objectives in relation to access and diversity and, as part of this planned review of RPL, it should consider what monitoring data would enable it to determine the effectiveness of its access policies in meeting the objectives identified with particular emphasis on social disadvantage and diversity.

TRANSFER

The university has developed a detailed Academic Programme Transfer Policy, which governs the transfer of both internal and external students between programmes. The policy has an appropriate focus on securing overall academic success and the achievement of programme-level learning outcomes. Information on the policy is included in the Student Handbook. The review team found the policy to offer commendable levels of flexibility, recognising that students may wish to change programme or subject area at various points in their learning journey, while ensuring that standards are not consequently compromised. The policy aims to be fair and its

application is only constrained by the availability of places, which is clearly stated in the information provided to students. In such circumstances, students may be advised that they will have to wait until the following year to be considered for admission to their new programme choice. It is noted that some changes to the Central Application Office (CAO) system will allow earlier decisions to be taken on internal transfers.

Student choice is further supported through the introduction of UG common-entry programmes in arts, engineering, science and computer science, which allow students to experience a range of first-year subjects before making a more specific discipline choice in year two.

The university provided statistics to the review team, confirming that the uptake of the flexibility offered by transfer arrangements is between 130-150 students per year, and that this figure has remained fairly static across the last four academic years. While the number of students availing of this opportunity is low in the context of overall student numbers, it does indicate a facility which is used, and no doubt appreciated, by students. Transfer arrangements are a useful option in supporting retention and progression and ensuring that students who may feel their initial programme choice was mistaken do not simply withdraw. **The review team commends the university for its commitment to student choice and the flexibility offered by its transfer policy.**

PROGRESSION

The university supports a range of entry routes that take account of entrants with a non-standard qualification profile. Students have access to awards up to NFQ level 10. Awards are designed to include earlier exit points where appropriate, providing for recognition of student achievement where the main award requirements have not been met.

Progression is governed by the university's academic regulations, which are set out in detail in the Student Handbook. This indicates the various end-of-year grades that may be awarded, and these include allowance for extenuating circumstances due to illness or other personal crises to be taken into account. If a programme team wishes to introduce exceptions to this regulation relating to repeat opportunities, they must seek specific approval from the VPAASE. All such exceptions must be published by the end of week one of the relevant semester on the Academic Registry website.

The university attracts students from a range of backgrounds and recognises the challenges faced by many students in making the transition to higher education. **The review team commends the university for its introduction of a First-Year Support Co-ordinator role to the strong student services team.** It is worth noting that in the five years since the post was established, attrition has decreased from 15% to 10% (for 2018 entrants).

Deficiencies in the arrangements for monitoring retention and progression and, in particular, the lag in data provision, were highlighted as an issue by a number of academic staff and it is therefore difficult for the university to assure itself that the actions it is taking are appropriate.

In order to provide assurance that current structures and policies are effective in supporting the progression and achievement of all students and to support the ongoing review and evaluation of these policies, the review team has made a recommendation above regarding the development of a dataset to monitor trends. As a measure of efficiency, taking into account the additional pressure placed on staff in the management of large numbers of fails and repeats, it may also be helpful to consider progression points at first sit and post the resit period.

Objective 4 – Provision of Programmes to International Learners

The university has a significant international student population: 11% of its students come from overseas and 1200+ visit the university as part of their studies. UL is the university with the largest outbound Erasmus scheme in Ireland. The university plans to increase the number of international students, particularly those studying for research degrees, and internationalisation is one of five goals set out in its Strategic Plan. The UL Internationalisation Strategy aims to have international staff and student enrich the university community, develop international partnerships for research and education, expand industry and cultural engagement, expand engagement with international alumni, and support staff to engage internationally. It established an Internationalisation Challenge Fund in 2017, which has resulted in a number of projects. The review team heard that one project led to the designation of UL as a University of Sanctuary for refugees and asylum seekers, offering a number of financial support packages and with 48 such students in 19/20.

The university operates effective and appropriate procedures to admit students. As noted above, it assesses the suitability of prospective international students by consulting NARIC on the equivalence of their prior qualifications. Admissions are facilitated by over 200 recruitment agents acting on behalf of the university, who are subject to due diligence processes and a code of conduct and assessed by student feedback. Students who are offered places must pay an acceptance fee to secure their places. This is subsequently deducted from their tuition fees. Students who are not native speakers of English must meet pre-determined English language requirements, and further support is available to them from the university's Language Centre, which provides pre-sessional programmes, an International Foundation programme, and daily English classes to non-native speakers for a small administrative fee with which 95% of students are satisfied.

The university has an International Education Division (IED), which provides ample information and support tailored to international students. It issues offer letters and pre-arrival information, including information on orientation, visa and immigration

advice, and notice of attendance requirements. It sends students weekly countdown emails before they arrive, prepares an orientation programme specific to international students, collects students from the airport, and provides cultural adjustment workshops, as well as a buddy system to help students adapt to life in Ireland and at the university. A high number of students, up to 90%, are satisfied with the orientation programme. This general orientation programme is supplemented by an academic induction to the relevant programme. The IED also provides information on scholarships and on the costs of living in Ireland. The IED assures itself that the information it provides to international students is accurate by continually updating this information, but it could strengthen this by involving students in the assessment.

Beyond these induction activities, the university has an International Support Officer to provide pastoral support to international students, although, with 3500 international students enrolled at UL, the review team felt that this role might be challenging for one person. While the university does not provide a hardship fund specifically for international students, international students can apply for financial aid from either the undergraduate or postgraduate financial aid funds. PG international students can also benefit from two study skills modules available on Academic Literacies.

The university has appropriate arrangements to monitor and review the international student experience but could go further in some areas. The IED runs a biennial survey covering pre-arrival and arrival experiences, orientation, accommodation, living experience and academic experience. The university also uses the iGraduate survey. Student survey results show that a high number of students, 87%, would recommend the university to a friend, and that they value in particular the multicultural environment within the university.

In order to raise their concerns and provide feedback, international students are encouraged to use, or take up the role of, class representative, but there is no specific international students' representative role. Meetings with students revealed that they had had positive experiences of admissions and enrolment

and felt welcomed into the university community. They evidently valued the pastoral support available, and, in relation to their studies, appreciated that programmes were accredited by professional statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). International students also expressed some concern that, while they complete surveys and provide feedback, they are rarely informed of changes as a result.

The university broadly aligns with the *QQI Code of Practice for Provision of Programmes of Education and Training to International Learners*, although there is room for its alignment to be strengthened. In the ISER, the university states that it aligns with requirements to provide information on access, internal transfer and progression with reliance on a 2018/19 student handbook that happens to remain on the university website. While this information might be available online, it is not clear how it is drawn to students' attention. The international students who met with the review team, while positive about information given to them, were unfamiliar with procedures for student transfer. Further, the QQI Code requires that information on late payment fees be provided to students. The review team found that, while fee regulations are available on the university's finance webpages, the university could go further to draw this information to the attention of students.

Section

4

Conclusions

Findings

Conclusions

The original site visit for the review of UL was planned for March 2020 but ultimately took place in August 2020. Over the intermediate six-month period, the university went into a highly operational mode due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Travel became impossible, and QQI and UL resolved to hold the review visit online over 6 days and 24 digital sessions.

The review team compliments the flawless technical support it received over these days: there were few, if any, problems due to the excellent preparations of the University of Limerick, in particular, the QSU, and QQI. The review team found the interviews were more than sufficient to obtain a complete picture of the university and secure the relevant information.

The success of interviews was largely attributable to all the people the review team spoke with: management, staff and students were all remarkably at ease and very open in giving their impressions, and in discussing the many strong, and sometimes weak, points of the university, and helpful in explaining some practices to us. The review team acknowledges the frankness and openness displayed in the interviews, and the speed with which the university produced additional requested information. This was a sign of positive engagement with the review process.

The review team notes that the university is going through a difficult time given the challenges posed by changes in leadership and the Covid-19 crisis. However, UL has shown that it is a strong organisation, able to overcome difficulties successfully. This is in particular a compliment to staff and students who are working under considerable pressure and still managing to deliver high quality teaching. Staff are considered to have performed well throughout the crisis.

However well the university performed over the past couple of months, the review team believes there remain some weaknesses in governance. The team noted that there is a communication issue at all levels of the university, most evident between

the Governing Authority and the EC, and the EC and the university community. The review team makes a recommendation on improving communication. This will help the university to make progress and implement the Strategic Plan during the difficult times ahead.

The communication issue was most evident in discussions regarding the university's Strategic Plan, but notable in many other meetings too. The review team regards the Strategic Plan as being of vital importance, given the improvements and changes planned. However, it concludes that, in spite of many good elements in this plan, it is too high-level and possibly too ambitious, certainly given the impact of the Covid-19 crisis. The review team was informed that the implementation plans are incomplete, so the review team makes a recommendation that the university revisit the strategy. The review team also found that the university needs to develop processes for strategic planning that are clear and flexible enough to set a high-level course while facilitating faculties, schools and departments to build their own aligned plans. Moreover, it is essential that an adapted strategic plan be considerably less high level, and more detailed than the present one, identifying a clear timeline with well-defined goals. It is important that measures of success be clearly articulated, and goals prioritised. Flexibility and agility in the planning process will be essential as the pandemic continues to disrupt "normal business".

The review team found it a great pleasure to talk to staff and students. As one member of staff mentioned in an interview: "the strength of the university is in the people, not in the procedures, documents, or structures". The review team met many committed members of staff with a great understanding of teaching and of the needs of students. The review team found that the university forms a vibrant, inclusive community, in which staff and students feel very much at home, and at the same time feel challenged to reach their potential.

The first document considered in a review is the ISER. A good ISER reflects the university and reveals with great clarity its weaknesses and what enhancements are necessary. The review team found the university's approach to developing the ISER commendable. The self-evaluative approach is demonstrated by the many enhancements that were identified during the process.

The core of our mission as a review team was to assess the QA and QE system. The team found some criticisms of the QA and QE process, although it is recognised that, in recent years, many initiatives and developments have been set in motion. However, at some critical key points there is considerable room for improvement, and that results in a number of recommendations about the complexity of the QA systems and the need for clearer lines of accountability.

The review team found the current QA and QE system to be orientated towards external accountability, even to the extent that parts of it are sometimes perceived as not relevant to the university community. Moreover, many staff have the impression that quality means compliance, when it needs to be seen as much more. There is a recommendation that the university reduce the complexity of the QA and QE systems.

The review team concludes that a digital, data-driven management system for QA and QE is essential. It notes that work is in progress, but considers the time now estimated for completion of the system (2.5 years) too long, and there is a recommendation on prioritising the development of data-driven systems.

The review team found that the QA and QE system is mainly 'top-down'. It noted with admiration that, at the level of faculty or school, there is great willingness and capability to assume more responsibilities and so, accordingly, there is a recommendation to secure more balance between top-down/bottom-up approaches.

Overall, there are more improvements needed in the QA and QE system than mentioned here – many of them centre on the need to implement of appropriate (fit-for-purpose) IT systems. In this respect, the review team is concerned that the effort to realise its implementation is underestimated and does not have sufficient priority.

Most of the university's QA and QE procedures concern teaching and have a lesser focus on research. Research management lacks data and there are few instruments available to enable staff to steer effectively towards strategic goals. For instance, the team found that the existing structures and lack of incentives hamper the strategic aim of fostering interdisciplinary research. The leadership of the Bernal Institute demonstrates the value of a deterministic strategy to put in place the elements necessary for research excellence but, elsewhere, it is less clear and the metrics for research performance need additional work. Junior researchers could benefit from additional support to seed new research initiatives. Further, PhD students would benefit from supervisors who are systematically assessed and provided with greater incentives to supervise.

The review team found that student services are performing well, with a collaborative and student-focused culture. In some areas, such as support for students' access, services require more sustainable funding mechanisms.

Finally, interviews with external stakeholders gave the review team a very positive view of the university. The stakeholders were unanimous in their perception of the University of Limerick as a highly visible and vibrant university, which forms a centre of activity in the region and a catalyst for innovation. There is recognition that the university is young with considerable scope to grow and mature, and there is evident belief in the university as whole, but most of all in its people. This belief is shared by the review team.

Findings

COMMENDATIONS

1. The review team commends UL on the resilience and dynamism shown in its response to Covid-19. This was clear from its ability, evident across the organisation, to overcome the difficulties associated with Covid-19.
2. The review team commends all interview partners for the frankness and openness of the interviews, and the speed with which additional information, if requested, was produced. This is a sign of positive engagement with the review process.
3. The review team commends UL for the involvement of many internal stakeholders in the self-evaluation process. The ISER provides a coherent picture of the university in spite of the many challenges experienced during its drafting.
4. The review team commends the university for the way it has connected the different quality teams and for how it fosters good practice exchange on various levels, so that others can benefit from creative solutions and so that the overall discourse on QA is kept alive.
5. Managers were evidently united in their focus on the student learning experience at UL and on the importance of accommodating students' needs. The review team commends UL's vibrant, inclusive community, in which staff and students feel very much at home, and at the same time feel challenged to reach their potential.
6. The annual monitoring process has clear scope and leadership, and the Associate Vice President Academic Affairs is unambiguously responsible. As an instrument to detect flaws and areas for improvement, the annual review process is considered to be effective. The review team commends UL for implementing the annual review process relatively recently (in 2017/18) after an initial pilot.
7. The review team commends UL for providing learner supports that are collaborative, comprehensive and ambitious.
8. Transfer arrangements are a useful option in supporting retention and progression and



ensuring that students who may feel their initial programme choice was mistaken do not simply withdraw. The review team commends the university for its commitment to student choice and the flexibility offered by its transfer policy.

9. The university attracts students from a range of backgrounds and recognises the challenges faced by many students in making the transition to higher education. The review team commends the university for its introduction of a First-Year Support Co-ordinator role to the strong student services team.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There is no overall chart of the university's QA system that shows how the different components are interlinked and who holds responsibility for each component. On a related note, UL's Quality Policy declares that each employee bears responsibility for quality and lists a number of bodies and individuals that share responsibility for QA and QE at the institutional level, although not beyond. A document outlining the day-to-day responsibilities for QA offers only marginally more information, in particular with regard to actual operational responsibilities. It is unclear if the information in this document derives from any official documents. A quality team leaders' forum seems to foster good practice exchange, but it is unclear how the forum supports the overall QA system or what status it has in terms of the overall QA governance. **Accordingly, the review team recommends that there be a clear line of accountability for QA, including the ultimately accountable person, who should be the VPAASE.**
2. The review team found that, overall, the QA and QE system functions in a top-down manner. The review team also noted with admiration that, at the level of faculty and school, there is a great willingness and capability to assume greater responsibilities for QA. **The review team recommends re-analysing the QA and QE system to obtain a more balanced top-down/bottom-up attribution of responsibilities, which, in the view of the review team, will lead to greater engagement and ownership from all involved.**
3. The review team noted that there is a considerable communication issue at all levels of the university, most evident between the GA and the EC, and the EC and the university community, although interviewees acknowledged that communication had improved during the Covid-19 crisis. But they also stated that overall dissatisfaction with communication might originate from a misunderstanding of what it means to communicate effectively: disseminating information (from sender to receiver) appears to be the dominant format for communication in the university, whereas staff and students indicated that reports and minutes are often too long and detailed to be effective. More dialogue-oriented formats and alternative ways of creating and sharing information (most notably with the help of aggregated data and quantitative information) could be helpful. **The review team recommends that special efforts be undertaken to improve communication where needed as soon as possible, and that the lines of transparent and timely internal communication be strengthened. Identifying the less effective elements of UL's communication architecture might be a productive first step. This will help the university to make progress and implement the Strategic Plan in the difficult times ahead.**
4. The review team concludes that, in spite of the many good elements of the Strategic Plan, it is too high-level and possibly too ambitious, certainly given the impact of the Covid-19 crisis. **The review team therefore recommends that the university reconsider the Strategic Plan and adapt it in light of present circumstances before the faculties start to develop their own plans in earnest. The university needs to develop processes for strategic planning that are sufficiently clear and flexible to set a high-level course, while facilitating faculties, schools and departments to build their own aligned plans.**
5. Given that UL was unable to clarify during the visit how the EC would monitor progress and how the impact of the Strategic Plan would be observable in qualitative and quantitative terms, **the review team recommends that the university, in adapting the Strategic Plan, ensure that the adapted version is considerably**

less high level and more detailed than the present one, and that it identify a clear time line with well-defined goals. It is important that measures of success be well articulated and goals clearly prioritised, while maintaining a high level of flexibility and agility in the planning process, as the pandemic continues to disrupt 'business as usual'.

6. The review team recommends that the university modify the programme approval and revisions processes with the goal of inspiring more enthusiasm among staff, although it is acknowledged that designing a lighter and more inspiring process should not be at the expense of its thoroughness. Moreover, the review team recommends devolving minor revisions to faculty boards, thus making the process more lean and delegating responsibility to the front line.
7. It is remarkable that in a well-organised university such as UL, in which there are extensive protocols for many processes, there is not a regular staff satisfaction survey. Such a survey, if carried out properly and regularly, would enable managers to improve areas of evident weakness, identify good practice, and keep track of the departments that are not performing well and need more support. **The review team recommends that the university put in place a regular staff survey in order to improve on the performance of staff and thus quality. Such a survey would give timely signals of dissatisfaction to senior management, pointing to issues on which policy and strategy should be focused.**
8. A significant proportion of staff have little experience in online learning and have negative feelings about the move to blended learning. It is therefore urgent that UL staff receive training in this area and are provided with access to modules to support them in adapting easily to these new ways of teaching, without compromising quality. Clearly, the newly established Learning Technologists Forum (LTF) plays a crucial role here, but, at present, the unit functions primarily as a best-practice forum to connect interested staff. In view of the disruptive speed with which international higher education is being forced to adopt blended and online teaching and in view of the Covid-19 pandemic, **the review team recommends that UL rapidly build further on the promising first steps taken in 2019 with the establishment of the Centre for Transformative Learning, both by making the necessary investments and stimulating these new technologies.**
9. Both programme design and annual review form the backbone of what one could describe as the 'top-down loop of quality assurance'. The review team considers this is well established through the clear rules laid down by Academic Council and approved by GA and associated procedures. However, the review team concurs with the view expressed in the ISER that procedures are top-heavy. **The review team recommends that UL revise the processes involved in programme design and annual review in order to identify the critical steps and remove the less important ones.**
10. Given the central position that student surveys have in the overall QA system, the review team recommends that UL continue work with students to close the loop by improving student response rates, using all means possible, including new channels of communication, to renew enthusiasm for the process. In particular, the review team recommends that UL pilot, identify and follow up best practice in improving student feedback together with students, and, at the same time, work with students on how to address the feedback, including consistently reporting back to students on how their feedback is used and which changes have resulted from it.
11. The review team recommends that the university ensure its appeal procedures are accessible, timely and fair to all students.
12. The review team acknowledges the recent developments towards building management and quality dashboards, yet recommends that the university make an even stronger effort to identify key performance indicators/key information for decision makers and actors on different levels, and further recommends that the university create the necessary database (potentially also through revised methodologies of obtaining and analysing data generated

throughout the student life cycle or related to the university's different core processes) and IT (infra)structures and processes.

13. In order to obtain really meaningful and systematic enhancements, the review team recommends that the university put in place a much more complete and online data management system that provides data to central administration, as well as faculties and schools.
14. The review team recommends that the university strengthen the role of bottom-up feedback by using staff and student feedback, and that the university give this feedback a more prominent position in the quality architecture.
15. The review team recommends that the university clarify its objectives in relation to access and diversity, to which the policies already in place are related. In order to satisfy itself of the success of these policies and the achievement of its objectives in this regard, the review team further recommends that the university consider developing an appropriate data set that will allow it to monitor trends in student entry, progression and achievement.
16. The review team recommends that the university clarify its objectives in relation to access and diversity and, as part of this planned review of RPL, it should consider what monitoring data would enable it to determine the effectiveness of its access policies in meeting the objectives identified with particular emphasis on social disadvantage and diversity.

TOP 5 COMMENDATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

COMMENDATIONS

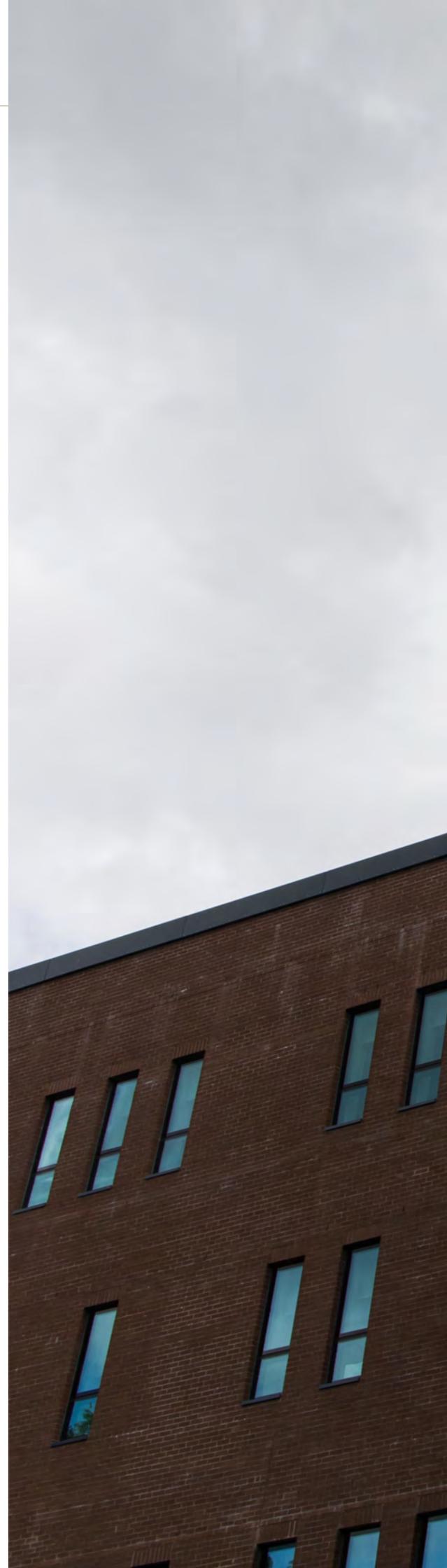
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 4. The annual monitoring process has clear scope and leadership, and the Associate Vice President Academic Affairs is unambiguously responsible. As an instrument to detect flaws and areas for improvement, the annual review process is considered to be effective. The review team commends UL for implementing the annual review process relatively recently (in 2017/18) after an initial pilot.
 5. The review team commends UL for providing learner supports that are collaborative, comprehensive and ambitious.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The review team found that, overall, the QA and QE system functions in a top-down manner. The review team also noted with admiration that, at the level of faculty and school, there is a great willingness and capability to assume greater responsibilities for QA. **The review team recommends re-analysing the QA and QE system to obtain a more balanced top-down/ bottom-up attribution of responsibilities, which, in the view of the review team, will lead to greater engagement and ownership from all involved.**
2. Given that UL was unable to clarify during the visit how the EC would monitor progress and how the impact of the Strategic Plan would be observable in qualitative and quantitative terms, the review team recommends that the university, in adapting the Strategic Plan, ensure that the adapted version is considerably less high level and more detailed than the present one, and that it identify a clear time line with well-defined goals. It is important that measures of success be well articulated and goals clearly prioritised,

while maintaining a high level of flexibility and agility in the planning process, as the pandemic continues to disrupt 'business as usual'.

3. Both programme design and annual review form the backbone of what one could describe as the 'top-down loop of quality assurance'. The review team considers this is well established through the clear rules laid down by Academic Council and approved by GA and associated procedures. However, the review team concurs with the view expressed in the ISER that procedures are top-heavy. **The review team recommends that UL revise the processes involved in programme design and annual review in order to identify the critical steps and remove the less important ones.**
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Section 5

Institutional Response

Institutional Response



INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE BY THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK TO CINNTE REVIEW REPORT

Since its inception in 1972, the University of Limerick has strived to provide an excellent environment and experience for its students and staff. This opportunity to reflect on the effectiveness of our quality assurance system has come at an opportune and critical time in the University's development.

As the University prepares to mark its 50th anniversary and embarks on the implementation of a new strategic plan, the process of self-evaluation and review has been an important exercise – both to validate what we do well and to assure that the University's future development is supported by a robust quality assurance and enhancement framework.

The University and its operations have been significantly impacted through the COVID-19 pandemic and the Panel's finding that the University remains able to deliver high quality teaching is reassuring to our students, staff and stakeholders.

We are heartened that the Panel has confidence in the University and its people and are particularly pleased that our focus on our students' learning needs was evident throughout the review process. The Panel's commendations for learner supports services, commitment to student choice and flexibility as well as for the introduction of the First Year Support Co-ordinator role are evidence of that commitment.

The Panel has found that the University fosters exchange of good practice and that a quality assurance discourse is alive within the institution.

We also welcome the Panel's commendation on the University's commitment to transparency both through the openness of the dialogue during the review process and on an ongoing basis via the publication of its quality activities and action plans.

The Panel has provided a number of high-level recommendations on which the University community will reflect over the coming months. This reflection will involve a process of considering each of the recommendations to ensure that we, as a community, have a shared understanding of what they entail. On completion of that process, the University will develop an implementation plan for these recommendations that is closely aligned with the University's Strategic Plan, UL@50.

We note the Panel's observations on the need for information systems to manage and inform quality assurance and enhancement activities and to support teaching and learning, particularly in the disruptive context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The University commenced the process of modernisation of its IT infrastructure including a Business Intelligence platform in 2018 through the implementation of its IT strategy, 'UL Enable,' and has invested significantly in this area with an annual implementation plan to 2022. These efforts are embedded in the commenced work on an institutional Digital Strategy.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant challenges, it has also presented opportunities to reflect on UL@50, to recalibrate our Strategic Plan and to adjust the respective planning of our faculties and support divisions accordingly.



In reviewing the recommendation to reduce the complexity of the University's quality assurance and enhancement system, we will endeavour to balance this reduction with our statutory obligations as a degree awarding body and the substantial requirements of our professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

The University agrees with the Panel's recommendation that the role of feedback from students and staff should have a prominent position within the University's quality architecture and looks forward to including the student voice in the implementation of those recommendations.

University of Limerick would like to sincerely thank the International Review Panel for its thought-provoking and robust engagement. We would especially like to thank the Panel for the collegial manner in which it conducted the virtual review, a context which was unfamiliar to both the Panel, university colleagues and stakeholders.

We also wish to acknowledge the support of colleagues at QQI who facilitated the smooth transition to the virtual review.

Professor Kerstin Mey
President

November 2020



APPENDICES



Appendices

A: Terms of Reference

B: Main Review Visit Timetable

Appendix A

Terms of Reference (Terms of Reference for the Review of Universities and other Designated Awarding Bodies)

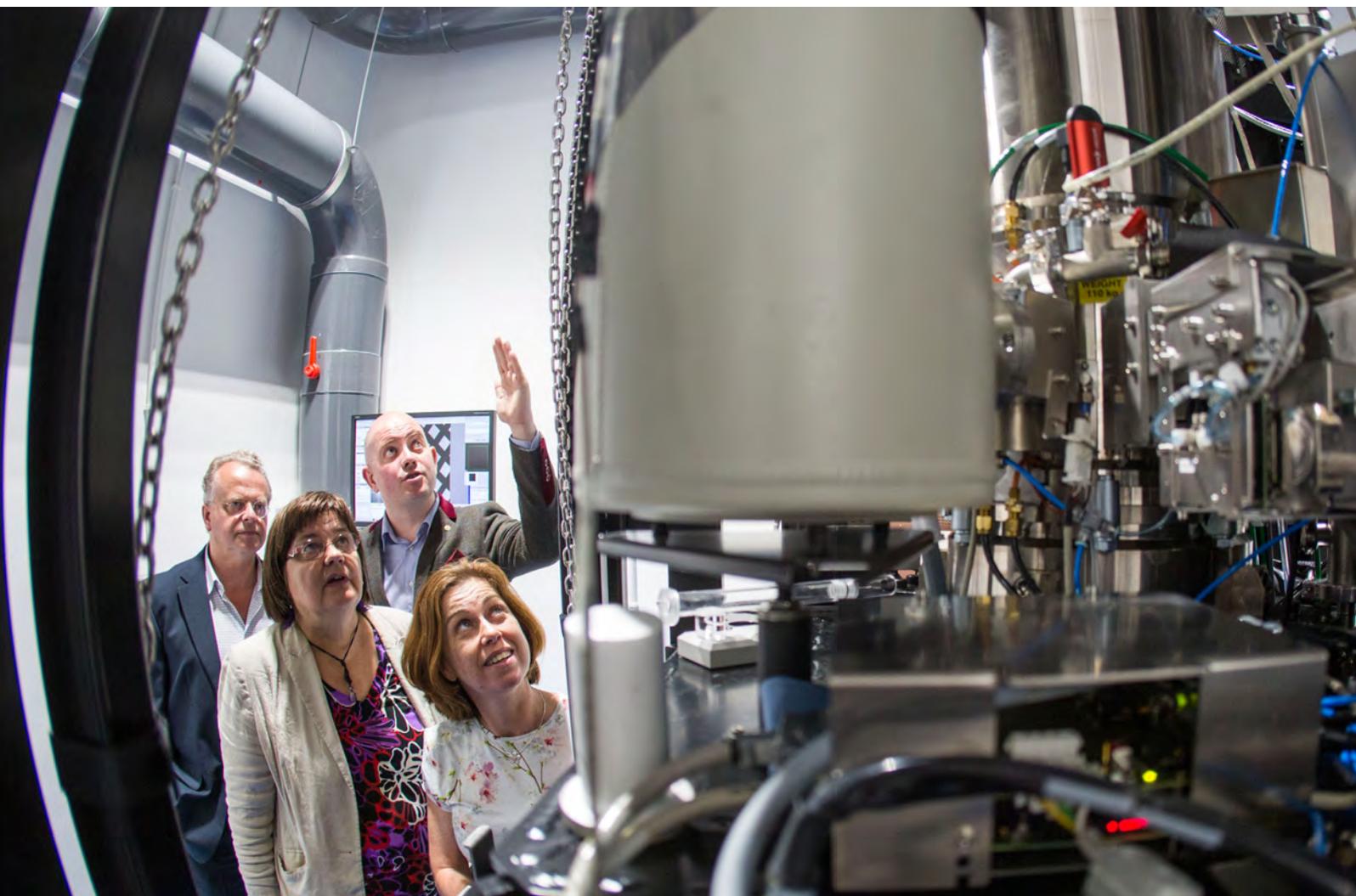
SECTION 1 Background and Context for the Review

1.1 Context and Legislative Underpinning

These are the Terms of Reference for the Review of a Designated Awarding Body (DAB). The concept of a Designated Awarding Body is derived from the [Qualifications and Quality Assurance \(Education and Training\) Act, 2012](#) (The 2012 Act) and is defined as '*a previously established university, the National University of Ireland, an educational institution established as a university under Section 9 of the Act of 1997, the Dublin Institute of Technology and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland*'. The following institutions are Designated Awarding Bodies:

- Dublin City University
- Technological University Dublin
- University College Cork
- University College Dublin
- University of Limerick
- National University of Ireland, Galway
- Maynooth University
- The National University of Ireland
- The Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland
- Trinity College Dublin

In 2016, QQI adopted a [policy](#) on cyclical review in higher education which sets out in greater detail the scope, purposes, criteria, model and procedures for review. These are represented in the Terms of Reference and the Handbook for the Review of Designated Awarding Bodies. QQI has introduced an annual reporting process for institutions whereby institutions are required to submit an Annual Institutional Quality Report (AIQR). The aim of the AIQR is to provide a contemporary account of quality assurance (QA) within an institution. Information is provided through an online template and it is published. Collated annual reports are provided to periodical review teams. Annual reporting allows institutions and QQI to engage on a regular basis. Published annual reports assist with documentation management for institutions in reviews and lessen the burden on institutions in the lead-up to a review.



This review cycle is being conducted in a very changed context for higher education. The landscape for higher education has been significantly reshaped since the last cycle of reviews commenced. Smaller colleges have been merged with universities and many institutes of technology are reorganising and preparing mergers as part of the Technological University process. New alliances and clusters, envisaged by [Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape](#) have commenced. A new approach to public funding has been introduced and operated by the Higher Education Authority (HEA). Initiatives for enhancement such as the *Irish Survey of Student Engagement* (ISSE) and the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (NFETL) have been formalised at a national level. These developments mean that there are new sources of information and external benchmarks available to institutions that can be used to inform self-evaluation in this review cycle. Key measurements such as entry profiles, student retention, graduate profiles and staff and student satisfaction rates can provide some quantitative evidence of the quality of an institution's offer.

The 2012 Act states that QQI shall consult with the HEA in carrying out the review. QQI has agreed with HEA that this will take the form of engagement with QQI on the Terms of Reference and confirmation of the status of the institution within the higher education system, sharing individual institutional profiles and data with the team. Further details of the agreement can be accessed [here](#).

This is the third review round of Designated Awarding Bodies. Previous rounds took place in 2004-2005 and 2009-2012.

1.2 Purposes

The Policy for the Cyclical Review of Higher Education Institutions highlights four purposes for individual institutional reviews. These are set out in the table below.

PURPOSE	ACHIEVED AND MEASURED THROUGH:
<p>1. To encourage a QA culture and the enhancement of the student learning environment and experience within institutions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - emphasising the student and the student learning experience in reviews - providing a source of evidence of areas for improvement and areas for revision of policy and change and basing follow-up upon them - exploring innovative and effective practices and procedures - exploring quality as well as quality assurance within the institution
<p>2. To provide feedback to institutions about institution-wide quality and the impact of mission, strategy, governance and management on quality and the overall effectiveness of their quality assurance.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - emphasising the ownership of quality and quality assurance at the level of the institution - pitching the review at a comprehensive institution-wide level - evaluating compliance with legislation, policy and standards - evaluating how the institution has identified and measured itself against its own benchmarks and metrics to support quality assurance governance and procedures - emphasising the improvement of quality assurance procedures
<p>3. To contribute to public confidence in the quality of institutions by promoting transparency and public awareness.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - adhering to purposes, criteria and outcomes that are clear and transparent - publishing the reports and outcomes of reviews in accessible locations and formats for different audiences - evaluating, as part of the review, institutional reporting on quality and quality assurance, to ensure that it is transparent and accessible
<p>4. To encourage quality by using evidence-based, objective methods and advice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - using the expertise of international, national and student peer reviewers who are independent of the institution - ensuring that findings are based on stated evidence - facilitating institutions to identify measurement, comparison and analytic techniques, based on quantitative data relevant to their own mission and context, to support quality assurance - promoting the identification and dissemination of examples of good practice and innovation

SECTION 2

Objectives and Criteria

2.1 Review Objectives

OBJECTIVE 1

To review the effectiveness and implementation of the QA procedures of the institution through consideration of the procedures set out, primarily, in the AIQR. Where necessary, the information provided by the AIQR is supplemented by additional information provided through documentation requests and interviews. The scope of this includes the procedures for reporting, governance and publication. This also incorporates an analysis of the ways in which the institution applies evidence-based approaches to support QA processes, including quantitative analysis, evidence gathering and comparison. Progress on the development of QA since the previous review of the institution will be evaluated. Consideration will also be given to the effectiveness of the AIQR and ISER procedures within the institution.

The scope of this objective also extends to the overarching procedures of the institution for assuring itself of the quality of its research degree programmes and research activities.

This objective also encompasses the effectiveness of the procedures established by the institution for the assurance of the quality of collaborations, partnerships and overseas provision, including the procedures for the approval and review of linked providers, joint awarding arrangements, joint provision and other collaborative arrangements such as clusters and mergers.

OBJECTIVE 2

To review the enhancement of quality by the institution through governance, policy, and procedures.

To review the congruency of QA procedures and enhancements with the institution's own mission and goals or targets for quality.

To identify innovative and effective practices for quality enhancement.

OBJECTIVE 3

To review the effectiveness and implementation of procedures for access, transfer and progression.

OBJECTIVE 4

Following the introduction of a statutory international education QA scheme, to determine compliance with the Code of Practice for the Provision of Programmes to International Learners.

2.2 Review Criteria

CRITERIA FOR OBJECTIVE 1

The Review Report will include a specific qualitative statement on the effectiveness of the QA procedures of the institution and the extent of their implementation. The report will also include a specific statement about the extent to which the QA procedures can be considered compliant with the ESG and as having regard to QQI's Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines (QAG). These statements will be highlighted in the Review Report.

The statements may be accompanied by a range of ancillary statements, recommendations and possibly recommendations for directions in reference to this objective.

The criteria to be used by the team in reaching conclusions for this objective are:

- ESG
- QQI *Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines (Core)*
- QQI *Sector Specific Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Universities and Other Designated Awarding Bodies*
- QQI *Topic Specific Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Research Degree Programmes*
- Section 28 of the 2012 Act
- The institution's own objectives and goals for quality assurance

Where appropriate and actioned by the institution, additional QQI Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines will be incorporated.

The QQI *Sector Specific Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Independent/Private Providers* may be an appropriate reference document if they have been adopted as their linked provider(s).

CRITERIA FOR OBJECTIVE 2

The Review Report will include a specific qualitative statement on the enhancement of quality by the institution through governance, policy, and procedures.

The statements may be accompanied by a range of ancillary statements and recommendations in reference to this objective. If identified, innovative and effective practices for quality enhancement will be highlighted in the report.

The criteria to be used by the team in reaching conclusions for this objective are:

- The institution's own mission and vision
- The goals or targets for quality identified by the institution
- Additional sources of reference identified by the institution.

CRITERIA FOR OBJECTIVE 3

The report will include a qualitative statement on the extent to which the procedures are in keeping with QQI policy for Access, Transfer and Progression.

This statement may be accompanied by a range of ancillary statements and recommendations and possibly recommendations for conditions in reference to this objective.

The criterion to be used by the team in reaching conclusions for this objective are:

QQI Policy and Criteria for Access, Transfer and Progression

CRITERIA FOR OBJECTIVE 4

When the statutory international education quality assurance scheme is in place, the report will include a qualitative statement on the extent to which the procedures are compliant with the Code of Practice for the Provision of Programmes to International Learners.

This statement may be accompanied by a range of ancillary statements and recommendations and possibly recommendations for conditions in reference to this objective.

The criterion to be used by the team in reaching conclusions for this objective is the Code of Practice for the Provision of Programmes to International Learners

Key questions to be addressed by the review for each objective

- How have QA procedures and reviews been implemented within the institution?
- How effective are the internal QA procedures and reviews of the institution?
- Are the QA procedures in keeping with European Standards and Guidelines?
- Are the QA procedures in keeping with QQI policy and guidelines, or their equivalent?
- Who takes responsibility for quality and QA across the institution?
- How transparent, accessible and comprehensive is reporting on quality and QA?
- How is quality promoted and enhanced?
- Are there effective innovations in QA and quality enhancement?
- Is the student experience in keeping with the institution's own stated mission and strategy?
- Are achievements in QA and quality in keeping with the institution's own stated mission and strategy?
- How do achievements in QA and quality measure up against the institution's own goals or targets for quality?

SECTION 3 The Review Process

3.1 Process

The primary basis for the review process is this handbook.

3.2 Review Team Profile

QQI will appoint the review team to conduct the institutional review. Review teams are composed of peer reviewers who are students and senior institutional leaders and staff from comparable institutions as well as external representatives. The size of the team and the duration of their visit will depend on the size and complexity of the institution but in general the review team for a Designated Awarding Body will consist of 6 persons. Each review team includes a Chairperson and Coordinating Reviewer, and may be supported by a rapporteur, who is not a member of the team, to take and collate notes of meetings. A single team may undertake the review of two different institutions.

Reviewers are not QQI employees, but rather peers of the institution. The institution will have an opportunity to comment on the proposed composition of their review team to ensure there are no conflicts of interest, and QQI will ensure an appropriate and entirely independent team of reviewers is selected for the institution. QQI has final approval over the composition of each review team.

There will be appropriate gender representation on the review team. The team will consist of carefully selected and trained and briefed reviewers who have appropriate skills and are competent to perform their tasks. The team will operate under the leadership of the Review Chairperson.

The review team will be appointed in keeping with the following profile:

1. A Review Chairperson

The role of the Chairperson is to act as leader of the review team. This is an international reviewer who is a (serving or recently former) senior third-level institution leader – usually a head of institution or deputy head of institution or a senior policy advisor who:

- » possesses a wide range of higher education experience;
- » demonstrates a deep understanding of the complexities of the higher education system;
- » understands often unique QA governance arrangements;
- » has proven experience in the management of innovation and change.

2. A Coordinating Reviewer

The role of the Coordinating Reviewer is to act as secretary to the team as well as to be a full review team member. This is usually a person with expertise in the higher education system and prior experience in participating in external reviews. As the coordinating reviewer is responsible for drafting the report, he or she will possess proven excellent writing abilities.

3. A Student Reviewer

The role of the student reviewer is to represent the student voice in the review team. The student reviewer will be typically a PhD student with significant experience of higher education or an undergraduate student who has completed a specific programme preparing them for the role or who has previously had a key role in other institutional reviews.

4. An External Representative

The role of the external representative is to bring a ‘third mission’ perspective to the review team.

In addition to the specific roles above, the full team complement will include a range of experts with the following knowledge and experience:

- » International reviewer experience
- » EQF and Bologna expertise
- » Experience of higher education QA processes
- » Experience of managing research within or across institutions
- » Experience in governance
- » Experience and proven ability in the advancement of teaching and learning

Details of review team roles and responsibilities can be found in Appendix B.

3.3 Procedure and timelines

The outline set out in the policy (below) will be elaborated further and timelines will be set out to accompany it, through discussion and consultation.

STEP	ACTION	DATES	OUTCOME
Terms of Reference (ToR)	Completion of an institutional information profile Confirmation of ToR with institution and HEA	9 months before the Main Review Visit (MRV)	Published Terms of Reference
Preparation	Appointment of an expert review team Consultation with the institution on any possible conflicts of interest	6-9 months before the MRV	Review team appointed
Self-evaluation	Forwarding to QQI of the Institutional Self-Evaluation Report (ISER)	12 weeks before the MRV	Published ISER (optional)
Desk Review	Desk review of the ISER by the team	Before the initial meeting	ISER initial response provided
Initial Meeting	An initial meeting of the review team, including reviewer training and briefing	5 weeks after the ISER, 7 weeks before the MRV	Team training and briefing is complete. Team identify key themes and additional documents required

STEP	ACTION	DATES	OUTCOME	
Planning Visit	A visit to the institution by the Chair and Coordinating Reviewer to receive information about the ISER process, discuss the schedule for the main review visit and discuss additional documentation requests	5 weeks after the ISER, 7 weeks before the MRV	An agreed note of the planning visit	
Main Review Visit	To receive and consider evidence on the ways in which the institution has performed in respect of the objectives and criteria set out in the Terms of Reference	12 weeks after the receipt of ISER	A short preliminary oral report to the institution	
Report	Preparation of a draft report by the team	6-8 weeks after the MRV		
	Draft report sent to the institution for a check of factual accuracy	12 weeks after the MRV		
	Institution responds with any factual accuracy corrections	2 weeks after receipt of draft report		
	Preparation of a final report	2 weeks after factual accuracy response		QQI Review Report
	Preparation of an institutional response	2 weeks after final report		Institutional response
Outcomes	Consideration of the Review Report and findings by QQI together with the institutional response and the plan for implementation	Next available meeting of QQI committee	Formal decision about the effectiveness of QA procedures <i>In some cases, directions to the institution and a schedule for their implementation</i>	
	Preparation of QQI quality profile	2 weeks after decision	Quality profile published	

STEP	ACTION	DATES	OUTCOME
Follow-up	<i>The form of follow-up will be determined by whether 'directions' are issued to the institution. In general, where directions are issued, the follow-up period will be sooner and more specific actions may be required as part of the direction.</i>		
	Preparation of an institutional implementation plan	1 month after publication of review report	Publication of the implementation plan by the institution
	One-year follow-up report to QQI for noting. This and subsequent follow-up may be integrated into annual reports to QQI	1 year after publication of review report	Publication of the follow-up report by QQI and the institution
	Continuous reporting and dialogue on follow-up through the annual institutional reporting and dialogue process	Continuous	Annual Institutional Quality Report Dialogue Meeting notes
Note: The total period from start to finish is approximately 15 months but will depend on QQI committee meeting dates.			

Appendix B

Main Review Visit Timetable

Wednesday 19th August

TIME (GMT)	GROUP	PURPOSE
09.00-09.30	Institutional Coordinator	Meeting with Institutional Coordinator
09.30-10.00	Private Review Team Meeting	
10.00-10.15	1. President	Private Meeting with President
10.15-11.00	2. Senior Management Team	Discuss institutional mission, strategic plan. Roles and responsibilities for QA and Enhancement
11.00-11.45	Private Review Team Meeting	
11.45-12.45	Panel Lunch/Break	
12.45-1.00	Private Review Team Meeting	
1.00-1.45	3. Governing Authority	Discuss the mechanisms employed by the governing body for monitoring QA and Enhancement and how it ensures effectiveness
1.45-2.15	Panel Review Team Meeting	
2.15-3.00	4. Deans	Discussions on strategic management and quality assurance structures, including the roles and responsibilities for quality assurance and management between the centre, faculties and schools/departments
3.00-3.30	Private Review Team Meeting	
3.30-4.00	Panel Break	
4.00-4.45	5. Student Life & Postgraduate Student Union Officers & Management Teams	Discuss student engagement and student role in the institute in QA, Strategic Planning and decision-making processes.
	New student sabbatical officers	
4.45-5.15	Private Review Team Meeting	

Friday 21st August

TIME (GMT)	GROUP	PURPOSE
9.00-9.30	Institutional Coordinator	Meeting with Institutional Coordinator
9.30-10.15	6. Self-Evaluation Team/Quality Office	Discussion on management of quality assurance structures, including the experience of implementing quality assurance throughout the institution
10.15-11.15	Private Review Team Meeting	
11.15-12.00	7. Quality Committee & Academic Council	Discuss how the institution monitors the effectiveness of its quality management processes and structures and it ensures the outcomes of QA processes are enacted in an appropriate, consistent and timely manner.
12.00-12.30	Private Review Team Meeting	
12.30-1.30	Panel Lunch/Break	
1.30-1.45	Private Review Team Meeting	
1.45-2.30	8. Assistant Deans Academic Affairs/ Heads of Schools/Department	Discuss Quality Management Processes at the Academic Department Level, implementation and how their effectiveness is ensured.
2.30-3.00	Private Review Team Meeting	
3.00-4.00	Parallel sessions with student groups	
	9. Student Representatives	
	Parallel session	
	10. International Students	
	Parallel session	
	11. PGR Students	
	Parallel session	
4.00-4.30	Private Review Team Meeting	
4.30-5.30	12. UG/PG students 1	
	Parallel session	
	13. UG/PG students 2	
	Parallel session	
	14. UG/PG students 3	
	Parallel session	
5.30-6pm	Private Review Team Meeting	

Monday 24th August

TIME (GMT)	GROUP	PURPOSE
9.00-9.45	Institutional Coordinator	Meeting with Institutional Coordinator
9.30-10.00	Private Review Team Meeting	
10.00-10.45	15. Research Directors	Discuss the development of Research and Innovation in the Institute.
10.45-11.15	Private Review Team Meeting	
11.15-12.00	16. Academic Staff – Research	Staff experience of research management and supervision, the relationship between teaching, research and innovation, QA and enhancements and the impacts on the research student experience.
12-12.30	Private Review Team Meeting	
12.30-12.45	Break	
12.45-13.15	Private Review Team Meeting	

Tuesday 25th August

TIME (GMT)	GROUP	PURPOSE
9.00-9.45	Quality Office	
9.45-10.00	Private Review Team Meeting	
10.00-10.45	17. Internationalisation Staff	Discuss involvement in QA and enhancement in International Education.
10.45-11.15	Private Review Team Meeting	
11.15-12.00	18. Collaborations, Professional Education & Apprenticeships	Session to discuss QA of the staff/student experience
12.00-12.15	Break	
12.15-12.45	Private Review Team Meeting	
12.45-1.45	Panel Lunch Break	
1.45-2.30	19. Linked & Collaborative Providers	Discuss arrangements for ensuring the quality of provision for staff and students for programmes offered with collaborative partners & linked providers.
	Parallel Session	
1.45-2.30	20. External Stakeholders	Discuss relationships with industry & sectoral representation
2.30-3pm	Private Review Team Meeting	
3.45-4.00	Break	
4.00-4.30	Private Review Team Meeting	

Wednesday 26th August

TIME (GMT)	GROUP	PURPOSE
09.00-09.10	Institutional Coordinator	Meeting with Institutional Coordinator
09.10-10.00	Private Review Team Meeting	
	Parallel Sessions	
10.00-10.45	22. Snr Academic Staff	
	Parallel Sessions	
10.00-10.45	23. Early Career Academic Staff	
10.45-11.15	Private Review Team Meeting	
11.15-11.30	Break	
11.30-12.15	24. Student Support Services Staff	Discuss involvement in QA and enhancement
12.15-12.45	QQI/Review Team discuss key findings, recommendations, commendations	Discuss the Review Team's main findings and alignment TOR

Friday 28th August

TIME (GMT)	GROUP	PURPOSE
9.00-10.00	Private Review Team Meeting	
10.00-10.30	Meeting with President	
10.30-11.00	Break for Review Team	
10.30-11.00	QQI and Institutional Coordinator	QQI gathers feedback on the review process
11.00-11.30	Private Review Team Meeting	
11.30-11.45	Break	
11.45-12.45	26. Oral Report	Oral Report of main findings
12.45-1.45	Lunch	
1.45-5.30	Private Review Team Meeting	Report drafting

Glossary

Glossary of terms, acronyms and abbreviations from this report

Term	Definition
2012 Act	Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012
ACGC	Academic Council Grading Committee
AIQR	Annual Institutional Quality Report
APRC	Annual Programme Review Committee
Athena SWAN	Charter recognising and encouraging advances in gender equality
CAO	Central Applications Officer
CINNTE	The name given to QQI's first cyclical review period
Core QA Guidelines	QQI Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines
CTL	Centre for Transformative Learning (formerly, Centre for Teaching and Learning)
DAB	Designated Awarding Body
EC	Executive Committee
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ESG (2015)	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
EU	European Union
GA	Governing Authority
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HR	Human Relations
ISER	Institutional Self-Evaluation Report
IED	International Education Division
iGraduate	UL's International Student Barometer Survey
ISSE	Irish Survey of Student Engagement
ISER	Institutional Self-Evaluation Report
ISO	International Organization for Standardization

IT	Information Technology
KPI(s)	Key Performance Indicator(s)
MRV	Main Review Visit
NARIC	National Academic Recognition Information Centre
NFETL	National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NISE	National Institute of Studies in Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PDRS	Performance Development Review System
PG	Postgraduate
PGR	Postgraduate Research
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy (/Postgraduate Doctoral Research Degree)
QA	Quality Assurance
QAG	(QQI's Statutory) Quality Assurance Guidelines (e.g. Core)
QE	Quality Enhancement
QIP(s)	Quality Improvement Plan(s)
QMS	Quality Management Systems
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
QSU	Quality Support Unit
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SMT	Senior Management Team
Student Life	UL student's union
TELU	Technology Enhanced Learning Unit
ToR	Terms of Reference
TU	Technological university
UG	Undergraduate
UL	University of Limerick
UN	United Nations
VPAASE	Vice-President Academic Affairs and Student Engagement

