



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

O L L S C O I L L U I M N I G H

**Report of the Quality Review Group
to the
University of Limerick
Postgraduate Student's Union**

Review dates	22 nd to 25 th October 2018
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UL QSU Website	www.ul.ie/quality
Unit Website	https://ulpsu.wordpress.com/
QQI Website	www.qqi.ie

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1 The UL Quality Review Process

The University of Limerick (UL) follows an established process for quality assurance (QA) and quality improvement (QI) in line with that originally developed jointly by the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB), the latter whose functions are now carried out by Quality and Qualifications Ireland ([QQI](#)). The review process involves an approximate seven-year cycle during which each unit works to improve the quality of its programmes and services and undergoes a rigorous self-evaluation prior to a quality review by internationally recognised experts in the relevant field.

The common framework adopted by the Irish universities for their QA/QI systems is consistent with both legislative requirements and international good practice. The process itself evolved as a result of the Universities Act, 1997, in which the responsibility for QA/QI was placed directly on the individual universities. The process now complies with the [Qualifications and Quality Assurance \(Education and Training\) Act 2012](#). The UL Quality Support Unit (QSU) website (www.ul.ie/quality) provides details on the process.

Academic units are reviewed against international standards as described in the document *Quality Review Process for Academic Units*, which is available on the [QSU website](#). The planned schedule of quality reviews for both academic and support units is available on the [QSU website](#).

The UL quality review process comprises the following three phases:

1. Pre-review phase, in which the unit under review conducts a self-evaluation exercise and writes a self-assessment report (SAR).
2. Review phase, in which a quality review group comprising external experts, both national and international, review the SAR, visit the unit, meet with stakeholders and produce a report (this report), which is made publicly available on the [QSU website](#).
3. Post-review phase, in which the unit considers the recommendations of the QRG, devises plans to implement them and reports implementation progress to a Governing Authority subcommittee and UL senior management.

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

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

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

2 The University of Limerick Postgraduate Students' Union

All UL students (undergraduate and postgraduate, taught and research) become automatic members of [UL Student Life](#) (formerly UL Students' Union - UL Student Life) when they register at the university. UL took a pioneering step when it facilitated the establishment in 2002 of a students' union specifically for postgraduate students. The [UL Postgraduate Students' Union](#) (PSU) is an autonomous entity and is independent of UL Student Life, although postgraduate students are members of both unions. The PSU recognises UL Student Life as the representative body of all UL students. In turn, UL Student Life recognises the PSU as the fully autonomous representative body of postgraduate students on postgraduate issues. Both unions perform very valuable roles in relation to meeting students' needs. However, postgraduate students sometimes have very different needs to those of their undergraduate colleagues.

The PSU was initially formed as the Postgraduate Students' Association (PSA) in September 2002. The PSA became the PSU in the academic year 2012/13; since then, the union has continued to represent every postgraduate student who passes through the doors of UL.

The PSU represents the postgraduate community in every aspect of college life, from academic issues to helping students adjust to their new surroundings. The PSU offers interest-free hardship loans and childcare bursaries through the Financial Aid Committee.

The PSU is funded by a capitation fee that comes directly from UL. The fees are paid in instalments to the PSU by the Fees Office over the course of the academic year. Once the money is transferred, the PSU is mandated to give 66% of the capitation fee to Clubs & Societies (a constituent part of UL Student Life) after the president's and vice-president's wages have been deducted. That split is required by UL and is specified in the memorandum of understanding (MoU) between UL Student Life and the PSU. In addition, the PSU makes an annual financial contribution to UL Student Life as a flat fee for services provided. These services include payroll, reception desk and support from the Democracy Development Manager and the Leadership Coordinator.

As specified in the PSU constitution, the PSU's mission is as follows:

The Union alone shall represent and defend the interests of postgraduate students of the University of Limerick on departmental, faculty, university and other committees and shall be empowered to negotiate on all matters concerning both the employment of postgraduate students and the remuneration for such employment within the University.

The PSU is governed by, in descending order of authority:

1. Referendum
2. General Meeting
3. PSU Council
4. PSU Executive

Members to Council and Executive are elected at the AGM

The PSU is managed by an elected president and vice-president/treasurer (referred to as the vice-president hereafter). The president is a full-time sabbatical officer, and the vice-president is a full-time student who works part-time for the PSU. Neither post-holder can serve more than two terms of office. As elected officers, the president and vice-president are paid an allowance but are not employees of the PSU. (The PSU does not have any employees.)

All postgraduate students currently registered at UL are deemed to be full members of the PSU. This includes full-time and part-time students, on-site and distant learners, taught and research master's students and PhD candidates.

3 Preliminary Comments of the Quality Review Group (QRG)

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

The number of postgraduate students in UL is approximately 2,600, of which almost 2,000 are on one-year taught master's programmes, the remainder being PhD candidates. Some 1,000 are international students, in almost all cases experiencing UL and Ireland for the first time at the commencement of their postgraduate studies. The PSU represents all postgraduate students, through one elected sabbatical officer (the President) and a part-time Vice-President.

The QRG met with the officers of the PSU and with stakeholder representatives, for discussions based on the self-assessment report (SAR) prepared for us by the PSU. In all of our engagements, we were met with friendliness, a frank and open discussion of relevant issues, and a willingness to deal with our queries fully in an open and honest manner.

The QRG found the PSU SAR to be a clear and thoughtful review of the work of a very busy and committed students' union. The SAR was prepared by the outgoing president of PSU, but reflects extensive consultation with the incoming president and other stakeholders. We wish to express our appreciation of the effort involved in the report and in providing us with all the additional detail that we requested. We also appreciate the fact that the PSU agreed to inclusion in the UL quality review process, although, as an independent entity, it had no obligation to do so.

The postgraduate students we spoke to commended the range and quality of the services provided by the PSU, especially the willingness of the union to represent and advocate for students experiencing difficulty, either in their academic progress or in other areas of their lives. At the same time, it is clear that the union is under substantial pressure because of increasing student numbers with diverse needs, and its reliance on one sabbatical officer (the President) and one part-time officer to fulfil its role. The quality of the union's performance is dependent on continuing to find excellent officers to fill the elective posts.

The role, and hence the appropriate structure, of the PSU, including its relationship with the UL Students' Union (now UL Student Life), formed a large part of our discussions. While the provision of separate advocacy and support services for the very diverse postgraduate student population is clearly warranted, the dependence of the PSU on the efforts of its president raises questions about its ability to provide a wide range of services consistently into the future without additional support.

The university recognises the very valuable role of the union, but we were informed that this recognition is not always manifest in individual cases where the union is representing the concerns of a student. A formal recognition of the shared interest of union and university in support for postgraduate students would be welcome.

It is understandable that a major strategic planning exercise has not been undertaken by the PSU to date, although we welcome the fact that the union does intend to draft a strategic plan. Our recommendations are intended to support this process by suggesting means by which the PSU may ensure the continued provision of consistent support and advocacy for the diverse and growing postgraduate student population.

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

4 *QRG Commendations and Recommendations*

4.1 *Commendations*

The QRG commends the following:

No.	Commendation
1	The dedication, hard work and strong advocacy on behalf of postgraduate students by the PSU President and Vice President, given the limited resources available.
2	The PSU open-door policy and the obvious sense of visibility and accessibility that is clear to the students served by the union.
3	The unique variety of PSU programmes and services that support the social, cultural and educational needs of the union's constituents.
4	The diligent and highly committed work of the PSU in support of the unique needs of international students.
5	The use of a variety of methods, including Facebook, the union website, Twitter and common-room postings, to communicate and share information with members.
6	The delivery of inclusive events such as Holi, which was a collaboration with the International Education Division.
7	The provision of a dedicated space with facilities for postgraduate students to meet and socialise.
8	The very impressive service user reach, given that 89 per cent of postgraduate students are either 'very familiar' or at least 'somewhat familiar' with the presence of the union.
9	The very effective targeting of PSU events towards issues that specifically and uniquely affect postgraduate students, which is a great way of facilitating student engagement with the PSU.
10	The clearly effective mediation to facilitate resolution to supervision issues.

4.2 Recommendations

The QRG recommends the following:

4.2.1 Level 1 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
1	Maintain UL Student Life and the PSU as separate unions.	The PSU serves a unique subset of the student population, with unique interests, case management issues and legal needs. The PSU should continue operating independently.
2	In conjunction with UL, and UL Student Life where appropriate, revisit the finance, funding, financial planning and reporting arrangements for the PSU, paying regard to the delivery of services that are unique to the postgraduate community and identifying those functions, activities or processes that could be supported through MoUs or partnership agreements with either UL Student Life, UL or both.	There seems to be a legacy issue around finance which is resulting in tensions and at times entrenched positions and distrust, both in relation to UL Student Life provision of resources and support to the PSU and the PSU's requesting such support. This being said, the QRG did find evidence of good support and collaboration, especially in relation to staff representation support, officer training and, more recently, casework. However, there are certainly areas where thinking more strategically and developing a partnership approach could definitely be improved by both organisations, which would ultimately benefit the students.
3	Proceed with plans to review and draw up a new mission and constitution, developing and including both vision and organisational values in this process.	The PSU plans to review both the mission and constitution during the 2018/19 academic year and to hire a solicitor to review the constitution. Organisational values provide a framework for decision making, programmes and services, while also providing checks and balances. Special attention should be paid to mission, vision and values as they relate to equality, diversity and inclusion.
4	Develop a PSU Advisory Board, structured to ensure that students comprise at least fifty percent of the group and that student advocacy and representation are not lost.	It is important to maintain and build relationships with key university partners, including Student Academic Administration, Student Affairs, UL Student Life, Sports, Graduate Studies, the Writing Centre, the International Education Division, accommodation providers and other partners. An advisory board would not be a decision-making body, but intended to enhance collaboration, communication and, information sharing and to build support for PSU programmes and services.
5	Proactively engage with the Dean of Graduate Studies and Assistant Deans for research in the faculties to foster an active	Building strong relationship with UL key service providers will aid the PSU in its endeavours and may yield potential opportunities for the union.

	partnership to support the advocacy work of the PSU.	
6	Recruit a dedicated staff support person, with the relevant advocacy, mediation and academic caseworker experience, who is independent from the university but can work closely with UL Graduate & Professional Studies and Assistant Deans for Research in order to ensure a student-centred approach.	<p>It became evident from the SAR and the president's handover document that casework for postgraduates and PhD students is a large part of the role. The president's role is primarily to represent students and act strategically for the benefit of all postgraduates. Having a dedicated staff member would help free up time to facilitate this.</p> <p>It was also noted that an elected president may not have the expertise, skills, time or knowledge required to support what can sometimes be complex cases. There was discussion regarding several cases which were not resolved satisfactorily and led to students leaving UL.</p>
7	Revisit governance of the PSU entity as it grows.	The PSU may need to act as an employer as it expands. All the contingent responsibilities it would have as an employer should be explored.
8	Enhance handover training for elected officers, extending the length of the training period and ensuring timely delivery and relevant reinforcement sessions.	The current approach to training and handover relies too heavily on the current president, their skills and availability, and the PSU might consider including training in a service agreement with UL Student Life, taking advantage of the training programme they have already established.
9	In conjunction with UL, and UL Student Life where appropriate, review postgraduate spaces on campus to assess their current use and discuss future postgraduate requirements with UL.	<p>Postgraduates are not one homogenous group. In reviewing requirements for postgraduate provision, it is important to think about different postgraduate cohorts, such as international students, PhDs and commuting students, who may need distinctly different supports and facilities.</p> <p>The UL Student Life building will become available when the new student centre opens in 2020.</p>
10	Work with UL and UL Student Life to develop a data-sharing agreement post GDPR and undertake GDPR training to ensure that communication and data handling can be effective.	There is a serious issue regarding data sharing affecting both the PSU and UL Student Life post GDPR, which needs to be rectified as soon as possible.
11	Increase efforts to collaborate with existing services in order to tackle postgraduate-specific issues.	There need to be more workshops around issues such as student/supervisor relationships and professional development, in which the PSU works collaboratively alongside the services that usually deal with these problems, so that postgraduate students feel even more engaged with the union and confident that it supports them on these issues.

12	Creates a database on student casework.	There is a need to record service users and their queries in order to understand the frequency of particular problems and to work this into the development of the union and its services, but also to use as evidence to inform university policy and decisions.
13	Engage an external facilitator to engage with UL Student Life and the PSU to develop a new model of working (facilitated by a restorative ethos) that is empowering and fair to both, the outcome of which is protected by an MoU that addresses services duplication and financial fairness.	There are clearly residual issues since the formation of the PSU. Continued differences do not serve well the organisations or the students they serve. Transparent communication and trust are at the core of building sustainable relationships, especially in organisations where key personnel change relatively frequently.
14	Develop a media and communications strategy which is essential to raise awareness of the activities of the PSU and to create a forum to facilitate the building of relationships and wider engagement with the union.	<p>The building of critical mass to extend the relationships that the PSU can capitalise upon is essential for the effective growth of the union.</p> <p>The PSU website and Twitter should be rejuvenated and efforts should be focused on capitalising on their potential with even stronger branding efforts, a comprehensive events calendar and interactive links.</p>

4.2.2 Level 2 recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Commentary
1	Amend the constitution to combine the Executive and Council.	Executive and Council have met concurrently over the last two years. Given the many responsibilities of postgraduate students, combining the two bodies would be a more effective and efficient use of time and resources.
2	Work with the UL International Education Division to formalise and enhance the buddy scheme, especially for international postgraduate students, and run social events such as the speed-friending initiative to promote integration.	Continued commitment to improving integration, preventing social isolation and building a sense of community is vitally important.

Appendices

A Membership of the QRG

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

B Membership of PSU Quality Team

Mr Dean Lillis	President, PSU
Ms Aimee McKenzie	Former President, PSU
Ms Hala Jaber	Vice President, PSU
Mr Declan Mills	Postgraduate Student