

Quality Assurance Committee

Report of its Workings: August 2018- July 2019

The Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) is a committee set up by Senate at its meeting of 11th May 2017. During the period under review, it was composed of the following members:

Professor Godfrey Baldacchino, in the Chair
Ms Jo-Anne Attard
Professor Maria Attard
Professor Victor Buttigieg
Dr Maria Cassar
Ms Deborah Duca
Professor Ing. Simon Fabri
Ms Veronica Grech
Dr Peter A. Xuereb
Mr Michael Piccinino (until 31.01.2019)
Ms Lara Attard (from 1.02.2019)
Mr Daniel Vella (until 31.01.2019)
Ms Yasmine Ellul (from 1.02.2019)

In attendance: Dr Sandro Spiteri
Ms Angela Tabone

Secretary: Ms Marlene Debono

The QAC met five times in the period under review.

This document is an overview of the work undertaken by, and under the auspices of, the QAC during this second year of its operations.

1. END-OF-STUDY UNIT STUDENT EVALUATION

The Committee reviewed the changes underway to improve the students' experience in end-of-study unit evaluation, with a view to also improving the student response rate. Students could use the My UM app to submit their evaluations at the end of the semester between January and March 2019. Additionally, all students who completed study units in January 2019 were invited to submit their feedback (rather than a sample of around one third, as in previous years).

In spite of these improvements, the response rate for January-March 2019 was 10.17% (compared to 20.8% in May-June 2018 and 25.6% in January-March 2018). This year's total equates to an average of 2.78 student responses per study-unit. The number of study units with a response rate greater than or equal to 30%, and thus permitting valid analysis, was 185 (compared to 228 in May-June 2018 and 238 in January-March 2018).

Such low response rates compromise the validity of the whole exercise. The Committee agreed with the decision taken by the Rectorate that UM academic staff be urged to ask their students to complete their

end-of-study unit evaluation form during the last few minutes of their last lecture of that same study unit.

Moreover, and in line with the suggestions of the external quality audit review, the Committee notes that students also need to see how the suggestions and concerns expressed via their evaluations loop back into their course (as improvements and other corrective actions), thus affirming the soundness and relevance of the exercise.

Given the even poorer student response rate (less than 10%) obtained at the end of the 2nd semester of the academic year 2018/9, the QAC is recommending a rethink of the modus operandi of this important exercise. Student feedback is vital to academic work and, if a central approach is proving difficult to operationalise, then more devolved initiatives of generating and evaluating feedback may need to be considered.

2. STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES

The work of identifying, developing, standardizing and collating these SOPs has been entrusted to the Quality Coordinating Team (QCT), consisting of the QAC Chair, Ms Audrey Cascun (Office of the Secretary), Ms Deborah Duca (RSSD) and Dr Sandro Spiteri and Dr Jonathan Xuereb (QSU).

The QCT has identified around 300 SOPs that cover technical, administrative and academic operations.

All identified administrative and technical SOPs have been uploaded on a dedicated portal on AIMS in a retrievable and searchable format: <https://www.um.edu.mt/operatingprocedures/> The interface between AIMS and the UM website has now been optimized, thanks to the input of IT Services. SOPs are accessible according to three levels of access: internal, specific, or public. The register is being kept up to date: new SOPs have been issued and SOPs in the process of expiring have been updated with the new template.

3. 'BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE' SYSTEMS

It has proved challenging to identify a member of staff who can work on the 'business intelligence' platform; and a first external call did not attract applicants. A renewed effort to recruit externally was made in May 2019. A suitable candidate (Mr Ryan Hamilton) was selected and has started working under the supervision of the Deputy Director of the AIMS Office. Dr Peter Xuereb and Mr Joe Bonello, from the Department of Computer Information Systems, will be exposing the recruit to a couple of projects to induct him into the system.

4. UM STRATEGIC PLAN 2020-2025

The QAC has been following the unfolding of the UM's Strategic Plan (SP) closely, since the SP offers a unique opportunity to benchmark the university's ambitions and objectives with its actions and initiatives. In fact, the QAC proposed that benchmarks which would serve to identify or measure UM's successful achievements in line with purported goals would be sourced from this SP (rather than, for example, Rector Vella's 'Surging Ahead' vision document from 2016).

The first set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) sourced from the draft SP provide a sense of how others can be identified once the SP is approved. KPI selection has been based on the following criteria:

- are achievable within the first year of implementation of the SP, with existing resources
- are related to concrete deliverables
- are related to multiple enabling strategies, or are a pre-requisite to them
- are likely to lead to impact/action on other 'adjacent' enabling strategies.

It is the intention of the QAC to monitor developments in relation to the Strategic Plan in the course of the current academic year.

5. INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL QUALITY AUDIT

UM complied with the requirement to submit to the National Commission for Further & Higher Education (NCFHE) a detailed update of the actions taken in response to the recommendations made as a result of its first External Quality Audit (EQA). The October 2018 update included information on: (1) pending issues, such as the Management Information System and a number of uncompleted Periodic Programme Review exercises; and (2) successfully concluded items, such as the setting up of the Office for Professional Academic Development, the approval of a plagiarism and screening policy for dissertations and theses, and the approval of a document outlining the responsibilities of course coordinators.

UM is also meant to launch an Internal Quality Audit exercise soon, prior to the next EQA cycle, expected in 2021. With this in mind, the QAC has:

- Prepared a revised version of the Quality Assurance Manual (or Self-Assessment Report) – the original document dates from 2015;
- Examined equivalent QA processes in a number of European universities that share the same global ranking as UM; and
- Identified institutional KPIs for UM in both academic and administrative spheres, emergent from the Strategic Plan exercise.

The QAC is also in the process of:

- Identifying good practices at Faculty/Institute/Centre/School (FICS) level, based on data collected from meetings with Deans and Directors in 2015 and 2016;
- Preparing a series of short but catchy communications releases, on the lines of similar efforts by the Committee for Sustainability at UM (C-SUM), that identify good practice and improvements at central or FICS levels; and
- Offering 'mock interviews' with a number of FICS leaders and administrative directors, to help these understand QA requirements and to encourage the process of peer-facilitated, analytic self-reflection.

All these processes are being fully supported by the Quality Support Unit (QSU).

6. PERIODIC PROGRAMME REVIEW

The Quality Support Unit was tasked by Rector to assist in advancing the Periodic Programme Review of the seven faculties whose self-assessment report (SAR) was either submitted but had not been processed by APQRU, or whose submission was still pending. SARs are being evaluated by the QSU to identify commendations, recommendations and action items, both explicit and implicit, in order to guide discussions with stakeholders. Stakeholder meetings (SMs) have been scheduled between June and October 2019. These SMs have been held or are planned in the short term:

28 th June 2019:	Faculty of ICT
1 st July 2019:	Faculty of Theology
24 th September 2019:	Faculty of Education
31 st October 2019:	Faculty of Social Wellbeing

The Faculties of Arts, Science and Built Environment are expected to conclude their periodic programme review during the first semester of this academic year.

Meanwhile, a number of institutes/centres have started working on their own periodic programme review. These include:

Centre for Labour Studies
Institute of Earth Systems
Institute of Tourism, Travel & Culture

7. ANNUAL REPORTS

The template for departmental annual reports had been approved by Senate in June 2018. The UM Annual Reports for 2016 and 2017 were sent for printing late in 2018. Work started in earnest for the UM Annual Report for 2018, with data collated by the Office of the Secretary. The complete first draft was tabled by the end of May 2019.

8. GOOGLE SCHOLAR PROFILES

The number of UM academics with a Google Scholar User Profile has increased from around 450 (September 2018) to 572 (as at 5th June 2019).

The QAC organized an information session on Google Scholar profiles on November 20th which attracted around 40 academics. UM's ten top-cited scholars made brief presentations and offered advice to the audience.

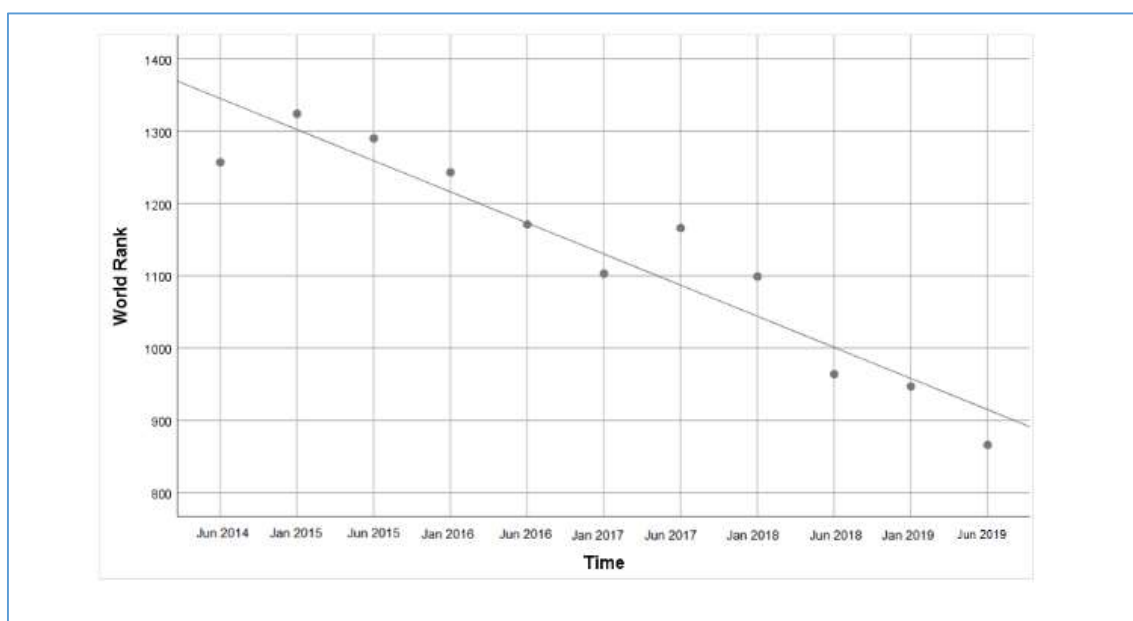
The significance of Google Scholar profiles and their role in university rankings will be highlighted in the promotional campaign being planned by the QAC for the 2019/20 academic year.

9. UNIVERSITY RANKING EXERCISES

UM is taking part in the following ranking exercises: Webometrics, U-Multirank, UI GreenMetric and (for the first time in 2019) the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings.

Participation in the QS (Quacquarelli Symonds) University Rankings has been discontinued because participation in this particular exercise is against payment and comes without a guarantee that UM would feature in the rankings.

UM's position on Webometrics has improved from 1324th place in January 2015 to 866th in July 2019: See Graph below.



DSpace – which is the software used for the Institutional Repository, OAR@UM – was upgraded in June 2019. The depositing of new research content in OAR@UM, and the subsequent indexing of all such material, has also boosted the presence of searchable documents on the UM website via Google and Google Scholar, impacting positively on UM's rankings.

A Task-Force chaired by the QAC Chair, and with wide representation across the campus community, reviews UM ranking results as determined by Webometrics on a six-monthly basis.

10. COMMITTEE FOR SUSTAINABILITY AT UM (C-SUM)

The Committee for Sustainability at UM was announced by Rector at the opening of the 2018/9 academic year. It is tasked with promoting the achievement and consolidation of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. It also takes over the functions and expanded the preliminary work of the Sustainable University of Malta (SUM) initiative that had been launched the previous year under the auspices of the QAC. The C-SUM collaborates with the Green Travel Plan Committee as well as

oversees a number of issues related to, for example, waste separation and recycling schemes. This year it has reported on a number of objectives following the development of the UM Strategic Plan.

The QAC has been following the initiatives taken by C-SUM regularly and supports this thrust into 'quality' matters that goes beyond the strictly academic and engages with the wider notion of 'quality of life' and sustainable living.

11. STUDENT ADMISSION PROCESS

The QAC had been alerted by the Registrar that there were still issues with the timely processing of overseas applications. The Committee was also alerted to the growing difference between applications and enrolments by international students over recent years.

A more expedited admissions process has been put into place for the October 2019 intake. Applicant files have now been digitized, making it easier and faster to send files across campus for action. More conditional acceptance letters have been issued, and earlier than previous years. FICS have also been encouraged to attend to any applicant files expeditiously. Hopefully, such measures will improve the recruitment rate of international applicants to UM.

12. MARKETING PROGRAMMES OF STUDY

The QAC has also advised that the responsibility for marketing specific programmes of study at UM needs to be devolved from central authority to FICS level. In order to improve the ability of FICS personnel to market their specific programmes of study using social media, a 3-session training course was developed by HRMD. When offered in Spring 2019, this course was oversubscribed. Two more sessions have been held at Tal-Qroqq and one at Junior College during 2018/19.

13. COLLABORATION WITH OPAD

Now that UM has set up the Office of Professional Academic Development (OPAD), the QAC will suggest appropriate provision, and will explore possibilities for joint delivery of training. Suggestions for such training include: (1) maximizing the analysis and use of data in developing the F/I/C/S SED as part of the PPR process; and (2) formats and justifications for different types of assessment.