IUQB Response to the EUA Quality Review of Universities in Ireland.
April 2005

1. The European University Association (EUA) conducted a review of the seven Irish universities in the calendar year 2004. The special focus of the reviews was the quality assurance system in place in each university in line with section 35 of the Universities Act 1997. **The reviews were commissioned jointly by the IUQB (acting on behalf of the universities) and the HEA,** in fulfilment of the requirements set out in section 35 (4) and section 49 of the Act. See appendices 1 and 2 for the Terms of Reference and the list of reviewers.

2. In March 2005 the EUA Review Reports were completed. **There were eight reports in all, one for each university and one devoted to the Irish university sector as a whole entitled the EUA Sectoral Report**. The sectoral report notes that it 'was drafted on the basis of the results of the reviews of the seven individual universities. It brings together the salient issued identified by the EUA teams concerning quality assurance across the Irish university sector, and presents a series of recommendations which the EUA teams believe will be useful in the ongoing implementation of quality assurance and quality improvement measures in Irish higher education'.

3. The **IUQB welcomes these reports**. They describe in clear terms the EUA views on the strengths and weaknesses of the Irish quality assurance/quality improvement system across the sector, and make strong recommendations on measures which they feel will improve the system.

4. The EUA teams consider that the **experience gained by the universities so far, individually and collectively, has been invaluable** and should be considered sufficient for the universities, through IUQB, to move on from the initial phase of testing and introducing the QA system, to a second phase of consolidation of the system and its alignment with other strategic processes such as planning, management and staff development.

5. In accordance with the terms of reference for the reviews, the EUA team chairs and secretariat met twice with the **High Level Reference Panel established by the HEA** comprising eminent Irish individuals from outside the university sector. In February 2005 the panel submitted a reflections document to the HEA entitled 'Quality Review of Irish Universities'. **The IUQB welcomes the contribution of the Panel. Their document fully supports and endorses the recommendations in the EUA sectoral report** and the work to date of the universities and the IUQB. It urges prompt compliance with the recommendations contained in the sectoral report and the reflections document.

6. The reflections document goes beyond the EUA review in that it highlights the role of the IUQB in the development of a coherent and accountable quality assurance system across the university sector. **The IUQB notes that this conforms to the observation in the OECD report to the effect that 'the IUQB**

should be allowed to mature.' The IUQB welcomes the views of the Panel. The Panel notes that 'the role of the IUQB has to date been significant in co-ordinating and leading the implementation of best practice procedures and processes across the sector.' It urges the Board to set itself further apart from the universities and establish itself as an independent body with the required changes in the composition of its membership and its legal status.

7. The Board notes that **the implementation of the Panel's recommendations on its structure are already well advanced and indeed are anticipated in the Board's Strategic Plan (2004-2006).** The plan also calls for the establishment of a Task Force which will collaborate with the universities in implementing the recommendations contained in the university and the sectoral reports. This initiative is **strongly endorsed by the HEA which has made a written request to the IUQB 'to provide the HEA with an action-oriented implementation plan'** in respect of the findings of the sectoral report and the Panel's reflections document. This plan should be submitted to the HEA as soon as possible. The Authority also decided to maintain an on-going review of progress and development by considering this issue every six months on the basis of an up-date report from the IUQB.

Compliance with the Act

8. In discussing the recommendations contained in the sectoral report, and the steps taken for their implementation, it is important to note that **the report confirms the achievements to date of the universities and the IUQB** in the area of quality assurance **in complying with the requirements of the Universities Act, 1997.**

9. Based on a detailed examination at each university, the EUA teams confirmed that the Irish universities have established quality assurance procedures and that they are functioning as part of the daily work of each university. The system is staffed and supported, is yielding results and has promise for the future.

10. **The EUA teams confirm that the Irish universities have complied with their statutory obligations** and indeed have taken considerable additional steps towards developing strong internal quality cultures, essential for the ongoing development of higher education in Ireland.

11. The sectoral report highlights the achievements to date of the universities and the IUQB in establishing a successful quality assurance process across the sector. **The EUA teams were unanimously impressed by the well organised systems in place, by the seriousness of the approach in each university, and by the amount of work undertaken by departments, faculties, service units and the university leadership and administration to ensure the success of these procedures. They particularly commend the agreed IUQB focus on quality improvement.**

12. This **systematic organisation and promotion of quality assurance** at the initiative of the universities themselves is, in the opinion of the EUA teams, **unparalleled in any other country in Europe, or indeed in the United States and Canada**. The system would appear to strike the right tone and combination of public interest, accountability, and university autonomy. It encourages a greater focus on quality and improvement than some systems worldwide, while at the same time being less intrusive than some other systems in Europe.

13. The EUA report notes that all this activity has taken place without the existence of a governmental agency or of any direct links to the distribution of core governmental funding. These are, in the opinion of the EUA teams, extremely important and positive points, which have resulted in a general acceptance among academic and administrative staff of the usefulness and indeed necessity of quality assurance activities, and in a positive focus on improvement rather than the negative connotations associated with perceived "inspections" of quality. The role of the IUQB has been central in fostering this approach.

Principal concerns and recommendations in the reports

14. The sectoral report analyses in some detail the QA systems in use in the universities, their effectiveness in driving change, and the degree to which they harmonise with, and are used in, strategic planning at top management level.

15. **At operational level the report recommends tightening the procedures** for self-assessment, peer review/site visit, and follow-up in implementing recommendations for improvement. At university level the report asks for more involvement of top management, and the integration of the QA processes into the institutional strategic planning system.

16. We note that since the IUQB was not specifically included in the terms of reference of the EUA review the Board's initiatives in organizing and carrying through projects aimed at improvement across the sector get little mention in the report. These projects are based on recommendations contained in peer review group reports in all the universities and are funded by the HEA though the Quality Assurance Programme funded under the National Development Plan 2000-2006. **Through collaboration** by experts in the seven universities and international benchmarking via international seminars **the Board is producing a series of good practice publications in the areas of research, teaching and learning, strategic planning/management.**

   Several of these projects anticipate recommendations in the sectoral report. The need for detailed information systems is already being addressed by a sectoral project entitled 'Institutional Research'. A recommendation on PhD programmes is anticipated in the Board's booklet entitled 'Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Universities'. This booklet is the first in a series and was launched in NUI Maynooth in February 2005 on the occasion of the Board's

third international conference. The IUQB's project entitled 'Strategic Planning in Academic Departments' is already developing good practice in strategic planning and will contribute to the implementation of the EUA recommendations in this area.

Process:

17. **A negative result** of focusing the review process on departments, at least during the initial phase, **has been to reinforce existing academic structures** and boundaries, without necessarily questioning the reasons for these. It may therefore be useful in certain cases in the future to evaluate groups of cognate departments or units, such as schools or faculties, allowing for a broader view of the discipline and its place within an institutional context.

18. The current system of evaluations **does not systematically address interdisciplinary issues or programmes,** since these often fall between academic units. Guidelines for self-assessment and peer reviewers should make explicit mention of the need to include all relevant interdisciplinary work also within the scope of the review.

19. **The schedule (of reviews) is not based on any university-level strategy**, e.g. executive succession in a particular faculty or school, or professional accreditation processes underway in parallel involving certain departments, or a major external change bringing a particular opportunity or threat to which the university should respond. The EUA teams therefore suggest that the timing of evaluations in the next phase be approached in a more strategic way.

20. The **EUA teams considered that a cycle of ten years was too long.** Whatever the length of review cycle in the university, in no case did this appear to be linked to the length of any other cycle, e.g. strategic planning or the term of office of Deans.

21. Notwithstanding the detailed requirements of the 1997 Universities Act, the universities may also wish to consider whether the second round of evaluations should necessarily cover all units again, or whether this new cycle should focus on weaknesses identified during the first round and other issues, such as interdisciplinary work, not always fully covered in the first cycle.

22. The EUA teams were surprised to note that the implicit links which should exist between other QA mechanisms and the formal quality review process were not always evident at unit and at institutional levels. In some cases, the links did not appear to be seriously considered at all.

Self-assessment:

23. The EUA teams commented on the length of time available for the self-assessment phase - in many cases a whole year. This was felt by the EUA teams

to be excessively long, and not necessarily resulting in better outputs than if the time had been strictly limited to, for example, three months.

24. **The role of students in the self-assessment process at department level in each university appeared to be rather limited**. While post-graduate students often had a formal representative on the self-evaluation committee, the role of undergraduates was reported to be minimal. This lack of student involvement was surprising to the EUA teams, all the more so since very few systematic student feedback mechanisms appeared to be in place to ensure that departments had regular and clear information from students regarding the quality of teaching and of the learning environment. The EUA teams were of the opinion that much greater levels of student involvement and student feedback would be highly beneficial to the self-evaluation.

25. The EUA teams are of the opinion **that some departments have not taken full account of the external environment** in which they are operating and which will affect their future activities. The context in Ireland and at European level is evolving very rapidly, and self-assessment and peer review reports need to place their work in this wider context.

26. **Some departments do not take full account of the institutional context** when conducting their self-assessments. This contextual element needs to be better managed by each university in order to ensure that the self-assessment documents are also of use for wider institutional planning and management.

27. It is suggested that the length of self-assessment reports be strictly limited to a maximum of thirty pages, plus the necessary annexes.

28. In order for a departmental self-assessment to be complete, the EUA teams consider that this should normally also cover that department's links with the relevant university services which affect the quality of the department's work. Such services could include, e.g. the library, student services, human resources, staff development, etc

Peer Review:

29. Concern was voiced on a number of occasions regarding the composition of the peer review teams. For the second round, **it is recommended to take a more open and flexible approach to the choice of team members.** The EUA teams do not see the necessity of having so many places taken by internal peers, nor why teams should necessarily include peers from other Irish universities. Indeed, given the small size of the country and the important differences in structure and profile between several of the universities, it might be much better to have completely independent peers from outside the country.

30. Likewise, concern was expressed at the practice apparently accepted in all universities of the unit under review nominating a shortlist of its own candidates as peer reviewers. The EUA teams urge the Irish universities to ensure that any

direct link between the unit under review and the choice of peers for that review is cut.

31. The EUA teams learned that, in many cases, these peer review reports contained unrealistic recommendations regarding the need for additional resources, and did not take full account of the wider situation at the university.

32. It is suggested that the terms of reference and guidelines for peer reviewers be updated. The teams should be asked to emphasise a wider view of quality – including internationalisation, interdisciplinarity and research, and to support strategic change. **A clear distinction should be made between those recommendations which can be implemented without significant additional resources and those which do indeed require new investment**. The peer review reports should also be clear and unambiguous, to ensure that responsibility for the implementation of their recommendations is assigned to the correct level.

Quality improvement, follow-up:

33. While the quality assurance process is centrally organised and driven, **it has until recently not appeared consistently to have enjoyed the necessary support of senior management and governance at all universities.** Such support is vital to ensure the integration of its outcomes into the wider strategic activities of the institution.

34. In the opinion of the EUA teams, not all the university governing authorities and executives had a coherent view of the outcomes of the quality review process across the university. While reports are prepared regularly for these bodies, these reports do not so far appear to offer a strategic synthesis of results and the implications for improving quality. At the same time, governing authorities and executives do not all appear to offer the necessary support to ensure that the quality review outcomes are used at unit and institutional levels. In particular, the executives need to respond more visibly to the outcomes, even where additional resources may not be available. **The quality improvement plans subsequently developed by many units therefore do not appear to be linked systematically to strategic management or to any other reform process underway across the universities.**

35. In most cases, the EUA teams **saw little substantial evidence so far of systematic follow-up or monitoring at university level** to the quality improvement plans of the various units. Some universities are developing plans for this. Although the Irish QA system is still going through its first full cycle (only one university has already started its second cycle), this follow-up will be essential in demonstrating the long-term effectiveness of the quality assurance process which the universities have put in place. It might be useful, for both internal and external purposes, for the universities to include information on this aspect of their work in their annual quality assurance reports.

36. The EUA teams would encourage the universities to view their entire budgets as quality improvement funds.

37. There is **no system in place in the Irish universities for the performance appraisal of individual staff members**, with the possibility of incentives or sanctions attached to this.

Strategic planning, governance and management:

38. While the quality review process is certainly a consequence of strategic planning, it appears to have little impact so far on the next phase of strategic planning. When the different elements of the university are too isolated from each other, the benefits from the QA system for strategic planning are less than expected. In the opinion of the EUA teams, the feedback from the quality review process to strategic governance and management could be improved dramatically in most universities. The **governing authorities do not appear as yet to have the necessary strategic overview of these issues,** nor do the outcomes of the various quality assurance activities appear to influence in any substantial way the strategic discussions of these bodies.

39. Although governing authorities receive, in most cases, the full results of the formal quality reviews, these can be rather large and indigestible documents. In some universities, there are also large numbers of these documents. **No governing authority appears, however, to have been provided so far with a regular synthetic analysis of quality issues arising from the formal review process which could be used as an input for a substantial strategic discussion**. External members of governing authorities mentioned repeatedly to the EUA teams that in general their discussions tended to veer towards operational issues as opposed to concentrating on strategic ones.

40. The EUA teams remarked that, due to the structures of the universities and the department-based approach of the QA process, a number of strategic issues were not covered by regular review procedures. **The quality review methodology could easily be adapted, as needs arise, to focus on university-wide issues such as teaching methods, modularisation, PhD programmes, non-traditional students, etc.** It may be useful for the university to evaluate such cross-cutting issues from time to time as part of its own strategic development. The lead taken by IUQB in examining such issues at sectoral level should likewise be encouraged further.

41. There is a clear need to strengthen the universities' capacity for analysis about their own situation. This **institutional analytical capacity** should link planning, QA, staff development and the management information systems.

Teaching and Learning:

42. There is little evidence so far to suggest that the QA processes have influenced the overall teaching portfolios of the universities.

43. **The EUA teams were unanimously surprised to find that students have almost no formal input into monitoring or evaluating the quality of teaching and learning in Irish universities**. In many cases, no regular formal feedback on courses and modules is obtained from students at all. The Irish universities need to ensure coherent and regular student feedback on all courses and modules, and for this feedback to be an explicit input to the QA process.

44. The purpose and functioning of **the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) are not yet sufficiently understood across all Irish universities**. In some cases ECTS is not used correctly, e.g. in the relation between student workload and credit allocation. It is rarely used optimally for internationalisation or inter-institutional cooperation.

45. **Good staff development work** is being undertaken in small Centres for Teaching and Learning in each university. Since staff development is crucial for the continuous improvement of quality, the good work which has started in these centres **needs to be developed further**, and to reach greater numbers of staff across each university.

Research Policy and Innovation:

46. The overall numbers of research masters and PhD students as well as post-doctoral fellows are low in most universities. Furthermore, the current fragmented structures have exacerbated this situation, leading to very small and isolated groups of PhD students and post-doctoral fellows in many fields. This is a major challenge for the Irish universities to address, and the EUA teams would like to commend the work undertaken so far by the IUQB sectoral project in this field. **There is a need for all universities to make special efforts to ensure that post-graduate students have the opportunities to join structures and teams, as well as to meet each other and work together for their mutual benefit**.

47. There is **an urgent need** at the majority of the universities **for much better information systems regarding research outputs** across cognate departments, schools, faculties and the university. At present, it is unclear whether the institutions are aware of the very many research initiatives which are underway or planned.

48. Many research projects and centres undergo a variety of quality review procedures linked to their external funding contracts. However, there is a need to ensure greater coherence, in both methodological and logistical terms, between these external reviews and the university's own review processes.

49. In some cases, the peer review reports would appear not to have given due consideration to research activity at the units under review, apart from requesting a list of publications. There may therefore be a need for greater clarity in the

guidelines for self-assessment and peer review, and **for review teams to be explicitly briefed regarding research and research outputs**.

50. Given the average size of the Irish universities, the breadth of disciplines covered, and the need to maintain research as the background for research-based teaching in all disciplines, **there is, in the opinion of the EUA teams, plenty of scope for greater inter-institutional cooperation between universities and also with other organisations in order to create internationally competitive critical mass in many research fields**. In general, the EUA teams viewed the links between Irish universities and the external world as being very traditional.

Internationalisation:

51. Most Irish universities have only recently developed international strategies and plans, and in some cases these are essentially focused on the recruitment of fee paying students, rather than the internationalization of teaching, learning and research at the university for the benefit of the Irish students.

52. Irish universities have recently been making real efforts to attract foreign students, notably fee paying students. They also continue to be a popular and over-subscribed destination for Erasmus mobility students from other EU states, as well as for Junior Year Abroad students from the USA. However**, the EUA teams were disappointed to note that in most universities there was little push to send Irish students abroad,** despite the fact that those students who had been abroad appeared to have benefited considerably from the experience. In a number of universities, going abroad for a year or semester often meant that that period had to be repeated on return to Ireland, since the study undertaken abroad was not recognized. This is contrary to the principles of ECTS and the Bologna Process and a clear disincentive for Irish students to become more mobile. The universities need to examine closely their current practices in this field and amend where necessary such restrictive recognition procedures. Interestingly, students who went abroad as part of an obligatory work experience placement did not appear to face such problems.

53. One particular issue is **the overall low exposure of Irish students to foreign languages**. This is a challenge shared by other English-speaking countries, but nevertheless could constitute a long-term disadvantage to individual Irish students and have wider collective social and economic effects, given that the labour market is now international. In more immediate terms, the lack of foreign language competences of many young Irish students seriously hinders their opportunities to benefit from an international component to their study programmes.

Conclusion

The **IUQB wishes to thank the EUA for their excellent work** in reviewing the Irish universities. At all stages of the process they engaged in a focused and professional

manner with the IUQB, the HEA, the High Level Reference Panel and university staff and students. Their guidelines set out clearly what was expected of the universities, and the site visits were models of their type. **The final reports highlighted the achievements to date of the universities in the area of quality assurance/quality improvement and, most importantly, pointed the way for future developments**. Their robust analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the work already done, and *the* **recommendations for improvement in the immediate future, will serve the universities and the IUQB well as they set about their implementation. Working with the HEA and the universities the IUQB will play its part in this important endeavour.**