

IHEQN

**Irish Higher Education Quality
Network**

**‘And Never the Twain Shall Meet’? Exploring Quality
Assurance and Professional Accreditation/Recognition in a
Changing World**

Context Paper for Participants

17 October 2006, Conrad Hotel, Dublin

1. Executive Summary

The Irish Higher Education Quality Network (IHEQN) was established in 2003. It provides a forum for the principal national stakeholders¹ involved in the quality assurance of higher education and training to discuss quality in a national and international context, to work towards the development of a common national position on key quality assurance issues and to inform the debate on those same issues at a European level. It includes representation from all of the awarding bodies and agencies involved in quality assurance and the Department of Education and Science (DES), the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the Council of Directors of Institutes of Technology (CDIT) and higher education and training providers. The Network also provides the opportunity to work with the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) to develop the input of students into quality assurance processes.

'And Never the Twain Shall Meet'? Exploring Quality Assurance and Professional Accreditation/Recognition in a Changing World is the first conference of the IHEQN. The conference aims to:

- foster better understanding of professional accreditation/recognition and higher education quality assurance processes
- explore opportunities for the closer alignment of professional accreditation/recognition and higher education quality assurance processes
- identify further communication opportunities and vehicles for communication between higher education institutions and professional bodies

Much of the education and training for the professions in Ireland is carried out within the higher education environment. This has led to long-standing relationships between professional bodies and higher education institutions, centred on the needs and requirements both for practice and for the delivery and award of qualifications. Recent developments at a national and European level – including the introduction of the National Framework of Qualifications and the impact of European legislation, mainly through EU Directives – have raised issues relating to the processes and practices of quality assurance and professional accreditation that are of interest to both higher education and training institutions, to professional organisations and to public bodies. These issues will be the focus of presentations, case studies and workshops at the forthcoming conference.

The purpose of this short context paper is to provide an overview for conference delegates of how higher education and training organisations and professional bodies operate (particularly in terms of quality assurance and accreditation/recognition processes), to outline the national and European developments impacting upon them and to identify some of the themes that will feature in the IHEQN's inaugural conference.

¹ The full list of IHEQN member organisations is included in the Appendix.

2. Conference Themes

This section draws out some of the possible areas of common interest to professional bodies and higher education and training institutions which are likely to feature amongst the topics for debate in the forthcoming conference.

Research carried out by the UK based Professional Associations Research Network (PARN) in 2004² indicates that of those professional bodies who participated in the study, 52% developed and designed their own initial training syllabus, 76% accredited qualifications offered by others and 32% accepted specific qualifications offered by others but did not design or accredit them. This research helps to quantify the level of activity between professional bodies and higher education and training institutions and provides a context for the following themes which will feature at the forthcoming conference:

- Where quality assurance and accreditation/recognition processes co-exist there is a real risk of unnecessary duplication of effort to meet the needs of the two processes which in many ways are similar but which by their very nature differ in their functions. A key part of this conference is to review examples of how higher education and professional bodies have acknowledged this risk and attempted to address it and to discuss how and whether these examples have general applicability.
- The introduction of the National Framework of Qualifications is increasingly impacting upon higher education and training awarding bodies and providers and professional bodies alike. It has made quality assurance a pre-requisite for inclusion or alignment with the Framework and placed learning outcomes at the centre of education and training. This has created an education and training environment in which all those participating are, by their nature, inter-related and open to comparison. As these developments remain relatively new, it appears an opportune time for greater communication on this topic between higher education and training institutions and professional bodies.
- The focus on learning outcomes presents interesting opportunities for both professional bodies and higher education and training providers involved in programme design. The nature of professional programmes appears to lend itself to the practical aspects of learning outcomes which necessitate the identification of types and levels of knowledge, skill and competence
- One of the core reasons for the establishment of the IHEQN was to increase communication between the key organisations involved in quality assurance in higher education and training in Ireland. The Network also provides a basis for others to communicate with its members. The manner in which professional bodies can increase their inter-communication, and be communicated with, is a matter worthy of consideration. In the light of the rapid developments alluded to above, opportunities for sharing information

² Friedman, A. & Mason, J. 2004, *Professional Associations in Ireland: A Comparative Study with the UK*, (PARN) pg. 75. The responses of 25 professional bodies were recorded as part of the study.

and experience between professional bodies and higher education organisations would appear highly advantageous.

Existing differences between professional bodies and higher education and training institutions are the product of legislative and individual responsibilities rather than any fundamental differences in understanding regarding the aims, design and delivery of professional programmes. Any notion remaining of academic ivory towers has been gradually eroded as mass higher education, the increasing relevance of higher education and training to all aspects of modern society, legislation, market forces and quality assurance processes have led to the increased involvement of stakeholders in all aspects of education and training programmes.

National and European legislation and developments, the increasing importance of learner and worker mobility, as well as the role of market forces, are dominating the landscape of higher education and the professions. In this context, national differences and interests come second to adapting to these developments and being associated with quality, and excellence of provision and practice, in a European and international setting. It is this joint endeavour that underlines the themes running through this conference and which it is hoped will lead not only to discussion and debate but also to the prospect of concrete proposals for increased collaboration and communication in the future.

3. Setting the Context at the National and European Level

The following section provides an overview of the range and type of higher education institutions and professional bodies that are currently operating in Ireland. It also refers to the legislative basis, or otherwise, for their adoption of quality assurance and accreditation/recognition processes.

3.1 Higher Education and Training Providers / Awarding Bodies

- Undergraduate and graduate higher education and training in Ireland is provided by Universities, Institutes of Technology, the Dublin Institute of Technology, Colleges of Education, other state aided colleges and colleges within the independent sector.
- The authority to make higher education and training awards is set out in national legislation. Those bodies with a statutory right to make awards in Ireland include the universities - University College Dublin, University College Cork, the National University of Ireland, National University of Ireland Galway, National University of Ireland Maynooth, the University of Dublin (Trinity College), Dublin City University and the University of Limerick - the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC). HETAC is the awarding body for the Institutes of Technology and other non-university higher education colleges and institutions. It may also delegate the authority to make awards to an Institute of Technology. Currently, authority has been delegated by HETAC to each of the thirteen Institutes of Technology to make awards to at least level 8 in the National Framework of Qualifications.

3.2 Quality Assurance - National Developments

- The principal legislation underpinning quality assurance in higher education and training in Ireland is the Universities Act 1997 (www.irishstatutebook.ie/1997_24.html) and the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 (www.irishstatutebook.ie/ZZA26Y1999.html).
- The Universities Act 1997 sets out the requirement for each university to establish procedures for quality assurance ‘aimed at improving the quality of education and related services provided by the university’³, to carry out evaluations of departments, faculties and services at regular intervals and to review the effectiveness of its quality assurance procedures and the implementation of the findings which have arisen through the application of these procedures.
- The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 sets out the requirements for each provider whose programmes lead to HETAC awards, or which has delegated authority, to establish quality assurance procedures ‘for

³ Universities Act, 1997 Section 35 (1).

the purposes of further improving and maintaining the quality of education and training which is provided, organised or procured by that provider'⁴ and to evaluate at regular intervals each programme of education and training and the services related to each programme. The Act also sets out the general quality assurance arrangements for the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT).

3.3 Quality Assurance - European Developments

- Recent quality assurance developments in European higher education and training have largely been driven by the Bologna Declaration. The ultimate aim of the Bologna Declaration is to establish a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. The adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, the establishment of a transferable credit system, the promotion of mobility and the promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance were amongst the mechanisms identified as being required to achieve the EHEA.
- A Bologna Follow-Up Group was established at a European level to meet twice a year to chart the progress of the signatory countries towards realising this aim. It provides information for the meetings of European Ministers responsible for higher education, which take place every two years and issue Communiqués based on their discussions.
- The importance of quality assurance to achieving the EHEA was prioritised at the Berlin summit of Ministers in 2003. The Berlin Communiqué gave a mandate to the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) 'through its members, in cooperation with the EUA⁵, EURASHE⁶ and ESIB⁷', also known as the E4, to develop 'an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance' and to 'explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies, and to report back through the Bologna Follow-Up Group to Ministers in 2005'⁸. In response to this mandate, ENQA published its report, *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. The report set out the standards for internal and external quality assurance arrangements for higher education institutions and the internal quality assurance standards for quality assurance agencies. It also proposed the establishment of a system of cyclical review of national quality assurance agencies and a European register of quality assurance agencies.
- The *European Standards and Guidelines* (ESG), as they have come to be called, were adopted at the Bergen summit in 2005 and thereby entered the national quality assurance arena. It is envisaged that National agencies wishing to feature in the proposed register of quality assurance agencies will be reviewed against these European criteria.

⁴ Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 Section 28 (1).

⁵ European University Association – represents universities and national associations of universities at European level.

⁶ European Association of Institutions in Higher Education – represents the equivalent of Institutes of Technology at European Level.

⁷ National Unions of Students in Europe – represents national students' unions at European level.

⁸ 'Realising the European Higher Education Area Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers for higher education in Berlin on 19 September 2003'.

- In order to become a full member of ENQA, applicant agencies must comply with the *European Standards and Guidelines*. In July 2006, HETAC was the first organisation in Europe to be successfully reviewed under these criteria.

3.4 Quality Assurance – National Organisations

- There are a number of national organisations involved in reviewing quality assurance procedures and the effectiveness of these procedures in Ireland: the Higher Education Authority (HEA), HETAC, the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI).
- The HEA was established in 1972. It is responsible for furthering the development and assisting in the co-ordination of State investment in higher education. The HEA has a statutory function to assist universities in achieving their quality assurance objectives, to review and report on the quality assurance procedures developed by the universities and to be consulted by the universities in their review of the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures.
- HETAC was established under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. Its functions include the agreement of quality assurance procedures with providers delivering programmes that lead to HETAC awards, as stipulated under section 28 (1) of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. HETAC is also responsible for reviewing the effectiveness of provider quality assurance procedures and the implementation of the findings which have arisen through the application of these procedures.
- The IUQB was established by the seven Irish universities in 2002 to increase the level of inter-university co-operation in developing their quality assurance procedures and processes. It was delegated authority by the governing authorities of each university to organise the periodic review of the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures in place in the universities, as required under Section 35(4) of the Universities Act 1997, IUQB also plays a key role in working with the universities on the implementation of the findings from these reviews. IUQB was established as an independent body in February 2006.
- The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland was established under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. In terms of quality assurance the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland's key responsibilities are the review of the Awards Councils' performance of their functions (i.e. HETAC and FETAC⁹) and the review of the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures of the DIT.

⁹ The Further Education and Training Awards Council

3.5 Professional Bodies and Accreditation/Recognition

- There are over one hundred professional bodies operating in Ireland with membership numbers ranging from less than one hundred to several thousand. There are currently no grounds set by the State regarding the basis upon which professional bodies can be established or recognised.
- The role and functions of professional bodies can include the regulation of a profession or of the use of a professional title, representing and promoting the advancement of a profession, providing opportunities for the continuous professional development of members and protecting the public interest by setting standards and ensuring that members perform in accordance with these standards.
- There are relatively few regulated professions in Ireland. For those professions that are regulated, a competent authority is assigned to determine the eligibility or otherwise of applicants seeking to work within that field. The role of the competent authority in this context is to maintain a register of persons whose qualifications are recognised for the purpose of working in the profession and to review and make decisions on qualifications presented from abroad, in accordance with the relevant EU Directives. A number of other professions have informal or voluntary systems of registration organised by the respective professional body.
- The accreditation/recognition processes in place for reviewing the provision of professional education and training in higher education and training institutions varies from body to body and often depends upon the basis under which the professional body was established. Professional bodies can be established by statute or Charter and their memberships and/or their qualifications can also be recognised by statute or Charter. These professional bodies award qualifications that may lead to membership and/or registration. Some professional bodies that are not based in statute or Charter have, nevertheless, strong public recognition for their membership and/or their qualifications.
- Some professional bodies, do not make awards themselves, but provide membership or registration based on the achievement of the awards of other awarding bodies (predominantly in the higher education and training sector) or other criteria not administered by the professional or registration body. Other professional bodies provide for membership or registration following an assessment process similar to that used for the award of qualifications in higher education and training, again often subject to additional criteria.
- Accreditation/recognition processes carried out by professional bodies range from full institutional reviews to the review of a syllabus submitted by a higher education and training institutions.

3.6 Professional Bodies - National Developments

- Examples of two areas within the professional environment which have recently received particular attention from national legislators are health and building. The Health and Social Care Professionals Act (2005) which, at the

present time, has been enacted into law but is not yet implemented and the Building Control Bill (2005), which has reached Committee stage.

- The HSCP Act has essentially introduced a framework for the statutory, as opposed to voluntary, registration of twelve health and social care professionals. It will be accompanied by other forthcoming legislation in the healthcare arena. A registration council will be established to implement the Act, its responsibilities will include protecting the public ‘by promoting high standards of professional conduct and professional education, training and competence among registrants of the designated professions’.¹⁰
- The Building Control Bill (2005) seeks to regulate the use of certain titles and makes a direct reference to the implementation of certain provisions of Directive 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council on the recognition of professional qualifications (see section 3.7).

3.7 Professional Bodies - European Developments

- European developments have impacted upon higher education and professional bodies as specific Directives have been proposed by the EU Commission and adopted by the European Parliament and Council regarding the mobility of services, providers and the recognition of qualifications.
- The proposed Directive on Services in the Internal Market aims to increase competition by eliminating restrictions on market access for service providers and by removing obstacles to the cross-border provision of services within the EU. The Directive’s ‘country of origin’ principle allows service providers to operate their businesses on a temporary basis according to the laws of the country of origin of the service rather than those of the country where the service is being provided.
- EU Directive 2005/36 was adopted in September 2005. It consolidates fifteen existing directives and will come into effect on 20 October 2007. Its purposes include ensuring greater liberalisation of the provision of professional services and securing more automatic recognition of qualifications. In principle the Directive sets out that qualifications which are recognised for a profession in one member state must be equally recognised in another. However, where a qualification is, on comparison, deemed to be of a lower standard, recognition can be refused, subject to conditions relating to the administration of compensation measures in particular instances.
- As well as EU Directives, there exist a number of voluntary initiatives which facilitate the recognition of accreditation decisions on an international basis. For example, quality assurance and accreditation agencies in higher education have formed the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) and professional bodies have established agreements such as the Washington Accord¹¹.

¹⁰ <http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/S/0178/S.0178.200411090005.html>.

¹¹ The Washington Accord was signed in 1989. It is an agreement which provides a mechanism for mutual recognition between signatory bodies of engineering education accreditation processes.

4.0 National and International Developments in Relation to the Transparency and Recognition of Qualifications

The following section describes national and international developments relating to the transparency and recognition of qualifications and the mobility of the learner. It also refers to the impact that these developments have on quality assurance and accreditation/recognition processes.

4.1 The National Framework of Qualifications

- The primary responsibility of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland has been the development and maintenance of the National Framework of Qualifications. The Framework was introduced in October 2003 as a ten level construct, designed to incorporate awards made for all kinds and sizes of learning, regardless of the context in which it takes place. Higher education and training awards are designated levels 6-10 on the Framework¹².
- The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland published ‘level indicators’ to accompany the Framework which indicated the standard of knowledge, skill and competence associated with each level. This solidified the movement in higher education and training in Ireland away from learning inputs and towards learning outcomes and has had a fundamental impact upon the manner in which programmes are designed.
- The awarding bodies recognised for the purposes of having their qualifications included in the Framework are those with statutory power to make awards. The awarding bodies making these awards and the providers delivering them are all subject to statutory quality assurance arrangements.
- A limited number of professional bodies are also awarding bodies under Statute. The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland recently published its policies and criteria for the inclusion of these awards in the Framework and the alignment of the awards of certain Irish bodies which ‘do not make awards on a statutory basis but which recognise the attainment by learners of learning outcomes in a formal way associated with the legal regulation of the operation of a profession or of a professional title by such bodies’¹³. It also makes provision for the alignment of the awards of certain bodies from outside the State which make awards in Ireland. The policies and criteria document goes on to describe the manner in which these categories of professional body can, as appropriate and as part of a voluntary process, be included in, or aligned with the Framework. Apart from inclusion or alignment, a professional body can also choose to submit programmes for validation to one of the awarding councils or to another State awarding body.

¹² Level 6 is shared with further education and training

¹³ *Policies and Criteria for the Inclusion in, or Alignment with, the National Framework of Qualifications of the Awards of Certain Awarding Bodies* National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, July 2006, pg 5

- The introduction of the Framework provides a means of comparing and contrasting national qualifications. The need to order the qualifications system and to ensure that the awards included in the Framework are quality assured has been driven by national, European and international requirements.

4.2 Meta-European Frameworks

- The Bologna Process was initiated in 1999 and there are now 45 countries in Europe working towards the realisation of a common European Higher Education Area (EHEA). In 2003 Ministers of Education called on each of these countries to establish national frameworks of qualifications and for an overarching framework for qualifications to be developed. This overarching framework - the Bologna Framework – was adopted by ministers in Bergen in 2005 and is based on the first, second and third cycles identified in the Bologna Process.
- The rationale for the Bologna Framework is to provide a mechanism to relate national frameworks of qualifications to each other and to enable international transparency, international recognition of qualifications and international mobility of learners and graduates. Following the Bergen meeting of Ministers, Ireland responded to an invitation to undertake a pilot project of the self-certification of the compatibility of the National Framework of Qualifications with the Bologna Framework. A Steering Committee comprising representatives of HETAC, the DIT, the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and two co-opted international experts, is coordinating this work, which is expected to be completed in October 2006. The draft report of the Steering Committee was published in June 2006 (www.nqai.ie/en/International/Bologna/).
- Parallel to these developments and a further extension of the rapid movement towards transparency, cooperation, transferability and mobility in European higher education is the proposed European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The European Commission published a consultative document on the EQF in 2005 and consultation and development work have continued on this proposal since that time. The EQF has been described as acting as a ‘translation device’ that is ‘intended to facilitate citizens’ mobility for work and study alongside, for example, Erasmus, the European Credit Transfer System and Europass’¹⁴. The proposed structure for the EQF will contain 8 levels and will relate to all education and training awards in Europe. It will be fully compatible with the Bologna Framework. The manner in which ‘sectoral awards’ – often trans-national professionally oriented awards - can be facilitated through the EQF is a matter for current debate. One suggestion is that sectoral awards, due to their often pan-European and/or international nature, should be linked directly to the EQF at a European level. This approach may be inconsistent with the EQF’s nature and role as a meta-framework, conflicting in particular with a key feature of the proposed model: that qualifications relate in the first instance to national structures and through these to the EQF.

¹⁴ European Qualifications Framework. Retrieved, 25 August, 2006 from http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/eqf/index_en.html.

Appendix: IHEQN Member Organisations

The Council of Directors of Institutes of Technology (CDIT)

The Department of Education and Science (DES)

The Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT)

The Higher Education Authority (HEA)

The Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA)

The Higher Education & Training Awards Council (HETAC)

The Irish Universities Association (IUA)

The Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB)

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI)

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI)