



## ***Irish Higher Education Quality Network***

# **Principles for reviewing the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures in Irish higher education and training**

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### **Introduction: Purpose and Legislative Background**

Reviews of the 'effectiveness' of quality assurance procedures are a fundamental element of the external system of quality assurance in Irish higher education and training. 'Effectiveness' reviews are undertaken at the institutional level by bodies or agencies external to the higher education institution under review, and allow for periodic evaluation of how well a quality assurance system in an institution is operating and whether it is delivering the intended outcomes for which it has been established.

'Effectiveness' reviews serve two essential purposes. The first of these relates to accountability and transparency. 'Effectiveness' reviews provide one of the key mechanisms for ensuring that the interests of society in the quality and standards of higher education are safeguarded, and for demonstrating the quality of individual higher education institutions at home and internationally. The second purpose relates to quality enhancement. As with other quality assurance processes, the 'effectiveness' review provides an opportunity for an institution to undertake a broad, corporate reflection on the nature and effectiveness of its quality processes and to consider whether they are contributing to the continued development and embedding of a quality culture within the institution.

Under national legislation, provision has been made for the conduct of cyclical reviews of the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures across the entire

Irish higher education and training sector. The Universities Act 1997 (section 35 (4)) provides that each governing authority of a university shall periodically review the effectiveness of its quality assurance procedures. This responsibility has now been voluntarily delegated by each university to the Irish Universities Quality Board in relation to the protocols and the selection of agencies to conduct the reviews. In addition, the Act also sets out that the Higher Education Authority may review and report on the quality assurance procedures developed by the universities, and that the Authority is consulted by the universities in their review of the effectiveness of their quality assurance procedures (section 49 (a)). For a detailed description of the Irish universities' quality assurance system, and the place of external 'effectiveness' reviews within it, see *A Framework for Quality in Irish Universities* (2nd edn.).

The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 (section 28 (4)) provides that the Higher Education and Training Awards Council shall periodically review the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures that it has established for the Institutes of Technology (other than the Dublin Institute of Technology), including those with delegated authority to make awards), and for other providers of education and training programmes, whose programmes have been validated by the Council. For more information on the context and objectives of the Council's institutional review role see *Policy on Institutional Review of Providers of Higher Education and Training*.<sup>1</sup>

The Qualifications Act (section 39 (4)) also provides that the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland shall periodically review the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures established by the Dublin Institute of Technology (in agreement with the Authority) under the Act. The Act also makes provision for similar arrangements in relation to any future universities that are established. For a contextual description of the Qualifications Authority's 'effectiveness' review role, and the procedures used in the same, see *Quality*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.hetac.ie/docs/Policy%20on%20Inst%20Reviews%20December%202007.doc>

Review of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland: Self-Evaluation Report (Document no. 2007/3)<sup>2</sup> and the Authority's published external quality assurance procedures.<sup>3</sup>

The directions contained in the legislation regarding the conduct of 'effectiveness' reviews are not prescriptive with regard to detail. It is possible, therefore, to frame and shape them in a manner that is responsive to the evolving needs of learners, higher education institutions and other stakeholders, and in a manner which endeavours to continually assure and improve the quality of institutions in the rapidly changing, knowledge-based society of the twenty-first century.

All 'effectiveness' reviews undertaken in the Irish higher education and training system to date have drawn on existing international models of good practice in external quality assurance. An important benchmark in this regard is the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (European Standards and Guidelines).<sup>4</sup> This document – which was adopted by the Ministers responsible for higher education in the Bologna signatory states in 2005 – establishes standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions; for the external quality assurance of higher education; and for quality assurance agencies. The European Standards and Guidelines are now being applied and operated in all parts and at all levels of the national system of quality assurance in higher education, including in 'effectiveness' reviews. Of particular relevance here are the European standards and guidelines for the external quality assurance of higher education (Part 2).

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<http://www.nqai.ie/en/FrameworkDevelopment/QualityReviewoftheQualificationsAuthority/File,1881.en.pdf>

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<http://www.nqai.ie/en/PoliciesandProcedures/File,1901.en.doc>

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[http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG\\_v03.pdf](http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_v03.pdf)

The following principles have been agreed by the members of the Irish Higher Education Quality Network. They reflect experience and practice within the sector. They are consonant with the national legislative arrangements that govern reviews of effectiveness of quality assurance procedures; and they are in conformity with the European Standards and Guidelines.

## **Principles**

Providers of higher education and training programmes are responsible for the quality assurance of provision

- Reviews of the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures will take place at the level of the institution by bodies or agencies external to the institution
- Reviews of the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures will take place on a cyclical basis, normally on a quinquennial basis
- Reviews of the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures will have clear terms of reference
- Terms of reference will be finalised following consultation between the institution and the reviewing body
- The starting point for a review of effectiveness is, where applicable, the previous review of effectiveness
- The effectiveness review process will consist of the following elements:
  - Institutional self-evaluation, including preparation of an analytical and reflective self-evaluation report and incorporating a consultation process within the institution
  - Review visit (or visits) by external panel of experts
  - Production of a report by a panel of experts, in which recommendations are clearly set out and distinguished from the general findings

- Production by the institution of a written response which addresses all recommendations and includes a timeline in respect of their implementation
  - Publication of the expert panel's report, the institutional response and, where applicable, any decisions of the reviewing body
  - Establishment and implementation of a clear and timely follow-through process in respect of any quality improvement recommendations, which may include publication of updates on progress
  - All panel reports, reviewing body decisions and progress updates are written in a clear manner and are readily accessible to the intended readership
- The external panel of experts consists of persons who are competent to evaluate the effectiveness of institutional quality assurance procedures, and includes persons with relevant national and international experience, and persons with learner and social partner perspectives.
  - Written guidelines and/or briefing/training are provided to assist review panels to fulfil their role.

#### **The Irish Higher Education Quality Network (IHEQN)**

The Irish Higher Education Quality Network (IHEQN) originated in a discussion amongst higher education and training stakeholders at a National Conference on the Bologna Process on 23 July 2003. During the conference, it was generally agreed that it would be helpful if the main organisations with a role or significant interest in quality assurance in higher education and training in Ireland were to meet to discuss quality in a national context, with a view to working 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. A meeting was held on 9 October 2003, at which it was agreed that it would be desirable for the group to become a formal network, with the designation Irish Higher Education Quality Network (IHEQN).