Irish Higher Education Quality Network

Principles of Good Practice in Quality Assurance / Quality Improvement for Irish Higher Education and Training

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Introduction

The IHEQN has reviewed the legislative requirements and procedures for quality assurance for the different institutions in the Irish higher education sector and has identified a set of common underpinning principles of good practice.

The following principles are agreed by the Network as consonant with the legislative arrangements that govern quality assurance in the Irish higher education sector, and as conforming to the principles outlined in the Berlin Communiqué, and to the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*.

I. General Principles of Good Practice

- The goal of quality assurance is quality improvement including the enhancement of the student experience, and quality assurance procedures reflect this

- The ownership and main responsibility of the quality assurance process resides with the provider – this is an essential condition for promoting internal quality cultures within higher education and training institutions

- All providers are responsible for the establishment of quality assurance procedures that are clear and transparent to all their stakeholders, including staff, students, external stakeholders and the general public, and

which provide for the continuing evaluation of all academic and service departments and their activities

- Quality assurance procedures conform to international best practice and include self-evaluation, followed by review by persons who are competent to make national and international comparisons
- Students, staff and other stakeholders must be involved in the quality assurance process
- Quality assurance procedures include appropriate measures to protect the integrity of the overall quality assurance process
- Quality assurance procedures ensure public accountability and transparency through the publication of the outcomes of the evaluations
- The quality assurance process facilitates continuous improvement through the implementation of findings of evaluations within the resources of higher education institutions
- Quality assurance procedures and their effectiveness are reviewed on a cyclical basis by independent experts and the outcomes of such reviews are published

II. Principles of Good Practice for the conduct of Quality Assurance/Quality Improvement reviews

Review Cycles

- The cycle length of quality reviews – whether they are programme-based, department/unit-based, or institution-based – may vary according to disciplinary or institutional needs. In general, there is a tendency internationally to maintain a quinquennial review cycle.
- Bodies1 responsible for the activation and administration of quality reviews publish a schedule in advance of the commencement of any cycle of reviews. In developing the schedule they adopt a flexible approach,

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[1] Such bodies would include quality assurance agencies and the offices of the Registrar or equivalent or the quality offices of higher education institutions.

consult with the institutions/entities that are to be reviewed and ensure that the latter are given reasonable notice of an impending review.

- Bodies responsible for the activation and administration of quality reviews publish clear and transparent procedures regarding the postponement or cancellation of scheduled reviews.

Self-Assessment

- Bodies responsible for the activation and administration of reviews publish clear and transparent guidelines for the conduct of the self-evaluation process in quality reviews. These guidelines are sufficiently flexible to allow for the range and diversity of the review activities and ensure that creative and innovative approaches to self-evaluation are not discouraged.
- The self-evaluation process in quality reviews engages a wide-range of stakeholders including students, and review guidelines provide clear guidance on how this might be achieved.
- Self-assessment reports :
    - are analytical and reflective;
    - identify strengths, areas for improvements, opportunities and constraints;
    - are concise and to the point.
- In line with current international practice, self-assessment reports are not published.

Composition of Peer Review Groups

- Peer Review Groups always count amongst their number independent, external experts who possess appropriate skills and are competent to perform their task, including, where appropriate, persons who are competent to make national and international comparisons. Where internal experts are included - in the case of some programme-based and department/unit based reviews - they are not closely associated with the programme or department/unit under review. In the case of reviews of

effectiveness of an institution's quality assurance procedures, all Peer Review Group members are external experts.

- Bodies responsible for the activation and administration of reviews publish clear and transparent guidelines regarding the selection of reviewers. These guidelines set out the criteria and process for selecting relevant experts. The process for selecting reviewers guarantees their independence.

- Bodies responsible for the activation and administration of reviews publish clear and transparent guidelines regarding the responsibilities and duties of Peer Review Group members, and ensure that the latter are adequately briefed on these responsibilities and duties and about the contexts (including relevant legislation) in which the reviews are being undertaken.

- Where there are internal members on a Peer Review Group, they are comparable in standing to the external experts.

- Peer Review Group members are contacted only by the bodies responsible for the activation and administration of reviews during the review process, and never by the institution, department/unit or programme provider under review.

Site Visits

- The bodies responsible for the activation and administration of reviews publish schedules for review visits, including indicative timetables.

- The bodies responsible for the activation and administration of reviews publish criteria regarding the selection of staff, students and stakeholders with whom the Peer Review Group will meet, and information about the mechanisms for selection of such staff, students and stakeholders. The selection and composition of staff, student and stakeholder groups is such so as to ensure that the discussions proceed with candour and frankness. The review process is at all times independent, impartial, rigorous, thorough, fair and consistent.

- The review procedures used during a site visit are sufficient to provide adequate evidence to support the findings and conclusions reached.

- When the Peer Review Groups meet with students and stakeholders, no employees of the entity under review are present.

Publication of Outcomes and Follow-up

- Bodies responsible for the activation and administration of reviews publish the outcomes of all reviews. Reports are written in a style which is clear and readily accessible to the intended readership. Any decisions, commendations or recommendations contained in reports are easy for a reader to find.

- Predetermined follow-up procedures exist for acting upon reports, implementing recommendations for action, or developing an action plan. These follow-up procedures are implemented consistently and are publicly available.

Legislation underpinning quality assurance in Irish higher education and training

A matrix setting out the statutory roles and responsibilities – as provided under the Universities Act, 1997 and the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 - of the institutions and the awarding, funding and supervisory bodies, in relation to quality assurance in Irish higher education and training is available on the IHEQN website at the following link: www.iheqn.ie/legislation/default.asp?NCID=182.

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).