

HEA

Higher Education Authority
An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas

REVIEW OF QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCEDURES IN IRISH UNIVERSITIES

REFLECTIONS DOCUMENT PREPARED BY THE HIGH LEVEL REFERENCE PANEL,
CHAired BY MR. JOHN DUNNE.

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FOREWORD

The first external independent review of the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures in Irish universities has now been completed.

This review was jointly commissioned by the Higher Education Authority and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB). The review was undertaken by the European University Association (EUA), which has considerable experience in carrying out reviews of universities across the breadth of Europe. The EUA review teams were comprised of international experts from Europe and North America.

The EUA produced an individual report for each university and an over-arching sectoral report. These reports have been published separately by the EUA.

The concept of universities as ivory towers distant from the daily needs of society is now gone – if indeed it ever existed. Today our universities are actively involved in all areas of society from local community groups to multinational businesses. The HEA considered it important that the views of stakeholders should also be heard in this quality assurance process. Accordingly, and to complement the EUA review process, the HEA, in consultation with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), established a High Level Reference Panel, comprising of stakeholders from wider society and the economy, to provide an external perspective on the social, cultural and economic context within which the Irish universities operate. This panel met with the EUA Review Teams on a number of occasions and subsequently produced this “reflections” document on the EUA process and outcomes.

The maintenance of a high quality internationally benchmarked university sector is an essential pre-requisite to achieving the Government’s stated objective of placing Ireland’s higher education system in the top rank of OECD countries. That top rank is not itself an objective but more a proxy for the multiple objectives presenting themselves to the third level sector. These include:

- Enhancing equality of access to allow all groups to benefit from the rewards of higher education
- Providing the graduates needed by business to sustain economic growth and development
- Providing in particular the PhDs we will need as Ireland, with the EU, commits itself to a quantum leap in research expenditure and activity in order to create and secure our position as a true innovation society.

These are complex and diverse challenges, but they are linked by an over-arching need for quality of educational experience and quality of educational outcomes. In turn, these experiences and outcomes can only be achieved through the creation and on-going development of an effective quality assurance system.

The EUA Review reports and the reflections document of the High Level Reference Panel together point the way forward for the sector.

Much has been achieved – the Authority is particularly encouraged to note that the review process endorses the quality assurance systems currently in place in Irish universities.

The review and the reports are but one phase in the overall quality review process, the next and a most important phase being implementation of findings. The Authority has accordingly requested the IUQB to provide the HEA with an action-oriented implementation plan in respect of the findings of the reports. The Authority will also maintain an on-going review of progress and development.

I would like to thank the members of the High Level Reference Panel for the time and commitment that they have given to this task. I also wish to thank the NQAI for their assistance.

Michael Kelly

Chairman

April 2005

This is a “reflections” document prepared for the Higher Education Authority by the High Level Reference Panel, chaired by Mr. John Dunne.

1. Background

1.1 The first formal review of Quality Assurance procedures and their effectiveness in the seven Irish universities commenced in January 2004 and was completed in early January 2005. This review was undertaken in the context of the requirements set out in Sections 35 and 49 of the Universities Act, 1997. In order to facilitate a more timely and effective review process, the HEA and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) rather than carrying out two separate reviews, jointly commissioned the review, which was undertaken by the European University Association (EUA).

2. Review Methodology

2.1 The review process commenced with the preparation by each university of a detailed self-evaluation report. This report was prepared in consultation with staff and students of the university, and in accordance with EUA guidelines, focussed on the following four questions.

- What is the university trying to do?
- How is the university trying to do it?
- How does the university know it works?
- How does the university change in order to improve?

2.2 Each university was then the subject of a preliminary site visit (two days duration) by a EUA review team, comprised of independent international experts in QA from Europe and North America. The purpose of the preliminary site visit was to allow the review team to gain an understanding of the environment and to measure the robustness of the self-evaluation reports against the reality on the ground. A further site visit to each institution took place some four or five months later, after which individual university reports and a crosscutting sectoral report were prepared by the EUA review team.

3. High Level Reference Panel

3.1 To complement the EUA review process the HEA put in place a High Level Reference Panel comprised of stakeholders external to the universities (membership and terms of reference are detailed in **Appendix 1**). The purpose of the reference Panel was to provide the EUA review teams with an Irish context to the review with particular regard to national social, economic and cultural needs and expectations, and to comment on the outcomes of the process at a sectoral level.

3.2 The reference Panel met on four occasions between May 2004 and January 2005. At its first meeting, the Panel met with representatives of the Higher Education and Training Awards Council

(HETAC), the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) and the IUQB and was provided with an overview on the roles and functions of these bodies in relation to Quality Assurance. The Panel also considered the questions/issues which it would like to see the EUA review group address in the course of its review of the universities.

- 3.3 At its second meeting (May 2004) the Panel met with the EUA team chairs and secretariat and discussed the questions, which the Panel had identified in its Issues Document (**Appendix 3**). The Panel met again with the EUA team chairs/secretariat in December 2004, and was given an initial overview of the findings of the EUA sectoral report.
- 3.4 Finally, the Panel met in January 2005 to consider and agree the content of its “reflections” document to be presented to the HEA.
- 3.5 The Panel welcomed the opportunity to participate in this first review of Quality Assurance procedures in the Irish universities. It considers that the inclusion of perspectives from external stakeholders has added value to the process and recommends that stakeholders should continue to be involved in future Quality Assurance reviews.

4. Views of High Level Reference Panel on EUA Review Process and Outcomes

- 4.1 The Panel considers that the review process utilised by the EUA was both rigorous and comprehensive. The composition of the review teams i.e. independent, international experts and the EUA guidelines, within which the teams operated, clearly combined to ensure the robustness of the process. The Panel is further satisfied that the matters of concern, which it raised with the EUA in its Issues Document, were fully taken into account in the review process.
- 4.2 The Panel welcomes the confirmation from the EUA teams that in aggregate the Irish universities have complied with their statutory obligations in relation to the development of Quality Assurance procedures and indeed have gone further than these statutory requirements in developing strong internal quality cultures and systems. In this context, the Panel agrees strongly with the view of the EUA teams that the Irish university QA system, with ownership of the procedures at individual university level, and focus on quality improvement “would appear to strike the right tone and combination of public interest, accountability, and university autonomy”. The EUA further considers that other countries across the world could learn from the Irish experience. The Panel welcomes this endorsement of the Irish QA system.
- 4.3 Quality Assurance is an ongoing and developing process. In this regard the Panel endorses the view of the EUA teams that the universities now need to move on to the second stage in the

development of their Quality Assurance procedures, building on the system already in place. Important issues have been identified in the sectoral report, which in the Panel's view, the universities will need to address in the context of developing their Quality Assurance procedures still further and ensuring their ongoing success, both nationally and internationally.

4.4 Particular issues raised in the sectoral report on which the Panel would wish to comment, include:

Linkages between Quality Assurance Processes and Other Planning Processes

The absence of a coherent relationship between QA processes, strategic planning and management processes and other reform processes underway across the universities is a cause of concern to the Panel. This is undoubtedly impacting negatively on the quality of the strategic planning processes. Good quality review systems should provide a strong stimulus for strategic change within an institution. The apparent lack of real engagement with governing authorities on the outcomes of quality reviews is a weakness identified by the EUA teams. A further and perhaps more worrying issue identified is the fact that the QA process does not in all universities receive the necessary support from senior management. Such support is vital if the outcomes of QA processes are to be integrated into the wider strategic activities of the institutions. Another weakness identified is the lack of comprehensive management information systems in the universities. The availability of data which is comprehensive, robust, timely and widely accessible, is an essential input to all management and planning processes. It will also be vital in the context of reducing the overall time associated with each QA review, as recommended by the EUA. The Panel strongly endorses the need to strengthen institutional capacity in these areas.

Structure of QA Systems

The EUA highlights the fact that the strength of the QA system has much to do with its structure i.e. it is based on small departmental units, which encourages ownership of the process by individual staff. Yet they also highlight that this structure can lead to fragmentation and a lack of institutional coherence. Departments are subject or discipline based and thus a Quality Assurance process directed at the departmental level will tend to reinforce existing academic structures and boundaries to the detriment of multi-disciplinary activity. In the area of research this can lead to small isolated groups of PhD. students. In addition the department based approach can hinder the review of university-wide issues e.g. modularisation, organisation of PhD programmes, access for non-traditional students, etc. The Panel strongly endorses the view of the EUA that "changes in these structures are necessary in order to create critical mass, to strengthen higher collective levels of responsibility and to support interdisciplinary processes".

Involvement of Stakeholders

The level of involvement of stakeholders in the QA systems is highlighted by the EUA as a weakness. In particular the involvement of students was reported as minimal. The Panel would strongly urge the

universities to put in place systematic student feedback processes covering the quality of both the teaching and learning environment and other support services provided for students.

In addition it appears to the Panel that there is limited engagement through the QA process with industry/business and social partners at both national and regional levels and with other educational and training providers at secondary, further and third level. Such engagement should be strengthened as a priority.

Teaching and Learning/Alternative Modes of Delivery

Progress on structures to encourage widening participation and lifelong learning is slow according to the EUA review teams. The Panel emphasises the need for immediate action in these areas, on a co-ordinated national basis and particularly requests the universities to actively co-operate with the implementation of the recently published action plan of the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education.

The Panel requests the universities to put modularised course structures in place as a priority, to enable the institutions to respond flexibly and effectively to the needs of non-traditional, mature and part-time students and also to facilitate mobility of students internationally. The Panel is concerned that the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) is in many cases not being used either correctly or optimally for internationalisation purposes. This is contrary to the objectives of the Bologna process and the development of the European Higher Education Area and needs to be urgently addressed by the universities.

The implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications and the recently agreed principles and operational guidelines for a national approach to credit in Irish higher education and training, will facilitate progress in these areas. The Panel urges the universities to adopt the learning outcomes approach of the Framework and to incorporate it in their Quality Assurance procedures.

The Panel also noted the issues raised by the EUA in relation to the current requirement for part-time students to pay tuition fees, and the negative impact that this could have in relation to national objectives of increased participation in higher education. The Panel considers that this is an important issue, and deserves further consideration, not least from the perspective of equity of treatment for part-time and full-time students in higher education.

The under-representation of women on staff of the universities and particularly at senior academic level is highlighted by the EUA. The Panel noted that this issue was previously raised in the high level group's report on University Equality Policies, commissioned by the HEA. The Panel considers that it is now urgent that universities put procedures in place to improve the recruitment, retention and progression of women in all areas of third level education.

5. Role of the IUQB

- 5.1 The EUA sectoral report identifies many important issues, which in the view of the Panel, would benefit from a co-ordinated sectoral level approach to implementation. 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. The publication of the “Framework for Quality in Irish Universities” is one example in this regard. The recently completed IUQB review of the organisation of PhD programmes is another.

- 5.2 As part of the next stage of its development, the IUQB needs to set itself further apart from the universities and establish itself as an independent body. This will require changes in the composition of its membership and its legal status. It is understood that progress has already been made by the IUQB in this regard. The Panel would strongly urge the IUQB to move quickly to implement these changes, so that it may become both nationally and internationally recognised as an independent Quality Assurance agency in respect of the Irish universities. However, care must also be taken to ensure that these changes do not undermine the desirability of the Quality Assurance systems and processes being institutionally owned and driven. Consideration might also be given to putting in place formal linkages with parallel processes established in respect of other Irish education institutions.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 The Panel considers that this review of quality systems within the university sector has come at an opportune time. The recent OECD report has identified the critical role of higher education and research in Ireland, and a series of fundamental challenges in order to secure their future.

- 6.2 The Panel reiterates the value of higher education and research. The core value is for the individual student, through the development of their abilities, and their development throughout life. That in turn provides the basis for wider national development of the “Knowledge Society” to which Ireland aspires. Higher education and research also supports social and cultural development. The OECD report also noted that in today’s environment, higher education institutions face increasing challenges to deliver on these objectives including global competition for staff, students and resources.

- 6.3 The EUA Report demonstrates the strong commitment of the university sector to the process of quality improvement. The review has validated much of the work underway in the sector for Quality Assurance, and provides accountability in respect of this work. Quality Assurance systems are particularly important, as such systems are essential to manage highly complex entities, to maximise their efforts and to efficiently use the resources available. The validation of these systems is therefore a major endorsement of the universities.

- 6.4 The report clearly points the way forward for the sector. A series of recommendations have been made for the universities, which should now be acted upon. The successful implementation of those recommendations will provide a basis for enhanced effectiveness of the universities.
- 6.5 The report has also addressed other overarching Government strategy – for example, the recommendation of the Enterprise Strategy Group that the quality of Irish graduates be benchmarked internationally. This report, by drawing on international reviewers, and setting the Irish systems of Quality Assurance in an international context has both addressed that recommendation, and provided a basis to monitor that standard into the future.
- 6.6 More generally, for the key external stakeholders, particularly, government, business and the other social partners, this report has a key message. All evidence points to the need for more and better higher education into the future, through both increased participation, and intensification of research within higher education. Although much remains to be done to further develop Quality Assurance systems in each of the institutions, this report, and its endorsement of the approach taken and the work to date in putting procedures and processes in place, demonstrates that the university sector is well positioned to further contribute to national development, economic, social and cultural.

7. Acknowledgements

- 7.1 The panel wishes to acknowledge the co-operation it received from all those involved in its work. It wishes also to acknowledge the expertise and commitment of its Secretariat, particularly that of Mary Kerr, Deputy CEO, HEA.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

HEA – Review of Quality Assurance Procedures in the Universities

Terms of Reference – High Level Reference Panel

1. The importance of higher education and the role it plays in a modern society has increased substantially over the past decade. There is now a growing recognition that an internationally high standard of third-level education, available to the majority of the population, plays a vital role in the development of a country's social and economic capabilities. The maintenance of high quality third level education is therefore a key concern of higher education institutions and their funding agencies. Quality has also become a central issue in the European Union, particularly in the context of the Bologna Process. The quality of higher education is seen to be at the heart of the setting up of a European Higher Education area, not least in order to promote understanding between the different educational systems of EU member countries, and facilitate student and worker mobility.
2. Sections 35 and 49 of the Universities Act, (1997) set out what is required of the Universities and the HEA in relation to the development of quality assurance procedures. The universities are obliged to establish and implement procedures for quality assurance, and to arrange for a review of the effectiveness of these procedures. The statutory responsibility of the HEA is to assist the universities in achieving the objectives set out under the Act in relation to quality assurance, to review the procedures established by the universities and to report thereon.
3. The Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) was established by the universities to increase the level of inter-university co-operation in developing quality assurance procedures and processes, in line with best international practice and to facilitate the conduct of reviews of the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures and their outcomes.
4. Under section 40 of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, the HEA must consult with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland in performing its review function.
5. The HEA jointly with the IUQB has now commissioned the first external review of quality assurance procedures in the Irish universities. (For more details see **Appendix 2**).
6. In undertaking the review, it is recognised that the implementation of quality assurance procedures, i.e. self evaluation, peer review, report and implementation of findings, is a relatively new development in Irish universities. While all of the universities have been engaged in these

activities since the mid-1990's (prior to this the system of external examination operated), the statutory requirement for quality assurance has only been in place since June 1997. However it should also be recognised that the nature of Irish university education, and the context in which that education is provided has changed greatly over the past 20 years. As with universities across the EU and indeed the OECD, there is an increasing recognition of the need for measures to be taken by universities to ensure that the education and other services that they provide are of high quality, that they are transparent and accountable in their activities and that they seek to adopt a dynamic approach to self-improvement. In the context of the proposed review the HEA considers that its role in the Universities Act "to assist" institutions in achieving their objectives under the legislation, is an important one. It considers that the outcome of the review should be positive and enabling for the universities while at the same time developmental and enhancing in terms of their procedures.

7. The review process being followed by the HEA envisages two discreet but interlinked elements. Firstly, the HEA and the IUQB have jointly engaged the services of the European Universities Association (EUA) to establish and oversee the operation of an international review team, which will visit each university, review the procedures in place for quality assurance and report on their findings. The Review Team is comprised of eminent academic/institutional leaders, who are experienced in this type of procedural review. To complement this international review team, the HEA has established a High Level Reference Panel comprised of stakeholders external to the universities, which will provide an Irish context to the review. The reference panel will meet and exchange views with the international review team prior to and subsequent to the EUA site visits. Both the EUA Review Team and the Reference Panel will provide reports on their findings directly to the HEA.
8. The role of the Reference Panel is to:
 - Provide an external perspective on the context within which Irish universities operate with particular regard to national, social, economic and cultural needs and expectations.
 - Provide an external perspective on the impacts of the introduction of quality assurance/quality improvement procedures in the universities since the Universities Act was enacted, including the introduction of the IUQB.
 - Consider the procedures in place across the third level sector in Ireland for assuring quality.
 - Consider the outcomes of the EUA review and prepare a "reflections" document for the HEA, which might, in addition, identify issues which might be taken into account in future reviews.
9. In carrying out its work the Reference Panel will liaise and consult with the EUA Review Team. It would also be open to the Reference Panel to consult and meet with and receive submissions from any organisations or individuals as it sees fit.

10. The Secretariat to the National Committee will be provided by the HEA with assistance from the NQAI.

Membership of High Level Reference Panel

Mr John Dunne	Chair Chairman, IDA Former Director General of IBEC
Dr Gay Corr	Former Director of Galway/Mayo Institute of Technology
Ms Lucy Fallon-Byrne	Director, National Centre for Partnership and Performance
Ms Una Halligan	Public Affairs Officer, Hewlett-Packard
Mr Dick Langford	CEO, Cork VEC Chairperson, National Qualifications Authority of Ireland.
Mr Ben Archibald*	President, USI

* Mr Ben Archibald replaced Mr Will Priestley as a member of the panel after his election to the office of President of USI.

April 2004

APPENDIX 2

Quality Review Of Irish Universities: HEA/IUQB Agreed Process

1. Introduction

An extensive, independent and objective review of quality assurance in Irish universities will be conducted by the European University Association with the assistance of experts from Europe, America and Canada. The review is being jointly commissioned by the Irish Universities Quality Board [IUQB] and the Higher Education Authority [HEA]. The review is structured to accord with the respective responsibilities of the universities and the HEA concerning quality assurance under the Irish Universities Act 1997 [Appendix 1]. The combined review arrangements are designed to ensure that the university system and its stakeholders gain maximum benefit from comprehensive evaluations by teams of experienced international quality assurance experts and that the procedures and processes in place in Irish universities can be reviewed against best practice internationally.

The review is taking place in the wider context of –

- the Government's "strategic objective of placing Ireland's higher education system in the top rank of the OECD in terms of both quality and levels of participation",
- the Government's commitment to "support efforts to protect and improve the quality of academic teaching and learning at undergraduate level " (Programme for Government),
- Government's acknowledgement that "the challenges of maintaining, quality, responsiveness and competitiveness in higher education are a major priority against the background of unprecedented levels of expansion, change and diversification in the sector in Ireland"

The implementation of appropriate quality assurance procedures must be an essential part of any strategy to achieve such top rank positioning. The intention is that this review will support the Irish universities in the continuing development of their quality assurance procedures to meet the best standards and practices in the world.

2. Legislative Background

The universities are obliged under the Universities Act, (1997) to establish and implement procedures for quality assurance, and to arrange for a review of the effectiveness of these procedures.

The HEA has a statutory function to assist universities achieve 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. The IUQB was established by the universities to increase the level of inter-university co-operation in developing quality

assurance procedures and processes, in line with best international practice and to facilitate the conduct of reviews of the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures and their outcomes.

The HEA and the IUQB have separate but complementary mandates in relation to quality assurance. In jointly commissioning this review, both roles will be combined with the objective of achieving the maximum benefit for the system in a more timely and cost efficient way.

3. Review Process

The HEA and the IUQB have engaged the European University Association (EUA) to undertake this review with the assistance of experts from Europe, America and Canada.

The EUA has a strong international reputation in quality assurance evaluation having conducted institutional reviews of universities in some 33 countries. The EUA adopts a dynamic methodological approach to evaluation. It focuses on the universities' capacity to change, including their strategic planning and internal quality monitoring, and examines if all the preconditions are assembled to make each and every institution more adaptable and responsive to the changing higher education environment at local, national, European and international level.

Under the joint commission the EUA will

- conduct, and report to the HEA on, an overall review of quality assurance procedures established by the universities, and
- in the case of each university, review and report on the effectiveness of its quality assurance procedures and the implementation of findings arising out of the application of those procedures, in the context of its overall institutional decision making and strategic planning

The EUA review will examine the following areas for each of the seven universities:

- Design and planning of existing internal quality processes
- Effectiveness of internal quality processes
- Relevance of internal quality processes and degree to which their outcomes are used in decision-making and strategic planning
- Perceived gaps in the internal mechanisms processes and frameworks and recommendations for enhancing them.

These key elements will be placed within an institutional analysis that will examine decision-making processes and will allow the review teams to comment on institutional obstacles and success factors for an effective internal quality management.

To complement the EUA overall review of quality procedures established by the universities the HEA in consultation with the IUQB and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), is putting in place a high-level reference panel comprising eminent individuals from outside the university sector. The role of this panel will be to provide an external perspective on the social, cultural and economic context within which the Irish universities operate, and the procedures established by them in respect of quality assurance and quality improvement. The panel shall consider the outcomes of the EUA review and shall prepare for the HEA a "reflections" document, which may identify particular issues of relevance to future reviews. With a view to reinforcing the credibility and objectivity of the review process the EUA review teams will meet with the high-level reference panel at the commencement of the process and again prior to its completion. Both the panel and the IUQB will be afforded the opportunity to comment on draft findings of the review.

4. Outcomes

The University Reports

The EUA will provide a draft report to each university for correction of factual errors. Universities will be allowed two weeks to notify the EUA of any corrections. Following this period the EUA will assume the university accepts the draft as the final report.

The final reports are then sent to the IUQB, which then forwards to each university its individual report. Copies will also be sent by the IUQB to the HEA for noting, and with the proviso that it is work in progress.

The IUQB will require a response to the report from each university within six weeks.

The IUQB then prepares its own formal response to the reports and submits all these documents, i.e. the EUA reports, the university responses, and the IUQB response, as a package to the Minister (section 41 of the Universities Act).

On completion of this process each university will publish its individual report on its website.

The Sectoral Report

The EUA will send the draft sectoral report to IUQB and HEA for correction of errors of fact. The HEA and IUQB will co-ordinate their response on this and report back to the EUA very quickly.

The EUA will then provide a final report to the HEA and the IUQB on its sector-wide review of quality procedures established by the universities. Following consideration of the EUA sectoral report and the 'reflections' document prepared by the high-level reference panel, the HEA will publish the outcomes of the review following consultation with the IUQB.

Following consideration of the EUA sectoral report the IUQB will publish its views on the outcome of the review, following consultation with the HEA.

Extract From The Universities Act 1997

Report and Information

41. (1) The chief officer shall, with the approval of the governing authority and having regard to the strategic development plan under section 34, as soon as practicable after the end of each period, not exceeding three years commencing on the commencement of this Part or at the end of the previous such period, whichever is the later, as the governing authority thinks fit, prepare a report on the operations and the performance of the university during that period.

(2) The governing authority shall publish the report in such form as it thinks fit and shall provide the Minister with a copy and the Minister shall cause a copy of the report to be laid before each House of the Oireachtas as soon as practicable after it is received by him or her.

Reviews

49. An tÚdarás, in furtherance of its general functions under **section 3** of the **Higher Education Authority Act, 1971**, shall assist the universities in achieving the objectives of Chapters IV, VII and VIII of Part III and may review:

- (a) strategic development plans prepared in accordance with section 34,
- (b) the procedures established in accordance with section 35,
- (c) the policies set out in the statement provided for in section 36 and their implementation, and
- (d) the matters referred to in section 50, having regard to any guidelines issued in accordance with that section and information provided in accordance with section 51, and may, following consultation with the universities, publish a report, in such form and manner as it thinks fit, on the outcome of any such review.

APPENDIX 3

Quality Review of Irish Universities High Level Reference Panel

High Level Reference Panel- Issues Document

The HEA, in the attached extract from its submission to the OECD Review Group, sets out the context within which Irish higher education is currently operating. Taking into account the current and future challenges facing higher education, the Panel has drawn up the following sets of questions/issues, which it would like to see the EUA Review Group addressing in the course of its review of Irish Universities.

Institutional Mission and Strategy, Governance and Cultural Change

- How do the Universities' quality assurance procedures contribute to the fulfilment of their institutional missions, including their regional roles?
- How are the outcomes of departmental and unit reviews linked in to the strategic planning processes of the Universities?
- Does the quality assurance process evaluate the external relationships of Universities, including inter-institutional co-operation with other higher education institutions?
- Are the governance, management and decision-making processes of Universities evaluated within the quality assurance process?
- Does the quality assurance process monitor and evaluate equality issues, including gender equality matters?
- Does the quality assurance process monitor and evaluate the efforts of the Universities to open up access to higher education to learners outside the traditional school leaving cohort, and does it evaluate their contribution to the development of a lifelong learning culture in Irish society?
- Is the quality assurance process contributing to the process of internal cultural change that the Universities deem to be necessary and which they say is underway?
- What systems of information sharing are in place to ensure that all staff receive regular and relevant information?
- Will the EUA review process take account of the diversity of institutional missions across the sector?
- Institutional reviews are currently not part of QA processes in the university sector – should they be in the future?

Robustness and integrity of the Universities' Quality Assurance Procedures

Self-evaluation

- Are the conditions under which the self-evaluation studies take place sufficient to allow the participants to freely and frankly express their opinions?
- Is the involvement of university staff, both academic and non-academic, sufficient?
- Are the views of students and graduates sought in the self-evaluation studies?
- To what extent are external stakeholders (e.g. industry/business) involved in the self-evaluation studies?

Peer review

- Does the selection process for external reviewers ensure that departmental and unit reviews are conducted in a robust and independent manner?
- Are the conditions under which the peer review visits take place sufficient to allow all stakeholders, including staff and students, to freely and frankly express their opinions to the review panels?

Implementation

- Are the findings arising from the application of quality assurance procedures implemented and how is this monitored?
- Are the quality assurance procedures geared towards delivering value for money for the taxpayer?

Commonality of the Universities' quality assurance procedures

- Is the sectoral approach to quality assurance favoured by the Universities, as articulated through the Irish Universities Quality Board, embedded in each of the institutions?
- Is there a common institutional sense of ownership throughout the sector of the Universities' 'Framework for Quality'?
- Do the cross sectoral initiatives undertaken by IUQB add value?
- Does sufficient sharing of experience with the non-university sector take place?

The student experience

- Is student evaluation of teaching an integral part of the quality assurance process? How is this carried out?
- Do the quality assurance procedures enable the proper evaluation of the whole student experience?

Review of education programmes:

- Do the Universities' quality assurance procedures ensure that their education programmes are reviewed on a regular basis?
- How do institutions ensure that their programmes and the structures of their programmes (e.g., modularisation, semesterisation, credit accumulation) are relevant to external needs, both economic and social?
- How are their programmes benchmarked against international norms and standards?

The link between Research and Teaching

- Do the quality assurance procedures evaluate the extent to which the research activities of the Universities feed into and support their teaching missions?

General

- How do the respective roles of the HEA, IUQB and the Universities compare with QA structures internationally?

May 2004

Attachment

Extract from HEA submission to OECD Review Group – January 2004

Irish Higher Education – a Context

In common with other OECD countries, Ireland is experiencing a continuing shift in the policy environment and expectations from higher education. It has long been recognised that each individual student who participates in higher education should be enriched by that experience, through the acquisition of new knowledge, the development of skills and competencies, fostering their personal development and the enhancement of his or her individual life chances. That remains and will remain true.

But today, policy makers increasingly recognise that the positive effects of higher education extend far beyond those to the individual. Higher education is now also recognised as an essential contributor to national well-being. At the risk of some oversimplification, these changes (and in particular the evolution of public policy) can be characterised as a movement from a view that higher education was an activity that had a value that was worthwhile in itself to one where it is, in addition, seen as a means of achieving important public policy objectives. The Irish Government and society now look to the higher education and research system and to the higher education institutions (HEIs) for delivery of a number of important national policy goals in addition to their historical missions of teaching and learning, scholarship and research. These policy goals include:

- Promoting social inclusion and citizenship particularly through widening participation in higher education and through provision of opportunities for life-long learning.
- Enhancing the skills levels of the population to meet the needs of a modern high-technology economy and society.
- Promoting economic development, traditionally through developing and enhancing the skills and abilities of the labour force but increasingly through research, the development, application and commercialisation of new knowledge and the emerging role of HEIs as potential and actual sources of enterprise and economic growth.
- Promoting regional and cultural development.

A changing higher education environment– opportunities and challenges

The environment in which HEIs are expected to meet these challenges is increasingly complex and demanding. The pace of change is quickening; the expectations of government and society are increasing. As well as confronting new demands, HEIs are faced with new and developing accountability and regulatory responsibilities and requirements.

The financial environment has also become more demanding. Notwithstanding the increasingly important role of higher education and research in the economy and society, the sector and its institutions need to be increasingly persuasive in making the case for public and private funding – not just because of demands for public expenditure from other sectors of education and areas such as health and infrastructure, but also because of government and other stakeholder concerns about accountability, value for money and effectiveness.

The sector and the HEIs also have to contend with a number of other external challenges. Ireland's demographic structure is changing. A fall in the birth rate, which has persisted since the early 1980s,¹ will, notwithstanding an increase in inward migration, reduce the numbers of school-leavers (who have until now accounted for more than 90% of student enrolments²). On the other hand the increasing importance of knowledge based skills in the labour force, as well as social policy concerns, will encourage the participation in higher education of increasing numbers of mature students availing of opportunities for second-chance education and for continuing professional and personal development.

Irish higher education now operates in a global environment. The number of new providers of higher education, both from abroad and within Ireland, is increasing. This is facilitated by the development of e-learning, which presents challenges and opportunities for pedagogic development within institutions as well as for distance education. Irish students will increasingly have the choice to participate in higher education abroad. At the same time, more students from other countries are choosing to enter Irish higher education institutions. Taken together, these changes are creating a new competitive landscape for Irish education.

¹ In 1980, there were some 74,000 births in Ireland; by 1994 this had dropped to 48,000. The effect of this decrease has been mitigated to some extent by increased inward migration.

² In 2002, over 90% of the c36,500 students who entered higher education through the Central Applications system were aged 19 or less.

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