

**Quality Review of the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) -  
commissioned by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) at the request of IUQB  
– Terms of Reference and Protocol for the Review**

**CONTEXT**

The Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) was established in 2002 to increase the level of inter-university co-operation in developing quality assurance procedures and processes, in line with best international systems. The IUQB was incorporated in February 2006 as a non-profit making company.

IUQB performs the following core activities in relation to quality assurance in the Irish university sector

- Conducting regular external reviews of Irish universities in accordance with national legislation and agreed European standards
- Establishing good practice and publishing and promoting national guidelines
- Disseminating information to stakeholders
- Co-operating with national and international organisations

In accordance with paragraph 2 (viii) of its memorandum of association, in line with good international practice and so as to fulfil European standards for external quality assurance agencies, the IUQB Board, in 2006, agreed to undergo an external review and requested the HEA to commission the review.

The review will

- Evaluate the effectiveness of the IUQB in the performance of its main objects of its memorandum of association since its establishment in 2002
- Adopt a developmental approach by assisting the IUQB in achieving its own quality enhancement goals and furthering the development of its own internal quality culture.
- Assess the IUQB's performance as a quality assurance agency in Irish higher education against the backdrop of developments in the European Higher Education Area. This will involve the following:
  - Evaluating the performance, organisation and structures of the executive and committees of the IUQB to date.
  - Evaluating the effectiveness of IUQB activities undertaken and funded by the HEA under the HEA Quality Assurance Programmes 2002-2004 and the HEA Strategic Initiatives Schemes 2005-2006
  - Evaluating the extent to which the IUQB, in the performance of its objects, complies with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*

The review will comprise

- The production and publication of a self-evaluation report by IUQB
- Evaluation of the self-evaluation report, including interviews with IUQB board members, staff and stakeholders, by a panel of experts appointed by the HEA
- Consideration of the report of the panel by the Board of IUQB and the development of a plan by

the Board of IUQB to implement the recommendations in the report

- Consideration of the report of the panel and the IUQB Board's plans by the HEA and the production of a response by the HEA
- Publication of the outcomes of the review to include the report of the expert panel, the plan developed by the IUQB in response to the report, and the response of the HEA (other stakeholders may also make prepare responses following publication of the review outcomes)

## Context

The Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) was established by the governing authorities of the seven Irish universities in 2002 to increase the level of inter-university co-operation in developing quality assurance procedures and processes, in line with best international systems. The IUQB was incorporated in February 2006 as a non-profit making company.

Under Section 35(4) of the Universities Act (1997), a university governing authority is required to arrange for a review of the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures in that university. In 2002, the governing authorities of the seven Irish universities agreed to devolve the power to arrange the conduct of these statutory reviews to IUQB.

Under Section 49(a) of the Universities Act, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) may exercise the right to arrange for a review of the quality assurance procedures in the universities.

In 2003, the HEA and IUQB jointly commissioned the European University Association (EUA) to undertake a review of quality assurance in Irish universities. The review was structured to accord with the respective responsibilities of the universities and the HEA concerning quality assurance under the Universities Act.

The review was designed to ensure that the university system and its stakeholders gained maximum benefit from comprehensive reviews by teams of experienced international quality assurance experts and that the procedures and processes in place in Irish universities were reviewed against best practice internationally.

## Policy Approach

In October 2006, the IUQB Board committed to undertaking a quality review. To a large extent, the process was modelled on the processes that are currently in use in higher education institutions, and it is assumed in this proposal that a quality review of the IUQB will be undertaken in a similar manner.

Within the quality review space occupied by the IUQB there is a key external dimension – the *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. The standards and guidelines were adopted by the ministers responsible for higher education in the 45 Bologna signatory states in Bergen in May 2005. They apply not only to higher education institutions, but also to external quality assurance agencies and require the latter to submit themselves to a five-yearly cycle of external reviews in order to demonstrate their compliance with the *European Standards and Guidelines*. It is also the case that compliance with these standards is now a membership requirement for the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

IUQB is one of a number of external quality assurance agencies operating in Irish higher education. IUQB has the devolved statutory power for the periodic external reviews of the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures of the Irish universities. The other external quality assurance bodies operating in Ireland in respect of public higher education institutions are the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) which has statutory quality assurance functions in relation to the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), which has responsibility for the other Institutes of Technology. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) may also exercise the right to arrange for a review of the quality assurance procedures in the universities.

It is of note that the NQAI commissioned and completed a statutory quality assurance review of HETAC in summer 2006. The HETAC review, in particular, was concerned with evaluating the extent to which the Council in the performance of its statutory functions complies with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. The Department of Education and Science commissioned a review of the NQAI. This review is currently underway and is also evaluating the extent to which the NQAI in the performance of its statutory functions complies with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*.

Given its key role as a quality assurance agency, the continued active participation of the IUQB in policy and practice debates on quality assurance, both at European and national level, is essential. To maintain its credibility in this arena, the IUQB will need to submit itself to an external review in order to demonstrate its compliance with the *European Standards and Guidelines* and in order to obtain membership of ENQA. IUQB intends to apply for membership of ENQA and to acquire full membership will need to submit itself, under ENQA regulations, to an external review.

## **Purpose and scope of the quality review of IUQB**

To meet the strategic needs of the IUQB at this stage of its development, the quality review will have three distinct, but related purposes.

**First**, the quality review will evaluate the effectiveness of IUQB in the performance of its objects since its establishment in 2002, having particular regard to the policies and procedures that the IUQB has developed for each function and how they are being implemented and operated. In particular, it is essential to evaluate how IUQB is serving its stakeholders, primarily the university staff and students, in addition to external stakeholders such as employers and the general public.

The main object for which IUQB has been established, as listed in the memorandum of association of the company, is the development and promotion of quality assurance and quality improvement procedures for application in the Irish universities in order to ensure that the quality of education, research, administration and other activities of the Irish universities is in accordance with the highest international standards.

The following objects are subsidiary and ancillary to that main object:

- (i) To maintain and promote co-operation between the Irish universities in quality assurance procedures and processes, supporting the universities in their goal of achieving a culture of quality through continuous improvement in all their activities;
- (ii) To arrange regular quality assurance reviews or evaluations of the Irish universities including reviews or evaluations of the effectiveness of quality assurance and quality improvement procedures as may be required by law;
- (iii) To appoint the reviewers and where necessary the agencies who undertake such reviews and to provide reports on such reviews and where such reviews contain recommendations for action or which require a subsequent action plan to collaborate with the Irish universities to ensure that such reviews have a predetermined follow-up procedure which is implemented consistently;
- (iv) To produce and publish from time to time summary reports describing and analysing the general findings of such reviews or evaluations;
- (v) To ensure that the processes, criteria and procedures used for any such reviews are predefined and are publicly available;
- (vi) To receive, review and comment on annual reports from each of the Irish universities on their quality assurance and quality improvement activities, including recommendations for improvement, in respect of any evaluations or reviews initiated by the Irish universities in accordance with law;
- (vii) With the co-operation of the Irish universities and other higher education partners, to organise and direct cross-university projects in quality improvement with the goal of establishing and publishing best practice in specific key areas;
- (viii) To organise an evaluation by experts of its own processes in reviewing the effectiveness of the quality procedures;
- (ix) To collaborate with the universities in organising regular major conferences on themes related to quality improvement;
- (x) To provide a source of information to stakeholders on important Irish, European and other international quality developments;
- (xi) To promote and provide facilities for discussion and consultation between representatives of Irish Universities and other higher education bodies in Ireland

on any matters affecting or relevant to quality in the higher education sector; to represent through its Board, committees, sub-committees, working parties and working groups to policy makers, civil servants, business people, trade unions, students, teachers, parents and the general public collective views on quality matters of common interest;

- (xii) To advise the Government, the Higher Education Authority, the institutions of the European Union and any other relevant agencies or bodies regarding its views and policies on quality issues;
- (xiii) To provide information, advice and assistance to the Irish Universities and other educational bodies within Ireland on any aspect of quality in educational affairs;
- (xiv) To identify international best practice in maintaining and improving quality, and to promote its adoption by the Irish universities;
- (xv) To co-operate and interact with the EU and other international organisations in relation to quality assurance in university education including accreditation; to establish formal links with international quality agencies in furthering European developments in higher education.

**Second**, the quality review will also be developmental in intent and will aim to assist the IUQB in achieving its own quality enhancement goals and to further develop its own internal quality culture. In this connection, it will consider in some detail the organisational structures and processes of the executive of the IUQB as it currently operates and evaluate its suitability in the context of the IUQB's developing role. Thus, it will focus on the mission of the IUQB and the norms and goals that the organisation has set for itself. It is envisaged that the process will assist the IUQB in discovering any constraints or opportunities that arise for the organisation in meeting its aims and goals. This will require an analysis of the organisation's strengths and weaknesses to identify any discrepancies between what might be and what actually is. The quality review will do this by facilitating reflection on

- the mission, aims and objectives of the IUQB and the systems and procedures in place and their suitability to fulfilling the mission
- the quality measures in use including feedback from stakeholders, both internal and external
- strategic planning procedures and the capacity to change and meet new challenges.

**Third**, the quality review will also have a particular focus on the IUQB's role as a quality assurance agency in Irish higher education against the backdrop of developments in the European Higher Education Area.

In order to address the various purposes of the review in a thorough manner, the review will be organised around three distinct strands:

- ***Strand 1: Evaluation of performance, organisation and structures of the executive and committees of the IUQB to date***

As IUQB has developed, the need arises for a review of the systems and structures that are in place. It is generally recognised that as an organisation develops and changes, the way in which staff and functions relate to one another can also change. Key activities of IUQB to date have been in the area of the development of National Guidelines of Good Practice, arising from the series of sectoral projects initiated with the HEA since 2003. Another significant activity has been the HEA/IUQB jointly commissioned external review of the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures in the 7 universities in 2004. In October 2006, the Board agreed to conduct a thematic review of PhD programmes in the seven universities, focusing on the adoption of the National Guidelines of Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes and also to conduct a second round of institutional quality assurance reviews commencing in 2009. The quality review will examine and evaluate the suitability of the organisational structures in place for the conduct of this ongoing series of reviews.

The Board has recently appointed a Management Committee, which first met in January 2007 and which will meet once between Board meetings. The review will examine the suitability of the current committee structures to the work of the Board.

- ***Strand 2: Evaluation of IUQB activities funded under the HEA Quality Assurance Programmes 2002-2004 and the HEA Strategic Initiatives Schemes 2005 and 2006***

This strand of the review will evaluate the quality improvement and dissemination activities funded by the Higher Education Authority under the above-mentioned programmes.

Since 2000, the HEA has funded a Quality Assurance Programme from within the Quality Assurance sub-measure of the Employment and Human Resources Development Operational Programme of the National Development Plan (NDP) 2000-2006. The NDP outlined how the aim of the Quality Assurance measure in the third level sector was to promote a quality culture across the whole range of activities in third-level institutions, and at the same time addressing society's concern for greater transparency and accountability and to improve pedagogical training, teaching evaluation and appraisal and the development of management skills.

Over the period of the NDP 2000-2006, an annual allocation was made by the HEA to eligible institutions, following consideration of submissions by a special committee. The overall strategy of the quality assurance programme was that universities move towards a systematic approach, with key common elements, to quality assurance and one that was consistent with the national legislative

provisions and the European Council Recommendations of 24 September 1998 and 15 February 2006 on European Co-operation in Quality Assurance in Higher Education. Priority for funding under this programme was given to cross-institutional developmental activities, including from 2002, the activities of IUQB.

In the period 2002-2006, the universities received specific funding from the HEA Quality Assurance Programme and its successor programme, the Strategic Initiatives Scheme to develop a series of sectoral projects, leading to the publication of National Guidelines of Good Practice aspects of quality assurance in the Irish universities.

IUQB was established in 2002 and from 2002-2004, in agreement with the Irish universities, made submissions to the HEA Quality Assurance Scheme in relation to IUQB sectoral activities and received finding of €105,000; €140,000 and €142,000 in those years respectively.

In 2005 and 2006, IUQB was invited by the HEA to make direct submissions to the Strategic Initiatives Scheme, the successor programme to the Targeted Initiatives Scheme and the Quality Assurance Programme. IUQB received funding of €142,000 in 2005 and €258,000 in 2006 for the quality improvement sectoral projects leading to the publication of National Guidelines of Good Practice and dissemination activities such as the IUQB annual conference; publication of the newsletter, *IUQB News* and the upgrade of the IUQB website.

### ***Strand 3: Evaluation of the Compliance of IUQB with European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area***

This strand of the review will evaluate the extent to which IUQB complies with the standards for external quality assurance agencies as set out in the recently adopted *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*.

There are eight such standards (see Appendix) which relate to:

- *the agency's use of the external quality assurance procedures for higher education as set out in the European Standards and Guidelines*
- *the agency's possession of official status*
- *the regularity of the agency's engagement in external quality assurance activities*
- *the adequacy of the agency's human and financial resources*

- *the clarity of the agency's goals as set out in a publicly available mission statement*
- *the independence of the agency with regard to its decision making processes and especially in relation to government and higher education institutions*
- *the use of external quality assurance criteria and processes involving self-assessment by the review subject, external expert review, publication of review outcomes and follow-up process*
- *the putting in place by the agency of its own accountability procedures*

Although this strand of the review will be the most discrete, it is anticipated that the findings from the other two strands will make a contribution towards demonstrating the Authority's compliance with the *European Standards and Guidelines*.

### **Review process overview**

The quality review process for the IUQB will consist of the following main elements:

- Commissioning of the review, including the appointment of the external panel of experts, by the Higher Education Authority (HEA)
- Preparation and publication of a self-evaluation report by the IUQB
- Evaluation by the panel of experts
- Consideration of the report of the panel by the IUQB and the development of a quality improvement plan by the IUQB to implement the recommendations in the report
- Consideration of the review report and the IUQB quality improvement plan by the HEA and the preparation of a response by the HEA
- Publication of Review Outcomes: Report of the expert panel, IUQB quality improvement plan and the HEA response

### **Review Process: Details and Indicative timetable**

- Decision by IUQB to undertake review and to request HEA to commission review  
*Oct-Nov 2006*
- Decision by HEA to commission the review including an evaluation of IUQB activities funded by the HEA since its establishment in 2002  
*December 2006*
- Preparation by IUQB Executive of draft terms of reference and protocol for the review for submission to the HEA  
*Jan-Feb 2007*

- Proposed draft terms of reference and protocol for review to be considered by IUQB Board

*26 February 2007*

- Draft terms of reference and protocol for the review communicated to HEA

*April 2007*

- HEA consultation with stakeholders on draft terms of reference and protocol for the review

*May 2007*

The stakeholders to be consulted will include the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the Department of Education and Science (DES), organisations representative of business and the trade unions and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The consultation on the terms of reference is distinct from the engagement that will take place with stakeholders during the review. The aim here will be to test the robustness of the quality review process that is envisaged and to take advice and soundings on the technical aspects of the review process. A broader list of stakeholders will need to be consulted during the review process proper.

- Preparation of self-evaluation by IUQB Executive. The self-evaluation process will include consultation with stakeholders.

*May 2007- November 2007*

A quality coordination committee, representative of all staff, will be appointed to oversee the self-assessment process. This committee

- will determine the nature of the self-assessment process (i.e. the kind of internal and external consultative exercises to be undertaken)
- will co-ordinate the self –assessment process and appoint a secretary from amongst its number to draft the self-evaluation report (SER)
- will provide feedback on a regular basis to the IUQB Board and the IUQB Management Committee on the progress of the review.

- Consideration of final draft Terms of Reference and Protocol for Review by IUQB Board

*21 May 2007*

- Determination by Higher Education Authority of Terms of Reference for review and appointment of an external panel of experts

*23 May 2007*

The panel's profile will be along the following lines:

- 2 senior national public figures (one with a broad interest in education and one stakeholder member) – one of whom will chair the panel
- 2 international experts in quality assurance (to include at least 1 European with knowledge of European standards and guidelines)
- 1 person representative of Irish Higher Education Institutions
- 1 expert with a learner perspective

There will also be a secretary appointed who will be independent of the IUQB

- Approval of the self-evaluation report by the IUQB Board and publication.  
*19 November 2007*
- Briefing session for Expert Panel  
*November/December 2007*
- Visit by Expert Panel , including meetings with IUQB stakeholders  
*February 2008*
- Provision of report with recommendations by External Panel  
*March 2008*
- Preparation of a quality improvement plan by the IUQB Executive based on the self-evaluation report and the recommendations in the expert panel's report  
*April 2008*
- The IUQB Board will consider the expert panel's report and agree the draft quality improvement plan at its May meeting ahead of their publication  
*May 2008*
- Consideration of the expert panel's report and the IUQB Quality Improvement Plan by the Higher Education Authority and approval of the HEA response to the review  
*May 2008*
- Publication of Review Outcomes (Expert Panel Report, IUQB Quality Improvement Plan and HEA Response)  
*June 2008*
- The Quality Improvement Plan will be implemented and reviewed on a timescale consistent with the activities identified. IUQB will undertake to publish one or more follow-up reports subsequently at specified dates. In addition, its implementation will be incorporated into the IUQB Strategic Plan for 2007-2011.

### **Quality Co-ordination Committee**

As mentioned above, an internal staff committee would oversee the self-evaluation process and produce the self-assessment report. Due to the small size of the Executive, all staff will be members of the committee. It may be necessary to recruit someone from outside the organisation to supplement and co-ordinate the work and to involve a nominated member of the IUQB Management committee in the self-evaluation process.

The committee will organise a number of self-evaluation exercises. It is likely that these will include staff and stakeholder surveys, focus groups, SWOT analyses.