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AGUS EOLAÍOCHTA | DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION
AND SCIENCE



An Roinn Fiontar, Trádála agus Fostaíochta
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment

QUALITY REVIEW

OF THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY OF IRELAND

EXTERNAL PANEL REPORT

Údarás Náisiúnta
Cáilíochtaí na hÉireann
National Qualifications
Authority of Ireland



A report commissioned by the Department of Education and Science in association with the
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

- 1 The Department of Education and Science (the Department), in association with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, appointed a Panel chaired by Pat Kelleher, former Director of Cork Institute of Technology, to undertake a quality review of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (the Authority) with particular reference to its principal statutory functions as contained in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. The Panel was also asked to consider the extent to which, in performing those functions, the Authority complied with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. In addition, the Panel was asked to evaluate the suitability of the organisational structures and processes of the executive of the Authority for performing its functions in the future. The Panel's full Terms of Reference, Protocol and Membership, including additional guidance given to the Panel by the Department, are contained in APPENDICES 1 AND 2.

REVIEW PROCESS

- 2 As part of the review, Panel members attended a briefing in the offices of the Authority on 17 April 2007. (Two Panel members were briefed separately on 20 April). At the briefing, representatives of the Department and the Authority described their respective organisations and outlined the requirements of the European Standards and Guidelines. Based on these briefings the Panel agreed a programme of on-site meetings. These involved: the Chairman and members of the Authority's Board; all staff of the Authority's executive, including its Chief Executive; representatives of the Higher Education Authority, HETAC and FETAC; representatives of the universities, the Dublin Institute of Technology, Institutes of Technology and private educational providers; representatives of key stakeholders, including government agencies and departments, employers, trade unions, professional and statutory bodies, the community and voluntary sector; officers of the Union of Students in Ireland; and representatives of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and the State Examinations Commission. These meetings – involving almost 80 people in total - were held in the Dublin offices of the Authority between 14 and 17 May 2007. (A full list of all those whom the panel met is contained in APPENDIX 3.)

EVIDENCE

- 3 A key document considered by the Panel was the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) prepared by the Authority. This was made available to all Panel members in advance of their initial briefing meeting. As an appendix to the SER the Authority provided a document summarising internal and external feedback concerning the Authority's functions. This feedback had been gathered internally through SWOT analysis and work journal exercises and externally either in meetings with Authority representatives or by means of questionnaires or other written submissions. Taken together these two documents provided a comprehensive and insightful evaluation of the initial years of the Authority and could be said to represent a model for such documents. The Panel endorsed the SER as providing a more than adequate basis for its review. This report should be read in conjunction with the SER. The Panel in its review of written submissions and of interviews with stakeholders was also independently able to satisfy itself fully about the conclusions of the SER.

- 4 In advance of the Panel's on-site visit the Authority made available additional documentation in support of its SER and documentation was provided to the Panel during its on-site visit in response to requests by the Panel. (A full list of the documents consulted by the Panel, including the SER, is attached as APPENDIX 4). The on-site visit provided oral evidence.

FINDINGS

- 5 In the light of the oral and documentary evidence considered by it, the Panel concluded that:
- the Qualifications Authority has performed effectively its principal statutory functions since its establishment in 2001;
 - in the performance of its relevant functions the Qualifications Authority complies with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.
- 6 For the future, the Qualifications Authority is invited to consider the suitability of the current organisational structures and processes of the executive in the light of the emerging priorities identified by the Panel during its review and summarised in paragraphs 8 to 11.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7 The Panel concurs broadly with the overall conclusions and areas for consideration identified by the Authority in Chapter 11 of its SER. In addition, in the development of an action plan in response to the Panel's findings as required under the Protocol for this Review and, ultimately its next Corporate Plan, the Authority will wish, in particular, to note the Panel's views concerning the priority to be given to some aspects of its statutory functions and of its compliance with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. Particular areas for consideration, which will also inform the Authority's consideration of its current organisational structures and processes, are summarised below.
- 8 The Panel recommends that the Authority:
- considers the resources currently devoted to its responsibilities for the recognition of international awards in the light of the, possibly significant, increase in demand for such recognition; and
 - builds on the support identified by the panel from a wide range of stakeholders for a broader, national approach to quality assurance in higher education.
- 9 The Panel endorses the Authority's own conclusions concerning:
- the work still to be done in encouraging the implementation of the Authority's and providers' access, transfer and progression policies (Chapter 3, page 28 of the SER); and

- the need to employ more effective external communication processes to enhance awareness of both the National Framework of Qualifications and of the services provided by the Authority (Chapter 11, page 87 of the SER), in particular the recognition of international awards referred to above.
- 10 The Panel invites the Department of Education and Science to note the widespread support for the work of the Authority and consider ways in which the Authority might be used more actively as a lead body with government departments and agencies in promoting the existence and benefits of the National Framework of Qualifications.
 - 11 Finally, the Panel invites the Authority, within the existing legislative framework, and based on the reputation it has established as an objective, impartial and professional national agency, to increase the speed with which the final elements of the National Framework of Qualifications are put in place, and access, transfer and progression policies are implemented.
 - 12 The Panel was particularly impressed with the quality of the operation of the Authority, and would wish to commend the strategic outlook of the Authority as evidenced by its corporate plans and other documentation. The trust in, and respect for the objectivity of the processes of the Authority was evident from meetings with numerous external stakeholders. The teamwork, mutual regard and preparedness to take responsibility by members of the Authority's executive is a feature of the organisation, well led by its Chief Executive.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Review Panel wishes to place on record its sincere gratitude to the officers and staff of the Authority for the professional, practical and personal support given to Panel members in preparing them for the review and during their on-site visit, and to the Chair and members of the Authority's Board who met the Panel. In particular, the Panel is most appreciative of the information and insights provided during the initial briefing; the work done by Authority staff to ensure the availability of people to meet the Panel during its on-site visit; and the documentary evidence and the logistical support provided by Authority staff. The Panel would also like to thank all those who met the Panel during the on-site visit; their input was invaluable.

Finally on behalf of the review Panel and myself as chairman, I would like to record our thanks to our Secretary, David Parry, for the manner in which he discharged his duties. The professionalism with which he enabled the panel to work so well together as a team in producing this review report was much appreciated.

PAT KELLEHER

*Review Panel Chairman
June 2007*

PART ONE

CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Department of Education and Science (the Department), in association with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, appointed a Panel chaired by Pat Kelleher, former Director of Cork Institute of Technology, to undertake a quality review of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (the Authority) with particular reference to its principal statutory functions as contained in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. The Panel was also asked to consider the extent to which, in performing those functions, the Authority complied with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. In addition, the Panel was asked to evaluate the suitability of the organisational structures and processes of the executive of the Authority for performing its functions in the future. The Panel's full Terms of Reference, Protocol and Membership, including additional guidance given to the Panel by the Department, are contained in APPENDICES 1 AND 2.

THE IRISH EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEM

- 1.2 Compulsory education in Ireland begins at the age of six, although most children attend some form of schooling at age four or five. Primary schools operate an eight-year programme, consisting of two kindergarten years, followed by classes one to six. The post-primary education sector comprises secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive schools. Secondary level education generally starts at the age of twelve and consists of a three-year junior cycle followed by a two- or three-year senior cycle. The Junior Certificate Examination is taken at the end of the junior cycle. The senior cycle offers a Transition Year which provides an opportunity for some students to experience a wide range of educational inputs. At the end of the senior cycle one of three Leaving Certificate Examinations is taken, namely the Leaving Certificate Programme, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme or the Leaving Certificate Applied.
- 1.3 Further education and training embraces learning opportunities which occurs outside second-level schooling but which is not part of the higher education and training system. Any provider of further education and training, whether public or private, can apply to the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) for validation of a programme.
- 1.4 The publicly-funded higher education system comprises the university sector, the Institutes of Technology, the Dublin Institute of Technology, the Colleges of Education and a number of other State-aided institutions. In addition, there are a number of independent private colleges which offer a range of courses complementing the existing provision in the higher education and training sector, some of which have submitted programmes for validation to the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC).
- 1.5 Seven universities are recognised under the Universities Act, 1997, four of which are constituent universities of the National University of Ireland (NUI). They validate and award their own qualifications as well as the qualifications they make following

- programmes undertaken in institutions such as the Colleges of Education. In addition to the four constituent universities, there are five Recognised Colleges of NUI.
- 1.6 There are 13 Institutes of Technology all of which have been delegated awarding powers by HETAC to at least level 8 on the National Framework of Qualifications (the Framework). The Dublin Institute of Technology was granted degree awarding powers status in 1997 to what is now level 10.

PROFESSIONAL AND STATUTORY BODIES

- 1.7 There are over one hundred professional and statutory bodies (PSBs) in Ireland. Some of these bodies award qualifications that may lead to membership and/or registration. Their memberships and/or qualifications can be recognised by statute or charter and in some instances they regulate professional practice or professional title.

PUBLIC BODIES RESPONSIBLE FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING

- 1.8 The principal government departments with responsibility for education and training are the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. They are assisted in this task by a number of agencies, representatives of all of whom met the Panel, namely:

- The State Examinations Commission
- The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
- The Further Education and Training Awards Council
- The Higher Education and Training Awards Council
- The Higher Education Authority
- Foras Áiseanna Saothair/The Training and Employment Authority
- The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

- 1.9 A more detailed description of the Irish education and training system is given at APPENDIX 5.

THE NATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF QUALIFICATIONS

- 1.10 The National Framework of Qualifications was launched in 2003 by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland. The Framework is a ten level system that incorporates awards made for all kinds of learning, gained in a variety of settings, including schools, the workplace, the community, training centres, colleges and universities. For each level of the Framework, standards of knowledge, skill and competence have been set out, defining the learning outcomes to be achieved by a learner seeking to gain an award.
- 1.11 Four classes of award-type have been determined for the Framework - *major, minor, special purpose and supplemental*. This enables the Framework to capture all types and amounts of learning undertaken by a learner. A diagrammatic representation of the Framework, colloquially known as the 'fan' diagram, is given at APPENDIX 6.

THE QUALIFICATIONS (EDUCATION AND TRAINING) ACT 1999

- 1.12 The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland was established under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. Relevant sections of the Act are contained in APPENDIX 7. The extent to which, and the ways in which, the Authority has performed these functions are considered separately (See Part Two below).

NQAI AND THE EUROPEAN GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

- 1.13 In the Berlin communiqué of 19 September 2003, the Ministers of the Bologna Process signatory states invited the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), in association with the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB), 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. The response to this mandate was the development of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* which was adopted by the Ministers responsible for higher education in the European Higher Education Area at their meeting in Bergen in May 2005. The *Standards and Guidelines* recommended that European quality assurance agencies would be expected to submit themselves to a cyclical review within five years. The Authority is one of the first agencies to undergo such a review. (HETAC was reviewed in 2006).
- 1.14 The *Standards and Guidelines* document contains a list of European standards for quality assurance in higher education and accompanying guidelines. They focus on three areas, namely:
- European standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance
 - European standards and guidelines for the external quality assurance of higher education
 - European standards and guidelines for external quality assurance agencies
- 1.15 The *Standards and Guidelines* themselves are contained in APPENDIX 8.
- 1.16 The extent to which, and the ways in which, the Authority complies with these standards and guidelines are considered separately (See Part Three below). Part Three of this report should, however, be read in conjunction with Part Two dealing with the Authority's performance of its statutory functions as these cover significant elements of the criteria contained in the *Standards and Guidelines*.

THE ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE AND PROCESSES OF THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY OF IRELAND

- 1.17 Having considered the extent to which, and the ways in which, the Authority has performed its principal statutory functions as contained in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 and the extent to which, in performing these functions (*Part Two*), the Authority complies with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (*Part Three*), the Panel offers some observations on the organisational structures and processes of the Authority (*Part Four*).

PART TWO

STATUTORY FUNCTIONS

INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 A key document considered by the Panel was the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) prepared by the Authority. This was made available to all Panel members in advance of their initial briefing meeting. As an appendix to the SER the Authority provided a supplementary document summarising feedback from internal and external stakeholders concerning the performance by the Authority of its functions. This feedback had been gathered either in meetings with Authority representatives and/or by means of questionnaires. Taken together these two documents provided a comprehensive and insightful evaluation of the initial years of the Authority and could be said to represent a model for such documents.
- 2.2 The SER grouped the Authority's statutory functions under eight main headings. Consideration of each heading in the SER began with a summary of action taken by the Authority, continued with a brief description and evaluation of stakeholder feedback on that aspect of the Authority's work, and ended with the conclusions of, and proposed areas for further consideration by, the Authority. Stakeholder feedback in its entirety was contained in the supplementary document made available to the Panel.
- 2.3 At its first meeting, the Panel endorsed the SER itself as providing a comprehensive and appropriate framework within which to undertake its own review. The supplementary document enabled the Panel to focus on areas identified by stakeholders as areas of strength on the part of the Authority or areas requiring further consideration in the performance of its statutory functions. This endorsement is critical to understanding the approach taken by the Panel to its task and to understanding the structure, content and style of this report. The transparency of the Authority's approach to the production of its self-evaluation enabled the Panel to conduct its own review more efficiently than might otherwise have been the case. The Authority's measured suggestions for future action are broadly endorsed by the Panel as consistent with the feedback obtained by the Authority. The validity of this feedback was subsequently confirmed during the Panel's meetings with a wide range of stakeholders most, but not all of whom, had provided written or oral feedback in advance of the Review.
- 2.4 The transparency of the self-evaluation process undertaken by the Authority, the clarity of the description of the action taken by it in performing its statutory functions, the consistency of the actions proposed by the Authority with stakeholder feedback and the congruence between written stakeholder feedback and the views expressed during the Panel's meetings with stakeholders, gave the Panel confidence in the content of the SER and in the capacity of the Authority for effective and transparent self-evaluation. The Panel in its review of written submissions and of interviews with stakeholders was also independently able to satisfy itself fully about the conclusions of the SER.

THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY OF IRELAND

- 2.5 The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland was established in February 2001 under provisions contained in Part II of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 (the Act). Section 5 of that Act made provision for the establishment of the Authority itself; Section 6 laid down the Membership of the Authority; Section 7 its Objects; and

Section 8 its functions. Relevant Sections of the Act are contained in APPENDIX 7 to this report.

2.6 The Authority's principal tasks under the Act are to:

- establish and enable the implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications
- enable improved arrangements for access, transfer and progression for learners
- facilitate the recognition of international awards.

2.7 These are reflected in the Authority's mission statement, as follows:

The Authority will lead a cultural change, in partnership with stakeholders, with the aim of achieving wide recognition of outcomes of learning, and improved access for learners to quality learning opportunities

2.8 The Authority's formal Objects under the Act were evaluated in its SER using the headings below.

- The National Framework of Qualifications
- Access, Transfer, and Progression
- Supporting the Awards Councils
- Supporting the Dublin Institute of Technology
- International Policy Engagement
- International Recognition of Awards
- Europass

2.9 The Panel's findings under each of these headings are summarised below.

THE NATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF QUALIFICATIONS

2.10 The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 lays on the Authority responsibility for:

'... establish(ing) and maintain(ing) a framework ... for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State, based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners ...'

2.11 The SER summarises the way in which the Authority set about the task of establishing a framework. This began with a consultation document entitled, *Towards a National Framework of Qualifications: A Discussion Document*, in November 2001, followed by a national forum in February 2002 and the establishment of a Consultative Group consisting of the Authority's main stakeholders in March 2002. Bi-lateral and multi-lateral meetings were held with stakeholders around key areas of policy development and a number of advisory groups were established in areas such as credit, the recognition of prior learning and the employment perspective. Further consultative papers were issued covering professional awards and international awards in May 2002, September 2004 and April 2006. Complementing these consultative activities, the Authority undertook some international research in relation to national frameworks of qualifications (a summary of which was published by the Authority in June 2002) and

engaged a market research company to carry out two surveys of learners and employers. The initial determinations made by the Authority to define the Framework were put in place between October 2002 and April 2003. As a result of these actions the Framework was launched in October 2003. Following the launch further work has been undertaken covering, *inter alia*: minor, special purpose and supplemental award-type descriptors; the placement of existing and former awards in the Framework; the alignment with or inclusion in the Framework of the awards of certain awarding bodies; and the determination of a descriptor for the higher doctorate award-type.

- 2.12 The Panel concluded that the Authority had performed very effectively its function of establishing the National Qualifications Framework and was continuing to take appropriate action to maintain the Framework. The Panel also concluded that much still remains to be done before the Framework is fully ‘populated’ and fully operational – a view shared by the Authority itself. The Authority’s approach throughout has been consultative, inclusive and patient, an approach which was universally commended by the stakeholders whom the Panel met. The Authority sought to be, and is widely regarded as being a facilitating, encouraging and enabling organisation, independent and objective, taking a holistic view of education, and an effective ‘guarantor’ of the Framework. The relationship with the Authority was characterised by one stakeholder as involving mutual respect and dialogue with an appropriate degree of detachment. In the view of the Panel this is due in no small part to the expertise and negotiating skills of the Chief Executive and the professionalism and competence of the staff of the Authority who are clearly held in high regard by the stakeholders with whom they engage.
- 2.13 There appears to be general acceptance of the Framework, including within the universities where the Authority’s power to direct is more limited compared with its role vis-à-vis other further and higher education and training awarding bodies and institutions. The Panel was particularly interested to learn that university external examiners are provided with details of the Framework and sees this as a promising starting point, especially if learning outcomes, a key element of the Framework, feature increasingly in course development and design within universities. New and revised subjects coming on stream within second level education take the Framework and learning outcomes into account.
- 2.14 As already noted, the Authority recognises that some parts of the Framework still need to be ‘populated’, in particular Levels 1 and 2 and the placement and inclusion of university certificate and diploma programmes. There is also a need for a closer alignment of the awards of Professional and Statutory Bodies. The desirability of incorporating employability characteristics within the Framework was also raised by stakeholders. In addition, external stakeholders in particular expressed the view that the language within which the Framework is presently couched could be reviewed (see also paragraph 2.20).
- 2.15 The Authority takes the view that the development of the Framework is a task which has now been completed, a view with which the Panel concurs. The Authority also takes the view that it has consulted effectively with diverse stakeholders in connection with the development and ongoing implementation of the Framework, a view with which it will be clear from the preceding paragraphs, the Panel also concurs. The Panel noted that the effectiveness of the Framework, including its implementation and impact, is to be the subject of a separate review which is planned to commence at the end of 2007.
- 2.16 The Panel concluded that the Authority has discharged this function effectively, whilst endorsing the Authority’s own view of the need to employ more effective external

communication processes to enhance awareness of the National Framework of Qualifications (see also paragraph 4.7).

ACCESS, TRANSFER AND PROGRESSION

- 2.17 The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 identifies a key function of the Authority as being to promote and facilitate access, transfer and progression. One of the objectives contained in the Authority's Corporate Plan 2006-2008 is to have improved arrangements for access, transfer and progression in place for a diverse range of learners by winter 2008, consistent with the full implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications.
- 2.18 Policies for promoting and facilitating access, transfer and progression for learners, incorporating a national approach to credit, were formally published in October 2003 as part of the launch of the Framework. Principles and operational guidelines in relation to the use of credit in higher education were published in 2004 and were followed by the publication of principles and operational guidelines for the recognition of prior learning. A substantial proportion of stakeholders agreed that the work of the Authority had helped to increase the diversity of access, transfer and progression arrangements.
- 2.19 There is, nevertheless, a general recognition amongst stakeholders, and acknowledged by the Authority, that there is still much to be done by the Authority, in partnership with the awarding bodies and providers of education and training to facilitate access, transfer and progression. This view was confirmed in the Panel's discussions with stakeholders and the suggestion was made by stakeholders that the Authority could, perhaps, be more vigorous in its leadership on this issue. As part of this more vigorous approach, the Panel formed the view that the Authority could be more pro-active in publicising and encouraging the removal of what were described as 'road blocks' to progression at various points in the Framework, for example, between the awards of FETAC and some HETAC providers and the universities.
- 2.20 The Authority takes the view that there is support for its policies on access, transfer and progression and that its role as coordinator and facilitator is both necessary and welcomed by stakeholders. The Panel found considerable support for this view amongst those stakeholders whom it met. Part of this co-ordinating and facilitating function involves clarification of the respective roles of the Authority, the awards Councils and providers for implementing agreed policies. The Panel also concurs with the Authority's view that the refinement and simplification of its messages on access, transfer and progression and their effective communication remains a priority. This applies particularly to migrant workers and those returning to the labour market after a period away from employment. These issues, and practical measures for achieving these objectives, will be considered in greater detail as part of the forthcoming review of the implementation and impact of the Framework (see paragraph 2.15).
- 2.21 The Panel concluded that the Authority has discharged this function effectively whilst endorsing the Authority's own view concerning the work still to be done in encouraging the implementation of the Authority's and providers' access, transfer and progressions policies.

SUPPORTING THE AWARDS COUNCILS

- 2.22 The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 established the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) as independent bodies with their own functions. An early priority for the Authority was the provision of support to both Councils through the collaborative establishment of transitional arrangements, prior to setting out the National Framework of Qualifications, and the agreement of appropriate procedures. The Authority worked closely with the Councils on the development of the Framework and is now working with them on its implementation. On an ongoing basis, the Authority's quality assurance role requires it to conduct reviews of the performance by the Councils of their functions. In addition, the Authority allocates funding to both Councils, reviews the fees charged by them and formally approves their corporate plans.
- 2.23 Both Councils are positive about the working relationship that they have with the Authority and both are satisfied that the process undertaken by the Authority for agreeing the procedures underpinning their functions was effective and appropriate. HETAC was of the opinion that the Authority had sensitively avoided over-regulation. FETAC considered that the process had provided an opportunity to re-think elements of the working relationship between FETAC and the Authority and to identify areas in which increased pro-activity by the Authority would be helpful to FETAC in performing its functions. HETAC felt that the quality of the relationship between HETAC and the Authority had benefited from the goodwill, diligence and professionalism of all those concerned.
- 2.24 The Authority is also responsible under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 for reviewing the Councils' procedures on a regular basis. A review of the performance of HETAC's statutory functions was commissioned by the Authority in 2006. Prior to the review, the Authority executive undertook an overview of national and international practice concerning the external review of agencies with a substantial role in quality assurance in higher education, and review practices concerning public sector agencies in Ireland. The overview was published and the terms of reference and protocol for the review were developed with reference to this practice, and with reference to the requirements of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. In addition, the Authority consulted key national stakeholders in developing the terms of reference and review protocol. That review protocol made provision for the following elements: self evaluation by the Council; external evaluation by a panel of experts; consideration of the report of the panel by the Council and the development of a plan by the Council to implement the recommendations in the external panel's report; consideration of the review report and the Council's plans by the Authority. The Council's self-evaluation report, the expert panel's report, the Council's response to the expert panel's report and the Authority's consideration of the review outcomes have all been published.
- 2.25 HETAC considered that the Authority had managed the review in an efficient and effective manner, a view endorsed by the Chair and Secretary of the external review panel, who agreed that the terms of reference for the review were clear, relevant and comprehensive, that the Authority had allowed the Panel to form its own conclusions and recommendations without interference and that timely and appropriate administrative support had been provided.
- 2.26 FETAC expressed satisfaction with the planning to date of the Authority's review of the performance of its functions which will take place towards the end of 2007.

- 2.27 The positive views expressed above and contained in the Authority's SER were confirmed in separate meetings involving the Panel and FETAC and HETAC representatives. The Panel noted that tri-partite meetings between the executives of the three organisations which had previously taken place on a regular basis were to re-commence. Frequent informal contact between the executives of all three organisations notwithstanding, the Panel agreed that the re-commencement of these formal meetings was necessary if the coherent implementation of the Framework and the associated policies and procedures on access, transfer and progression was to be effective. More specifically, the Panel heard from a number of providers of what were felt to be frustrating differences in HETAC and FETAC's quality assurance requirements and procedures and suggests that this is a matter which could be placed on the agenda of the reconvened tri-partite meetings.
- 2.28 The Authority considers that its initial and ongoing consultations with FETAC and HETAC were carried out effectively and with appropriate respect for the respective roles and responsibilities of the three organisations. The Panel found considerable evidence in its meetings with FETAC and HETAC representatives and providers to justify this view. Going forward, the Authority has identified, *inter alia*, a need to encourage the consideration of appropriate roles and responsibilities on accountability issues with the Councils and the Department of Education and Science. The Panel also noted the Authority's desire to re-commence regular tri-partite meetings which the Panel would strongly endorse.
- 2.29 The Panel concluded that the Authority has discharged this function effectively.

SUPPORTING THE DUBLIN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

- 2.30 The Authority and the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) have a unique relationship which is outlined in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. The Authority exercises certain functions in relation to the Institute's quality assurance procedures. The Authority's overall objective as set out in its Corporate Plan 2006-2008 is to continue to support the Institute in further developing and enhancing a culture of excellence. Under the Act, there is a requirement for the Institute to put quality assurance procedures in place and to agree those procedures with the Authority. The Authority and the Institute agreed an initial set of procedures in June 2002. The Institute adopted a revised Quality Enhancement Handbook in June 2006 which, *inter alia*, extends its quality assurance policies and procedures to non-academic departments. These revised procedures were agreed with the Authority in January 2007.
- 2.31 The Act also requires the Authority to consider the findings arising out of the application of the agreed quality assurance procedures and make recommendations to the Institute, as appropriate, in respect of them. Following consultation between the Institute and the Authority, an agreed approach to this function was developed in February 2004. The findings from the Institute's programme validation and review processes, as well as school and faculty reviews, are considered by the Authority on an annual basis, and overarching recommendations are made as appropriate. The agreed approach is kept under review by the Authority and the Institute.
- 2.32 The Authority is also required under the Act to review the effectiveness of the Institute's quality assurance procedures on a periodic basis and to publish the results of these reviews. The Authority engaged the European University Association to carry out the inaugural review of effectiveness on its behalf. The review process was based on the

EUA's established institutional evaluation programme, which makes provision for the training of internal and external evaluators, self-assessment by the institution, an external assessment by a group of experts, publication of a report with recommendations, and a follow-up procedure. The Authority's decision to engage the EUA was contingent upon the existence of such elements within the Association's institutional evaluation programme. Following discussions with the Authority and Institute, the EUA adapted its standard procedures to include an external panellist who represented a student/learner perspective. This was the first occasion on which such an adaptation had been made by the EUA. The Authority has also taken a proactive role with regard to following up the review recommendations, both by identifying priority action lines for the Institute within the review recommendations generally and by monitoring their implementation through regular updates provided by the Institute. Most elements of the review process – the original terms of reference and review methodology, the assessment report of the external experts, the Institute's response and update reports on the implementation of the review recommendations – are published.

- 2.33 The Deputy Secretary of the EUA confirmed in a teleconference with members of the Panel that the review had been carried out as described above using criteria which had also been used previously by the EUA to review universities in Ireland. The EUA's representative advised that the Association's experience with the Authority had been extremely positive and commented that its staff are regarded as competent and knowledgeable, sensitive to institutional aims and supportive of the Institute's efforts to further develop its own internal quality culture.
- 2.34 In its meeting with the Panel, representatives of the Institute confirmed that the Institute has a good relationship with the Authority, is content with the Authority's direct oversight of its quality assurance arrangements and is satisfied that the Authority is aware of and respects appropriate boundaries between itself and the Institute.
- 2.35 The Panel concluded that the Authority has discharged this function effectively.

INTERNATIONAL POLICY ENGAGEMENT

- 2.36 The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 lays on the Authority responsibility for informing itself of practices outside the State in respect of matters relevant to its functions. The Act places a similar responsibility on FETAC and HETAC to inform themselves of relevant international practice, and an agreement is in place within which the three bodies discuss their respective individual and collaborative international engagements.
- 2.37 It was clear to the Panel, from both the Authority's SER and discussion with stakeholders, that the Authority is involved in international matters, particularly, but by no means exclusively, in Europe. Irish representatives were said to be extremely active in, for example, the Bologna process, and organisations, including the Authority, representing Irish higher education in Europe were described as being empowered and able to contribute to European debates and developments. The agreement between the three bodies referred to above notwithstanding, the view was, however, expressed to the Panel that there was some uncertainty in European higher education circles as to '... who was in charge ...' of higher education policy in Ireland, a situation which could lead to confusion and which the Panel believes requires urgent consideration. There was,

nevertheless, a positive perception of the Authority in Europe, further testimony to the expertise and professionalism of Authority staff, this time in connection with their contributions to higher education developments in Europe.

- 2.38 In a wider international context, the Authority has engaged on a number of occasions, on behalf of the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, with the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD). This collaboration has included work on the role of national qualifications frameworks in the promotion of lifelong learning. The Authority also coordinated one of three thematic groups set up by the OECD to explore particular aspects of the development and use of qualifications frameworks as a means of reforming and managing qualifications systems. An international workshop based on this activity was hosted by the Authority in May 2003 as was the closing conference for this work in 2005. The Authority is currently taking part in the next phase of the OECD work which relates to the recognition of non-formal and in-formal learning.
- 2.39 The Panel concluded that the Authority has discharged this function effectively, whilst encouraging the Authority to work with others to address the issues of uncertainty over leadership referred to above.

INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION OF AWARDS

- 2.40 Under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999, one of the functions assigned to the Authority is to liaise with bodies outside the State which make education and training awards for the purposes of facilitating the recognition in the State of education and training awards made by those bodies, and to facilitate recognition outside the State of education and training awards made in the State. The introduction of the National Framework of Qualifications has aided the recognition of international awards for both of these purposes.
- 2.41 This aspect of the Authority's work has become increasingly important as the demand for the recognition of qualifications has, both from an individual and an economic perspective, grown significantly over the last five years. With effect from February 2003, and at the request of the Department of Education and Science, the Authority became the national centre for both the Network of National Academic Recognition Information Centres and its successor the European Network of Information Centres which was set up following the Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region. Within the Authority, this responsibility is discharged by a qualifications recognition service which is designated as 'Qualifications Recognition-Ireland'.
- 2.42 The Panel discussed the implications of this responsibility with staff of the Authority, including staff within the qualifications recognition service, and with a range of other stakeholders. It was put to the Panel that a significant increase in demand for the Authority's recognition service was imminent and the capacity of the service to cope with that demand, should it emerge, was questioned.
- 2.43 The Panel was provided with a summary of applications for qualifications' recognition between 2003 and 2006 and applications processed. As the table below shows, applications increased by 269% over that period. At least as significant, however, is the fact that, whereas in 2003, 30% of the applications received was from the UK, and probably more easily located within the Irish educational system, by 2006 only 10% of

applications was from the UK. This might be compared with, for example, applications from Poland, which by 2006 was the biggest single country from which applications were received, accounting for 15% of such applications compared with 1% in 2003.

APPLICATIONS RECEIVED

YEAR	UK	POLAND	TOTAL	PROCESSED	%
2003	97	3	324	209	65
2004	61	19	370	209	56
2005	103	104	799	758	95
2006	115	182	1,194	1,000	84

Source: Figures provide by the Qualifications Recognition Service

- 2.44 The scale of the task can only be fully appreciated, however, if some estimate of unmet demand for qualifications recognition is made. This is, almost by definition, impossible to be estimated, although the fact that 11.2% of the workforce in Ireland in the first quarter of 2007, some 244,400 people, is estimated to be made up of foreign nationals (Quarterly National Household Survey, May 2007) might give some clue as to the level of unmet demand for the Authority's qualifications recognition service.
- 2.45 One fact that did emerge from a number of the stakeholders with whom the Panel spoke concerned the 'visibility' of the qualifications recognition service. Despite the Authority's efforts to publicise its existence, it was clear to the Panel that many groups and individuals were unaware of the service or had only recently become aware of its existence.
- 2.46 Given uncertainty as to the scale of unmet demand for the service, research into this would appear to be an immediate priority. In the light of the findings of this research a decision should then be taken concerning the Authority's response, including the resources to be devoted to this service. Various options were put to the Panel, including the establishment of a public 'shop front' and prioritising particular countries and/or professions. Consideration of these and other options, including the resources to be devoted to publicising the service, should await the findings of research into the scale of demand for the service.
- 2.47 The Authority considers that the significant increase in applications received signifies an increase in awareness of the service and its importance to individuals, the economy and society. It believes that the best approach to the recognition of international qualifications is to ensure that as much information as possible is made available online about how international qualifications compare to Irish qualifications with the aim that such a central information hub will reduce the need for individual queries. The Authority takes the view that its active promotion of the international recognition service is still at a relatively early stage and has not as yet been successful in raising awareness of the service to the extent required.
- 2.48 The Panel concurs with the above conclusions and the Authority's suggested actions, including further work in establishing the international qualifications recognition service with migrant groups and enterprises; considering alternative locations for accommodating the service, including an analysis of the possible impact on the effectiveness of the service of the anticipated decentralisation of the Authority. The Panel also strongly endorses the Authority's desire to explore how the task of promoting

the international qualifications recognition service could be shared amongst interested parties and how collaborative work with these parties could enhance the service provided, including through FÁS offices abroad.

- 2.49 The Panel concluded that the Authority has discharged this function effectively whilst endorsing the Authority's own view of the need to employ more effective external communication processes to enhance awareness of the services provided by the Authority, in particular the recognition of international awards.

EUROPASS

- 2.50 Europass is a European Commission initiative that aims to assist individuals in having their skills and qualifications clearly and easily understood throughout Europe, thereby increasing the mobility of learners and workers. The main concept behind Europass is to link separate initiatives, all aimed at increasing the transparency of qualifications and competences, into a structured portfolio of five documents. The Authority was designated the National Europass Centre for Ireland by the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment in 2005 and is, thereby, linked to a network of corresponding Centres across Europe whose role it is to promote and implement Europass. To assist it in this task, the Authority formed a Europass Advisory Group, comprising representatives of the Authority, the Department of Education and Science, HETAC, FETAC and the universities.
- 2.51 As at March 2007 nearly 200 Europass Mobility documents had been issued to learners and the Authority continues to work with providers and awarding bodies to broaden its application to the full range of exchange programmes in operation in further and higher education settings. With regard to the promotion of Europass, the Authority has undertaken a number of initiatives. In November 2005, a launch event for Europass targeted those stakeholders involved in the implementation of its various elements. In February 2006 the initiative was introduced to the public, in conjunction with the annual FÁS Opportunities event and to coincide with the European Year of Workers' Mobility. More recent promotional activities have been designed in collaboration with the Union of Students in Ireland and include a poster campaign for higher education campuses, which was set to commence in April 2007. Europass has also been represented by the Authority at a range of further and higher education exhibitions.
- 2.52 The Authority considers that there will be further opportunities to implement elements of Europass across education and training. However, it is also of the view that a revised approach for this work will be required in order to secure consistent application of the Europass tools and to identify funding requirements that may be associated with their implementation. In particular, the Authority considers that it should give particular focus to ensuring widespread implementation of the Certificate Supplement and the Diploma Supplement.
- 2.53 In advancing with this particular focus the Authority considers that a closer collaboration with the Further Education and Training Awards Council on the development and implementation of the Certificate Supplement should be explored, in order to assist the Council more comprehensively in the implementation of this initiative. The Authority also considers that a closer collaboration with the universities, and the colleges associated with them, on implementation of the Diploma Supplement should be explored.

- 2.54 The Authority considers that the focus of the communications work of the Authority will remain on the Framework and on the recognition of international qualifications. With an increasing focus in the communication of the elements of the Europass directly associated with qualifications, it is anticipated that the development of co-ordinated approaches to the Authority's communication will be facilitated.
- 2.55 The Panel concluded that the Authority has discharged this function effectively.

OVERVIEW

- 2.56 In the light of the oral and documentary evidence considered by it, the Panel concluded that the Qualifications Authority has performed effectively its principal statutory functions since its establishment in 2001.
- 2.57 The Panel recommends that the Authority:
- considers the resources currently devoted to its responsibilities for the recognition of international awards in the light of a, possibly significant, increase in demand for such recognition; and
 - builds on the support identified by the Panel from a wide range of stakeholders for a broader, national approach to quality assurance in higher education.
- 2.58 The Panel endorses the Authority's own conclusions concerning:
- the work still to be done in encouraging the implementation of the Authority's and providers' access, transfer and progression policies (Chapter 3, page 28 of the SER); and
 - the need to employ more effective external communication processes to enhance awareness of both the National Framework of Qualifications and of the services provided by the Authority (Chapter 11, page 87 of the SER), in particular the recognition of international awards referred to above.
- 2.59 Finally, the Panel invites the Authority, within the existing legislative framework, and based on the reputation it has established as an objective, impartial and professional national agency, to increase the speed with which the final elements of the National Framework of Qualifications are put in place, and access, transfer and progression policies are implemented.

PART THREE

EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

INTRODUCTION

- 3.1 In its SER the Authority identified two reasons for its particular interest in the use of quality assurance and quality improvement processes within the Irish education and training system, and hence its interest in inviting the Panel to evaluate its compliance with European standards and guidelines for quality assurance. Both reasons relate to its statutory roles and functions. The first reason reflects the first object of the Authority, namely to establish and maintain a framework of qualifications for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners. This gives the Authority a concern with what it described as ‘whole-system’ quality assurance.
- 3.2 The second reason stems from its second object under the Act. Here, the Authority has been given the task of establishing and promoting the maintenance and improvement of the standards of awards within further and higher education and training, other than in the existing universities. The Authority has also been given, through the Act, a series of specific quality assurance functions, which complement and underpin the object of maintaining and improving the standards of awards in further and higher education and training. These functions relate primarily to the two awards Councils - HETAC and FETAC - and the Dublin Institute of Technology. It is also the case that these functions will extend to any future universities established under section 9 of the Universities Act 1997.
- 3.3 It is in this context that the Authority believes it to be both legitimate and desirable to designate itself a quality assurance agency in the Irish higher education and training context, and to seek to demonstrate its compliance to the new European standards for external quality assurance agencies.

CYCLICAL REVIEW OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

- 3.4 The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) provides a theoretical model for the cyclical review of quality assurance agencies (APPENDIX 8, pages 36 to 41). This model contains three main elements as follows:
- Terms of reference
 - Self-evaluation
 - Guidelines for the external panel review
- 3.5 It will be evident from Parts One and Two of this report that all three of these elements are reflected in this review of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland. It is, nevertheless, worth highlighting briefly the extent to which the arrangements made by the Authority comply with ENQA’s review model.
- 3.6 The Panel was provided with comprehensive terms of reference which clearly identified the goals of the review. The terms of reference also provided guidance for the conduct of the review. The Panel had available to it the SER prepared by the Authority and a supplementary document summarising internal and external feedback concerning the

performance of the Authority's functions. Additional supporting documentation was provided during the on-site visit at the request of the Panel. The fact that so little additional documentation was requested during the on-site visit is testimony to the comprehensive and well-structured documentation made available by the Authority in advance of the Panel's visit.

- 3.7 The review itself was preceded by a face-to-face briefing for Panel members by the Authority, including a presentation from a senior officer of the Department of Education and Science formally responsible for commissioning the review. The briefing also included a presentation of the ENQA Standards and Guidelines. Panel members were given detailed information of the general organisation of the review. The Panel Chair and Secretary drew up a programme for the three and a half day on-site visit and agreed with the Panel arrangements for drafting the report containing its findings.
- 3.8 The Panel consisted of international qualifications and quality assurance experts, individuals based in Ireland familiar with the Irish higher education system and representatives of student and other stakeholders' interests, from amongst whom a Chairman was appointed. An external Secretary, a higher education administrator with higher education quality agency and international institutional experience, supported the Panel.
- 3.9 The ENQA publication, *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, contains a list of European standards for quality assurance in higher education and accompanying guidelines. The standards and guidelines focus on three areas, namely:
- European standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance within higher education quality assurance
 - European standards and guidelines for the external quality assurance of higher education
 - European standards and guidelines for external quality assurance agencies
- 3.10 The Panel reviewed the Authority's compliance with the last two elements above which focus on external standards, including those applicable to external quality assurance agencies. Many of the Panel's findings in respect of its evaluation of the Authority's performance of its statutory functions are, of course, directly relevant to the European Standards and Guidelines. Indeed, the *Standards and Guidelines* document acknowledges (page 30) that an external review will usually flow from national regulations and involve an evaluation of the fulfilment of the national mandate as well as the extent to which the agency involved conforms to the European Standards and Guidelines. The remainder of Part Three of this report will, therefore, summarise the Panel's findings in this regard, referring to but not repeating, what has already been said in Parts One and Two where appropriate. The Authority's own SER (pages 69 to 86) evaluates its compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines and the Panel's findings broadly confirm the Authority's self-evaluation.

EUROPEAN STANDARDS FOR THE EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

THE USE OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESSES [EUROPEAN STANDARD [ES 2.1]

- 3.11 At a system level the Authority has encouraged the development of common

approaches to quality assurance/quality improvement in Irish higher education through the Irish Higher Education Quality Network (IHEQN). In May 2005, the IHEQN agreed principles of good practice for quality assurance/quality improvement in Irish higher education and training, which are compatible with the *European Standards and Guidelines*. With regard to agreeing new quality assurance procedures with the Dublin Institute of Technology, both the Authority and the Institute are mindful of the need to ensure compatibility with the *European Standards and Guidelines*. New procedures were agreed in January 2007, which make provision for all of the elements of internal quality assurance set out in Part 1 of the *European Standards and Guidelines*, including approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes, assessment of students, quality assurance of teaching staff, learning resources and student support and information systems. The new procedures formally acknowledge this compatibility.

- 3.12 The overarching procedures established by the Authority for HETAC in September 2005, make provision for internal quality assurance within the HETAC system and confirm that HETAC will have regard to the expectation that providers of higher education and training will take responsibility for their own assessment and quality assurance processes. The review of HETAC carried out in 2006 (see paragraph 2.24) confirmed that the Council complies with this aspect of the standards and guidelines.

DEVELOPMENT OF EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESSES [ES 2.2]

- 3.13 In the two principal external quality assurance reviews undertaken by the Authority to date - the review of effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures of the Dublin Institute of Technology (see paragraphs 2.30 to 2.35 above), and the review of the performance by HETAC of its functions - the aims and objectives were pre-determined, following discussion with both bodies and consultation with other key stakeholders. Terms of reference and protocols for both reviews, which also set out the procedures to be followed, were published ahead of the commencement of both reviews.

CRITERIA FOR DECISIONS [ES 2.3]

- 3.14 There are three quality-related processes which involve the Authority in a formal decision-making capacity. In the delegation of authority to make awards process, which is primarily a function of HETAC, the Authority has an agreement role with the Council in relation to the outcomes of reviews of delegations. The latest version of the general criteria and procedures for delegation of authority to make awards was agreed by the Council and the Authority in February 2004 and is available on the Council's website, as are the specific procedures used by the Authority in fulfilling its agreement roles.
- 3.15 The Authority also has two formal appeals roles in respect of the work of the Council. Under section 27 of the Qualifications Act, the Authority may hear appeals by providers against refusal or withdrawal of validation of a programme by the Council. Procedures for hearing such appeals, and the grounds upon which they may be made, have been established by the Authority and published on its website. No appeals have been made to date. Under section 29 of the Act, the Authority may hear appeals by providers against the withdrawal of delegated authority. Procedures for hearing such appeals, and the grounds upon which they may be made, have also been established by the Authority and published on its website. No appeals have been made to date.

PROCESSES FIT FOR PURPOSE [ES 2.4]

- 3.16 All of the quality assurance processes undertaken by the Authority are designed to achieve the specific aims and objectives set for them. The avowed aim of the review of effectiveness of the quality assurance of DIT, for example, was to facilitate the Institute to develop further its own internal quality culture, and to enable it to develop and internalise the links between its internal quality processes and the strategic development of the Institute. The EUA was commissioned to undertake the review on the Authority's behalf, though a number of elements of the EUA's standard review process were customised to satisfy particular statutory requirements, such as ensuring that the Authority had an appropriate input into the final outcomes of the review. The review of DIT has been considered in more detail in paragraphs 2.30 to 2.35.
- 3.17 The review of HETAC was also designed with the aims and objectives of the review firmly in mind. The terms of reference for the review and the review process itself followed extensive consultation with the Council and other key stakeholders and an overview of national and international practice concerning the external review of agencies with a substantial role in quality assurance in higher education, and review practices concerning public sector agencies in Ireland. The review of HETAC has been considered in more detail in paragraphs 2.24 and 2.25.

REPORTING [ES 2.5]

- 3.18 The Authority is committed to publishing reports and has signed up to the following principle of good practice, with fellow practitioners and policy makers, under the auspices of the Irish Higher Education Quality Network:

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

- 3.19 Reviews undertaken by the Authority to date have been published. Apart from the voluntary culture of openness and publication established by the Authority, there also exists a high level of legally enforceable transparency in Ireland, in particular, under the Freedom of Information Acts 1997 and 2003.

FOLLOW-UP PROCEDURES [ES 2.6]

- 3.20 The Authority is committed to having robust follow-up procedures built into its quality assurance processes. In both of the statutory reviews undertaken to date, those pertaining to DIT and HETAC, the review outcomes have included the publication of responses from the review in the form of detailed action plans. These action plans are also monitored periodically on an agreed basis with the review subjects. The Authority has also signed up to the following principle of good practice, with fellow practitioners and policy makers, under the auspices of the Irish Higher Education Quality Network:

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

- 3.21 The Panel is confident that the Authority has both the capacity and the expertise to follow up the outcomes of its statutory review obligations.

PERIODIC REVIEWS [ES 2.7]

- 3.22 The Authority's external review processes are undertaken on a cyclical basis. In the case of the review of effectiveness of the quality assurance processes of the Dublin Institute of Technology, the Authority is required to undertake such a review not more than once in every three years and not less than once in every seven years. With regard to the review of the performance by HETAC of its functions, as already noted the first review was completed in 2006. In line with the *Standards and Guidelines*, and the membership requirements of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, it is anticipated that they will take place on a cyclical basis at least once every five years.

SYSTEM-WIDE ANALYSES [ES 2.8]

- 3.23 No single agency is responsible for external quality assurance in the Irish higher education and training system. As a result, no system-wide analysis has been undertaken to date, though the HEA/IUQB review of the Irish Universities in 2004 resulted in a transversal report on the university sector, and two summary follow-up reports. In its SER the Authority suggested that this is an area that might be fruitfully explored in the context of the Irish Higher Education Quality Network, a view with which the Panel concurs. The Panel is confident of the ability of the Authority to undertake such analyses having noted its coordination of a number of system-wide studies of topics relevant to Irish higher education, including a review of national and international practice concerning professional doctorates and a review of national and international practices and trends in the classification or grading of awards in further and higher education and training.

OVERVIEW

- 3.24 In the light of the above, the Panel is entirely confident that the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland complies with the European standards for the external quality assurance of higher education.

EUROPEAN STANDARDS FOR EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

USE OF EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCEDURES [ES 3.1]

- 3.25 The extent to which the Authority has taken account of the presence and effectiveness of external quality assurance processes is considered in paragraphs 3.4 to 3.10.

OFFICIAL STATUS [ES 3.2]

- 3.26 The Authority was established in February 2001 under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. It is an independent corporate body, which operates under the aegis of the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade

and Employment. Its responsibilities and functions are summarised in paragraphs 2.5 to 2.9.

ACTIVITIES [ES 3.3]

3.27 In its SER the Authority grouped its higher education and training quality assurance activities under the following headings all of which have been considered elsewhere in this report:

- Establishing procedures for the performance by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council of its functions /Agreement of criteria and procedures with the Council for reviews in relation to delegation of authority and review of delegation of authority to make awards
- Reviewing the performance by the Council of its functions
- Agreeing the quality assurance procedures of the Dublin Institute of Technology
- Consideration of the findings arising from the application of the quality assurance procedures of the Dublin Institute of Technology
- Review of effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures of the Dublin Institute of Technology

3.28 In addition, the Authority has considered and agreed the outcomes of sixteen delegation reviews undertaken by HETAC. The Authority has also consulted with the Higher Education Authority in relation to its quality assurance review role for the universities. This was part of the consultation process which ultimately resulted in the commissioning and completion of a review of the universities' quality assurance procedures in 2004-2005 which was undertaken by the European University Association on behalf of the HEA and the universities.

RESOURCES [ES 3.4]

3.29 The Authority is provided with a grant each year by the Oireachtas. The organisation has a staff complement of seventeen which it considers adequate to enable it to perform its statutory functions, including its external quality assurance functions, in an effective and efficient manner, based on the current scale of activities.

MISSION STATEMENT [ES 3.5]

3.30 The Authority adopted its current mission statement initially in 2003, and readopted it in 2005. It has been published in the Authority's first two Corporate plans, which cover the planning cycles 2003-6 and 2006-8. The statement reads:

The Authority will lead a cultural change, in partnership with stakeholders, with the aim of achieving wide recognition of outcomes of learning, and improved access for learners to quality learning opportunities

3.31 The mission statement reflects the broad range of statutory functions and related activities in which the Authority is engaged, which include the development and maintenance of a framework of qualifications for the development, recognition and award of qualifications based on learning outcomes; and the promotion and facilitation

of access, transfer and progression opportunities for learners within the context of this framework. The next planning cycle will commence in the latter half of 2007, at which time the Authority's mission statement will also be reviewed.

INDEPENDENCE [ES 3.6]

- 3.32 Under the Qualifications Act, the Authority enjoys a high degree of independence and autonomy. The provisions for membership of the Authority are set out in the Act and reflect nominations by stakeholder, including learner, interests. The Authority is also required to nominate two members who have special knowledge and experience related to the functions of the Authority, at least one of whom has international experience related to these functions. The Authority operates in accordance with a Code of Business Conduct, which is published on the Authority's website and which is reviewed annually. The Code covers all the activities of the Authority for both members and employees and is intended to demonstrate that the Authority conducts all its business in a manner which is impartial and based on sound ethical principles. Within this framework the Authority makes its decisions relating to quality assurance matters – including the nomination and appointment of external experts involved in its quality assurance processes - in an independent manner, which is independent of influence from government, institutional or other sources.

EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE CRITERIA AND PROCESSES USED BY THE AGENCY [ES 3.7]

- 3.33 The processes, criteria and procedures used by the Authority in relation to its two major, statutory higher education review functions – the review of effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures of the Dublin Institute of Technology, and the review of the performance by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council of its principal functions – were pre-defined and made publicly available ahead of the commencement of both reviews. Both reviews have been considered in detail elsewhere in this report (see paragraphs 2.24 and 2.30 to 2.35).
- 3.34 With regard to the other regular, quality related-functions that the Authority carries out, the Authority has drafted, and published on its website, a document entitled 'National Qualifications Authority of Ireland: External Quality Assurance Procedures'. This sets out the principles underpinning these processes, and standard operating procedures for their conduct.
- 3.35 The Authority also has an appeals role in relation to the withdrawal by the Council of delegated authority from a recognised institution to make awards. The Authority has developed procedures for this function which are published on the Authority's website. No appeals have been made to date. The Authority also has a function to hear appeals in relation to the refusal or withdrawal of validation of a programme of education and training by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council. The Authority has developed procedures for this function which are also published on the Authority's website. No appeals have been made to date.

ACCOUNTABILITY PROCEDURES [ES 3.8]

- 3.36 The current external quality review process is a key element of the Authority's internal quality management strategy as set out in the Authority's Corporate Plan 2006-8 and a

demonstration of the accountability procedures to which the Authority is subject. The review will also be informed by a parallel process, namely the achievement of a quality mark, *Excellence through People*, which is the national standard for the development of human resources. The Authority will submit itself to external quality review at least once every five years in line with the requirements of the *European Standards and Guidelines* and the membership requirements of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

- 3.37 The Authority has also drafted, and published on its website, a document entitled, *National Qualifications Authority of Ireland: Internal Quality Assurance and Accountability Policy*. This sets out, *inter alia*, the general policy framework and structures through which the Authority assures the quality of the organisation itself and demonstrates accountability.

OVERVIEW

- 3.38 In the view of the Panel, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland complies with the European standards for external quality assurance agencies.

PART FOUR

THE AUTHORITY'S ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES

INTRODUCTION

- 4.1 The review's final term of reference invites the Panel to evaluate the suitability of the organisational structures and processes of the executive of the Authority for performing its functions in the future. In considering this term of reference the Panel was mindful of the forthcoming review of the National Framework of Qualifications and the development by the Authority of its next Corporate Plan.

PRIORITIES

- 4.2 With both the above in mind, the Panel adopted the approach of identifying what appeared to be the main challenges facing the Authority in the immediate and medium-term future, to some of which reference has already been made in this report. Attention to these challenges could have implications for the organisational structures and processes of the executive of the Authority. These challenges are summarised briefly below.

THE RECOGNITION OF INTERNATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

- 4.3 It will be apparent that this issue is regarded as a major, perhaps the most important challenge facing the Authority (see paragraphs 2.40 to 2.49). It is the view of the Panel that the scale and nature of the challenge requires further research. Such research will be an important element in decisions concerning the most effective approach to be taken and the resources to be allocated to meeting this challenge, and possible implications for the organisational structures and processes of the executive of the Authority.

THE NATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF QUALIFICATIONS

- 4.4 Much has been achieved in this area; much, however, remains to be done. In particular, some parts of the Framework still need to be 'populated', for example, Levels 1 and 2 and the placement and inclusion of university certificate and diploma programmes. There is also a need for a closer alignment with the awards of Professional and Statutory Bodies and the desirability of incorporating employability characteristics within the Framework. To achieve this, the Panel invites the Authority to increase the speed with which the final elements of the National Framework of Qualifications are put in place, and access, transfer and progression policies are implemented. In the view of the Panel, the Authority has established sufficient credibility in its objectivity, competence and professionalism for stakeholders to expect and desire the Authority not only to facilitate but, perhaps to take the lead and inspire in this. Its approach has always been characterised by partnership, and the Panel is confident that the Authority is capable of identifying and mobilising appropriate partners for what is now an urgent task.

APPROACHES TO QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

- 4.5 The Panel believes that there is support from a wide range of stakeholders for a broader, national approach to quality assurance in higher education, and invites the Authority to capitalise on this support now by devoting sufficient resources to achieve such a national outcome.

ACCESS, TRANSFER AND PROGRESSION

- 4.6 In the Panel's discussions with stakeholders it was suggested that the Authority could, perhaps, be more vigorous in its leadership on this issue. This could involve, but would be by no means confined to, being more pro-active in publicising and encouraging the removal of 'road blocks' to progression at various points in the Framework.

PUBLICITY

- 4.7 Publication of the Framework, of access, transfer and progression opportunities and of the existence of, and services provided by the Authority's qualifications recognition service were all areas identified by stakeholders as ones which the Authority should publicise as matters of priority. In the view of the Panel, this could involve encouraging a more holistic approach to publicity and communication involving a more co-ordinated and strategic role for the Authority, HETAC and FETAC.

OVERVIEW

- 4.8 The above priorities, and practical measures for tackling them should, in the view of the Panel, be considered in greater detail as part of the forthcoming review of the implementation and impact of the Framework.

PART FIVE

CONCLUSION

- 5.1 It will be clear from this report that the review Panel believes that much has been achieved by the Authority since its establishment in 2001. It will also be clear that the Authority is well aware of the tasks that remain to be completed, that it is already formulating priority areas and activities for the next phase of its work and that it is capable of mature self-evaluation and reflection.
- 5.2 As it moves to the next phase of its work, the Authority may wish to note the desire of a wide range of stakeholders to increase the pace of change and move more rapidly to the implementation phase, and a willingness to see the Authority take the initiative in this. The Panel would also encourage the Authority to be more explicit in testing the possible impact of its policies against the needs of the learner and to consider how it might involve students even more in its deliberations.
- 5.3 Finally, there is a real concern within the Authority and understood by Panel members, that the planned decentralisation to Edenderry will have a negative impact on the ability of the Authority to undertake the tasks placed upon it.

JUNE 2007

APPENDICES

1. THE PANEL'S FULL TERMS OF REFERENCE AND PROTOCOL, INCLUDING ADDITIONAL GUIDANCE GIVEN TO THE PANEL BY THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE
2. THE PANEL'S MEMBERSHIP
3. DETAILS OF THOSE WHO MET THE PANEL
4. DOCUMENTS CONSULTED BY THE PANEL
5. THE IRISH EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEM
6. THE NATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF QUALIFICATIONS: A DIAGRAMMATIC REPRESENTATION
7. RELEVANT SECTIONS OF THE QUALIFICATIONS (EDUCATION AND TRAINING) ACT 1999
8. THE EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

QUALITY REVIEW OF THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY OF IRELAND— TERMS OF REFERENCE AND PROTOCOL FOR THE REVIEW

The review will evaluate

- how effectively the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland has performed its principal statutory functions since its establishment
- the suitability of the organisational structures and processes of the executive of the Authority for performing the Authority's functions in the future
- the extent to which the Authority in the performance of its relevant functions complies with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*

The review will comprise

- Self-evaluation by the Authority
- Evaluation by a panel of experts
- Consideration of the report of the panel by the Authority and the development of a plan by the Authority to implement the recommendations in the report
- Consideration of the review report and the Authority's plans by the Department of Education and Science in association with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment

CONTEXT

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland has been in existence since 2001 and its work has been evolving and changing since then. In relation to its primary function – the establishment and maintenance of the National Framework of Qualifications – the Authority has moved over the last five years through a start-up phase to a development stage, and is now increasingly engaged in facilitating and co-ordinating the Framework's implementation by key stakeholders, as well as with new policy work arising from this implementation activity. In addition, the work of the Authority in the recognition of international awards has increased significantly in recent years. For an organisation to cope with these stages of development it needs to have appropriate strategies and structures in place. Organisational structures and coordinating and monitoring mechanisms may need to change to work effectively at certain stages of development.

The development of a quality management system in an organisation facilitates the evaluation of the organisation in its totality. A central feature of many such quality systems is the quality review. A quality review provides a snapshot of how the organisation conducts its business. It also helps to identify institutional strengths, as well as gaps and inefficiencies in the organisation's structures or methods. The desired outcome of a quality review includes improved decision making and increased effectiveness and adaptability for the future. A further goal is to provide opportunities to increase awareness, participation and influence throughout the organisation. In order to get these results the quality review must have the full support of the organisation and must involve participation across all levels in the organisation.

Another important consideration in proceeding with a quality review of the Authority is the need to ensure that the review is sufficiently robust to be credible and that it will be in general conformity to the principles of good practice in quality assurance that the Authority has agreed and signed up to with partner stakeholders. The Authority has a very strong interest in quality assurance in education and training, as strong quality assurance systems – whether they pertain to schools, further or higher education and training – are the essential means of guaranteeing the quality of the awards in the Framework, and the overall credibility of the Framework. As part of this legitimate concern, the Authority works closely with key stakeholders in education and training in the area of quality assurance, and, in general, would be regarded as having an authoritative voice on quality assurance matters, as evinced, for example, in the prominent role it has taken in the Irish Higher Education Quality Network. It is important, however, that we do not take any of this for granted, and that the Authority works assiduously in this area to retain its good name. In this regard, a quality review of the Authority would be timely, as it would demonstrate to key partners that the Authority itself is willing to submit itself to the same or similar quality disciplines that we would expect them to undertake.

POLICY APPROACH

In winter 2004, the Authority adopted a general policy approach to its own internal quality management system. In broad terms, this committed the Authority to undertaking a quality review to tabulate what quality systems are currently in place, where the gaps in those systems are, how these gaps will be filled and what mechanism will be implemented to ensure the quality management system is maintained. In addition, the policy approach also set out the process to be followed in undertaking this quality review. To a large extent the process set out was modelled on the processes that are currently in use in the quality reviews of academic departments and non-academic units in higher education institutions, and it is assumed in this proposal that a quality review of the Authority will be undertaken in this manner.

It is important to note, however, that the quality review of the Authority will not take place in a vacuum. Specifically, it will need to have regard to other quality-related reviews/activities to which the Authority is committed, especially in relation to the timing of the various reviews and the internal resources to be allocated to them; how (in certain instances) they relate to each other; and, where appropriate, how relevant findings from one review will feed into the other review processes.

The other quality-related reviews/activities of relevance that concern the Authority at this juncture are as follows:

- **REVIEW OF THE IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT OF THE NATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF QUALIFICATIONS; REVIEW OF LEVEL 6 DIFFERENTIATION**

A primary quality-related review is the review of the implementation and impact of the National Framework of Qualifications. In its current Corporate Plan, the Authority has committed itself to determining a policy approach to the overall review of the National Framework of Qualifications by winter 2006, and work on this is currently underway. The aim is to undertake this review in 2007. The establishment and maintenance of the Framework is, of course, the core function of the Authority, and any quality review of the Authority as an organisation would have regard to how it went about the business of developing and establishing the Framework, and the work that it is engaged in facilitating and assisting awarding bodies and providers to implement it. Consideration would therefore need to be given to how the quality review findings would feed into the broader Framework review.

As well as the overall Framework review, the Authority is also planning a related review of the differentiation between further and higher education and training at Level 6 in the Framework. This relates to the two award-types at Level 6. In September 2006, the Authority decided to postpone this review until implementation of the Framework at Level 6 is more advanced and the Authority and Framework reviews have been implemented.

- **EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA AND THE AUTHORITY'S ROLE AS A QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION**

Within the quality review space occupied by the Authority 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).

Increasingly, too, parallel developments are emerging in relation to the quality assurance of vocational education and training. The European Network on Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training was established in 2005 by the European Commission,

with the support of Member States, candidate countries, EFTA-EEA countries and social partners. The network aims to promote the use of a Common Quality Assurance Framework for vocational education and training in Europe and to foster co-operative, inclusive and voluntary networks at all levels. It also highlights the role of peer review within and across countries. In addition, as part of joining up European approaches to quality assurance across higher education and vocational education and training, some common principles have been developed which have been incorporated into the supporting policies of the proposed European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and these also refer to the need to have evaluation of agencies in quality assurance work.

In terms of Irish higher education, the Authority is one of a number of quality assurance agencies as it has direct and statutory quality assurance functions in relation to two awarding bodies, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology. It is of note that the Authority completed statutory quality assurance reviews of the two bodies 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*.

It is also of note that there is legislative provision for similar quality assurance functions to be extended to the Authority in relation to any new universities established under section 9 of the Universities Act; and that the Authority also has a consultative role in relation to the periodic statutory reviews undertaken by the Higher Education Authority of the quality assurance procedures of the existing universities under the same act.

Given its statutory role as a quality assurance agency, the continued active participation of the Authority in policy and practice debates on quality assurance, both at European and national level, is desirable. To maintain its credibility in this arena, the Authority 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 retain its membership of ENQA. The Authority is currently a candidate member of ENQA and to acquire full membership will need to submit itself, under ENQA regulations, to an external review before December 2007.

- **REVIEW OF FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING AWARDS COUNCIL**

As is the case with HETAC, the Authority also has a statutory function to review the effectiveness of the performance of its functions by the Further Education and Training Awards Council. In its current Corporate Plan, the Authority is committed to developing a policy approach for this review by the autumn of 2006 and implementing the review by the end of 2007.

PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE QUALITY REVIEW OF THE AUTHORITY

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

First, and in line with the statutory reviews of the two awards Councils, the quality review will evaluate the effectiveness of the Authority's performance of its functions since its establishment in 2001, having particular regard to the policies and procedures that the Authority has developed for each function and how they are being implemented and operated.

Second, the quality review will also be developmental in intent and will aim to assist the Authority 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 Authority as they currently operate and evaluate their suitability in the context of the Authority's changing role as it moves from developing the National Framework of Qualifications to promoting and facilitating its implementation in partnership with stakeholders. Thus, it will focus on the mission of the Authority and the norms and goals that the organisation has set for itself. It is envisaged that the process will assist the Authority 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 Authority 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 Authority'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: REVIEW OF PERFORMANCE, ORGANISATION AND STRUCTURES OF THE EXECUTIVE OF THE AUTHORITY**

- **STRAND 2: Quality Mark for the Authority**

Under the Sustaining Progress Action Plan (October 2005), the Authority has committed itself to identifying a Quality Mark for the Authority in 2006. Typically, the achievement of such quality marks would involve undertaking a fairly rigorous quality assurance process. The 'Excellence Through People' quality mark is the national standard for the development of human resources. It is designed to establish a level of good practice for the training and development of people in order to achieve organisational goals. The quality mark process aims to improve organisational outputs and internal processes. It also aims to raise awareness of the organisation's work and provide a means for external benchmarking. The achievement of the quality mark will be integrated into the broader quality review of the Authority. In effect, there will be a mini-assessment undertaken for the purposes of securing 'Excellence through People' accreditation. The outcomes of this exercise will then feed into the broader self-assessment report for the quality review. 'Excellence through people' is overseen by FÁS.

It is also envisaged that the outcomes of the broader quality review will feed, in turn, into the next Corporate and Strategic planning cycle, and the next modernisation plan that is required under 'Towards 2016', the new national partnership agreement. It is anticipated that the first two strands of the review will be closely integrated.

- **STRAND 3: COMPLIANCE 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 Authority 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 Qualifications Authority will consist of the following main elements:

- Commissioning of the review, including the appointment of the external panel of experts, by the Department of Education and Science in association with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
- Self-evaluation by the Authority
- Evaluation by a panel of experts
- Consideration of the report of the panel by the Authority and the development of a plan by the Authority to implement the recommendations in the report
- Consideration of the review report and the Authority's plans by the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
- Publication of Review Outcomes

REVIEW PROCESS: DETAILS AND INDICATIVE TIMETABLE

- Preparation of draft terms of reference and protocol for the review
July-Aug 2006
- Proposed terms of reference and protocol for review to be approved by Authority in principle, subject to completion of consultation with stakeholders
21 September 2006
- Consultation with stakeholders on draft terms of reference and protocol
To be completed ahead of Authority meeting of 29 November 2006

The stakeholders to be consulted will include the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment, the two awards Councils, the Higher Education Authority, the Irish Universities Association, the Irish Universities Quality Board 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.

- Final Agreement of Terms of Reference and Protocol for Review by Authority and submission to Department of Education and Science
29 November 2006
- Preparation of self-evaluation by Authority executive (following approval in principle by Authority of proposed terms of reference and protocol for review). The self-evaluation process will include consultation with stakeholders.
Late September 2006- Late March 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-assessment report (SAR)
 - will make necessary preparations for an application for the organisation's accreditation of the award 'Excellence through People' (ETP), including briefing of organisation on the requirements of ETP, organisation of ETP self-assessment and its integration into the general quality review self-assessment, and applying to FÁS for ETP accreditation
 - will provide feedback on a regular basis to the rest of the organisation and to Authority members on the progress of the review.
- Determination by Department of Education and Science, in association with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, of Terms of Reference for review and appointment of an external panel of experts
December 2006

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

- 3 x senior national public sector figures (at least one with a broad interest in education and training) – one of these figures will chair the panel
- 2 x international experts in quality assurance (1 European with knowledge of European standards and guidelines and ENQA requirements/1 North American)
- 1 expert on Frameworks and/or Qualifications Recognition
- 1 expert with a learner perspective

There will also be a secretary appointed who will be independent of the two Departments and the Authority

- Completion of the self-assessment report.

End of March 2007

This will need to be considered and agreed by the Authority ahead of its submission to expert panel. Also, the ETP process will need to be completed ahead of the finalisation of the SAR. In this connection, it is likely that the achievement of ETP accreditation, as opposed to the completion of the ETP assessment process, will post-date the submission of the SAR and the completion of the review.

- Briefing session for Expert Panel

Early April 2007

- Visit by Expert Panel, including meetings with the Authority's stakeholders

End of April 2007

- Provision of report with recommendations by peer review group

End of May 2007

- Preparation of a quality improvement plan by the executive based on the self-assessment report and the recommendations in expert panel's report

June/July 2007

- The Authority will consider the expert panel's report and agree the draft quality improvement plan ahead of their publication.
Consideration of the expert panel's report and the Authority's Quality Improvement Plan by the Department of Education and Science in association with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment

July/August 2007

- Publication of Review Outcomes (SAR, Peer Review Report and Quality Improvement Plan)

August/September 2007

The Quality Improvement Plan will be implemented and reviewed on a timescale consistent with the activities identified. The Authority will undertake to publish one or more follow-up reports subsequently at specified dates. In addition, its implementation will be incorporated into the Authority's Corporate Plan for 2008-2010 to be finalised in 2007.

QUALITY CO-ORDINATION COMMITTEE

As mentioned above, an internal staff committee would oversee the self-evaluation process and produce the self-assessment report. To ensure full and adequate staff involvement, it would need to be broadly representative of all staff, both in terms of grades and job profile. At the same time, it should not be too unwieldy, as it will need to develop a work programme quickly and oversee its implementation in a similarly speedy manner. The following profile is suggested:

- Director of Corporate Affairs
- Development Project Leader
- One Development Officer
- One AP
- One Grade 4/Grade 5
- One Grade 3

The committee will organise a number of self-evaluation exercises, including those relating to ETP specifically, and others relating to the broader review. It will be a matter for the committee to decide what these are in the context of time, budgetary and other constraints. However, it is likely that they will include staff and stakeholder surveys, focus groups, SWOT analyses.

ADDITIONAL GUIDANCE PROVIDED TO PANEL BY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE

A NOTE ON THE ROLE OF THE EXTERNAL PANEL AS IT RELATES TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE QUALITY REVIEW OF THE QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY

The agreed Terms of Reference for the Quality Review of the Qualifications Authority state that the Review will evaluate

- how effectively the Qualifications Authority has performed its principal statutory functions since its establishment in 2001
- the suitability of the organisational structures and processes of the executive of the Authority for performing the Qualifications Authority's functions in the future
- the extent to which the Qualifications Authority in the performance of its relevant functions complies with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

Based on these Terms of Reference, the Qualifications Authority indicated during the Panel briefing session that they would particularly like to establish:

- How effectively the Authority has carried out its functions so far
- Good practices it should continue, and the lessons that it can learn, to work effectively in the future
- Issues to take account of in ensuring that its internal processes and structures are appropriate to meeting future challenges
- Whether or not it is in compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines

This view was endorsed by the Department of Education and Science which also identified the following as being outside the scope of the agreed Terms of Reference:

- Whether or not the Qualifications Authority's current functions are appropriate
- Whether or not the Qualifications Authority's functions should be changed or expanded
- The suitability of the legislation underpinning the Qualifications Authority and the Awards Councils, that is, FETAC and HETAC
- The effectiveness of the National Framework of Qualifications (the implementation and impact of which will be the subject of a separate review later this year)
- The development of a strategic plan for the Authority (the outcomes of the Review process will instead inform the Authority's own strategic planning).

In order to address the Terms of Reference for the Review of the Qualifications Authority, the Panel will first need to satisfy itself in relation to the content of the Qualifications Authority's Self-Evaluation Report and the self-evaluation process and particularly to the 'conclusions' the Qualifications Authority has drawn and the 'areas for consideration' it has indicated at the end of each chapter.

This process will include an evaluation of the accuracy, comprehensiveness, validity and appropriateness of the Self-Evaluation Report and the self-evaluation process in all of its aspects and will largely be achieved through the Panel's independent meetings with internal and external stakeholders, through the review of documentation and through members' individual and collaborative deliberations. As a result, the Panel will come to its own findings and conclusions relating directly to the Review's Terms of Reference which may, of course, include areas not addressed in the Self-Evaluation Report.

EXPERT PANEL MEMBERS

Pat Kelleher (Chairperson of the Expert Panel)
Retired Director
Cork Institute of Technology

Anna Carroll
Retired Head of Education and Research
CERT, now Fáilte Ireland

John Cullen
Director General
Institute of Public Administration

Bernadette Farrell
Education Officer
Union of Students in Ireland

Andrew Cubie
Chairperson
Joint Advisory Committee
Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

Karl Dittrich
Chairman
NVAO - Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders

Donald Baker
College of Humanities and Social Sciences
United Arab Emirates University
and
Former Director
Post Secondary Education Quality Assessment Board
Ontario
Canada

Independent Secretary:
David Parry

REVIEW PANEL PROGRAMME OF MEETINGS (13-17 MAY 2007)

SUNDAY 13 MAY 2007

MEETING	TIME	PARTICIPANTS
	1800	Private meeting of Panel members Clarence Hotel, Clarence Suite C

MONDAY 14 MAY 2007

	0900-1045	Private meeting of Panel members [Finalise agendas for meetings 01-06]
	1045-1100	COFFEE
01	1100-1145	NQAI Senior Management Team Seán Ó Foghlú (Chief Executive) Claire Byrne (Director of Corporate Affairs) Jim Murray (Development Project Leader)
02	1200-1245	FETAC providers: FÁS Gerry Pyke (Assistant Director General) Anna Kelly (Director, Curriculum and Quality Assurance) Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA) Tony McKenna (Joint Honorary Secretary) Joe English (Development Officer) Fáilte Ireland Seán O'Malley (Manager of Education Operations) Teagasc Eamonn Tully (Head of Curriculum and Quality Assurance)
	1300-1430	LUNCH
03	1430-1515	FETAC representatives Stan McHugh (Chief Executive) Barbara Kelly (Director of Standards) Ultan Tuite (Director of Services)
04	1530-1615	NQAI staff: Corporate Affairs Claire Byrne (Director of Corporate Affairs) Eamonn Collins (Administration Executive) Celine Kelly (Staff Officer- Administration, Grade V) Mairéad McMahon (Staff Officer - Finance, Grade V) Yvonne Rudden (Clerical Officer, Grade III)

MEETING	TIME	PARTICIPANTS
05	1630-1715	NQAI staff: International Recognition Claire Byrne (Director of Corporate Affairs) Laura Carrigan (Manager of Operations - International Recognition, Grade VII) Lorna Conway (Assistant Staff Officer – Recognition, Grade IV) Carmel Kelly (Co-ordinator International Qualifications Recognition, Grade VII) Niamh Lenehan (Manager of Operations – Europass and Recognition, Grade VII) Jim Murray (Development Project Leader) William O’Keeffe (Assistant Staff Officer – Recognition, Grade IV)
	1715-1800	Private meeting of Panel members [Review discussion at meetings 01-05]
06	2000-2200	Dinner with representatives of the NQAI Board, Morrison Hotel, Penthouse room: Chair (Paul Haran) Deputy Chair (Caroline Hussey) Chair of the Internal Audit Committee (Pat O’Callaghan) Donal O’Rourke Seamus Smyth
TUESDAY 15 MAY 2007		
MEETING	TIME	PARTICIPANTS
	0900-1000	Private meeting of Panel members [Finalise agendas for meetings 07-12]
07	1000-1045	Conference Call with EUA [Sub-Group of Panel] Andrée Sursock (Deputy Secretary General) Professional and Statutory Body representatives: An Bord Altranais Anne-Marie Ryan (Chief Education Officer) Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland Ann McNicholl (Education Director) Institute of Bankers in Ireland Patrick Clifford (Registrar) Institute of Chartered Accountants in Ireland Joe Carroll (Lifelong Learning and Development Consultant) National Social Work Qualifications Board Karen Anderton (Qualifications Recognition Officer)

MEETING	TIME	PARTICIPANTS
08	1100-1145	HETAC representatives Séamus Puirseil (Chief Executive) Bryan Maguire (Director of Academic Affairs) Tadhg Ó hÉalaithe (Director of Corporate Services)
09	1200-1245	Social partners: Community and voluntary sector John Stewart (National Adult Literacy Co-ordinator, National Adult Literacy Agency) Irish Congress of Trade Unions Peter Rigney (Industrial Officer) Irish Business and Employers Confederation Tony Donohoe (Head of Research and Information Services) Finola McDonnell (Social Policy Executive)
	1300-1430	LUNCH
10	1430-1515	Government departments: Department of Education and Science Margaret Kelly (Principal Officer) Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment Pat Hayden (Principal Officer) Higher Education Authority Tom Boland (Chief Executive) Mary Kerr (Deputy Chief Executive)
11	1530-1615	HETAC providers: Higher Education Colleges Association Diarmuid Hegarty (President, Griffith College Dublin) John O'Connor (Registrar, Portobello College) Council of Directors of Institutes of Technology Dermot Douglas (Senior Academic Executive) Diarmuid O'Callaghan (Registrar, Institute of Technology Blanchardstown) Jim Devine (Director, Institute of Art, Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire)
12	1630-1715	Union of Students in Ireland Colm Hamrogue (President, Union of Students in Ireland) Gerard McCarthy (St. John's Central College, Cork)

MEETING	TIME	PARTICIPANTS
		Hamidreza Khodabakhshi (Vice President, Academic & Student Affairs, DIT Students' Union. Education Officer (Elect) Union of Students in Ireland)
		Richard Morrisroe (President, UCC Students' Union. President (Elect) Union of Students in Ireland)
	1730-1800	Private meeting of Panel members [Review discussion at meetings 07-12]
WEDNESDAY 16 MAY 2007		
MEETING	TIME	PARTICIPANTS
	0900-1000	Private meeting of Panel members [Finalise agendas for meetings 13-17]
13	1000-1045	NQAI Staff: Framework Development Stuart Garvie (Development Officer) Anna Murphy (Director of Framework Development) Jim Murray (Development Project Leader) Trish O'Brien (Development Officer)
14	1100-1145	Irish Universities Association David Redmond (Registrar, NUI Maynooth) Lewis Purser (Assistant Director, Academic Affairs) Irish Universities Quality Board Padraig Walsh (Chief Executive) Teresa Lee (Programme Manager)
15	1200-1245	Dublin Institute of Technology Brian Norton (President) Tom Duff (Academic Registrar)
	1300-1430	LUNCH
16	1430-1515	International Recognition of Qualifications – State Employment Perspective Public Appointments Service Carol Black (HEO) Robbie Morrissey (Staff Officer) Local Government Management Services Board John Conway (HR Executive)

MEETING	TIME	PARTICIPANTS
		Reception and Integration Agency Judy Howard (Assistant Principal Officer)
		Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform Patrick Fitzgerald (Executive Officer, Garda Division HR) Anne Sheridan (Administrative Officer, Garda Division HR)
17	1530-1615	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment Anne Looney (Chief Executive)
		State Examinations Commission Pat Coffey (Assistant Head of Examinations and Assessment Division)
	1630-1700	[Review discussion at meetings 13-17]

THURSDAY 17 MAY 2007

MEETING	TIME	PARTICIPANTS
	0900-1000	Private meeting of Panel members [Finalise agenda for meeting 18]
18	1000-1045	International Recognition – Migrant Perspective Migrant Media Representative Ptryk Chowanski, SOFA magazine Citizens Information Board Anne Cox (Information and Advice Manager) Equality Authority Cathal Kelly (Development Officer)
	1100-1145	COFFEE
	1100-1230	Private meeting of Panel members [Agree main findings of the review]
19	1230-1300	Chief Executive of NQAI and others invited by him [Panel feedback of main findings]
	1300-1400	LUNCH
	1400	Panel members depart

REFERENCE DOCUMENTATION LISTING

LEGISLATION

- Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999

NFQ DETERMINATIONS

- Determinations for the Outline National Framework of Qualifications (Oct 2003)
- Descriptors for Minor, Special Purpose and Supplemental Award-Types (Summer 2004)
- Descriptor for Higher Doctorate (Summer 2004)

PRINCIPLES AND PROCEDURES, POLICIES AND CRITERIA

- Policies & Criteria for the Framework under section 8(2)(c)
 - Policies and Criteria for the Establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications (Oct 2003)
 - Policies and Criteria for Minor, Special Purpose and Supplemental Award-Types (June 2004)
 - Additional Policies and Criteria Established for the Placement of Existing and Former Awards in the National Framework of Qualifications (March 2005)
 - Policies and Criteria for the Inclusion in, or Alignment with, the National Framework of Qualifications of the Awards of Certain Awarding Bodies (July 2006)
- Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners (Oct 2003)
- Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of a National Approach to Credit in Irish Higher Education and Training (Nov 2004)
- Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning (June 2005)
- Implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications in the Universities (Jan 2006)
- Awards Council Procedures
 - Procedures for the Further Education and Training Awards Council (July 2001) (Updated Dec 2001) (Updated April 2003)
 - Procedures for the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (July 2001) (Updated Dec 2001) (Updated April 2003)
 - The appeals process under sections 17 and 27 of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 in relation to validation being refused or withdrawn by the Further Education and Training Awards Council or Higher Education and Training Awards Council (Dec 2001) (Updated May 2005)
 - Criteria and Procedures for the Delegation of Authority to Make Awards (Sept 2001) (Spring 2004)
 - Understanding on Delegation and Research (June 2004)
 - Withdrawal of Delegation of Authority to Make Awards - Appeals Procedures (June 2004)

NFQ RELATED CONSULTATION DOCUMENTS

- Towards a National Framework of Qualifications - A Discussion Document (Nov 2001)
- Towards a National Framework of Qualifications - Inclusion of Professional and International Awards (May 2002)
- Consultative Paper - Draft Policies and Criteria for the Inclusion of Awards in the National Framework of Qualifications (Sept 2004)

NFQ RELATED RESEARCH / REPORTS

- Frameworks of Qualifications - A Review of Developments outside the State (Spring 2002)
- Surveys of Learners and Employers Perceptions of Awards and Qualifications (Sept/Oct 2002)
- Towards a National Framework of Qualifications - The Employment Perspective (Nov 2002)
- Report on the Workshop on the Inclusion of Professional Awards in the National Framework of Qualifications (Mar 2003)
- Report on the Workshop on the Inclusion of International Awards in the National Framework of Qualifications (May 2003)
- Report of a Discussion Forum on the Implementation of the Copenhagen Declaration on Enhanced European Co-operation in Vocational Education and Training (Oct 2003)
- Short-Cycle Awards in Context: A Study of Developments Relating to Higher Education Awards' Structures Outside the State (December 2003)
- Ireland Country Background Report for OECD thematic review on qualification systems (December 2003)
- Report on the Workshop 'Towards a National Approach to Credit in Higher Education - benefits, principles and operational guidelines (Feb 2004)
- Submission of National Qualifications Authority of Ireland to the OECD Higher Education Review (February 2004)
- Background Paper for the Presidency Conference on Higher Education & Vocational Education and Training Common Approaches (March 2004)
- National and International Practices and Trends in the Classification or Grading of awards in Further and Higher Education and Training (July 2005)
- Consultation on the European Commission Proposal for a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning: Response from Ireland (Dec 2005)
- Note on Briefing Session on Draft Policies and Criteria on Professional / International Awards (April 2006)
- Reviews of Qualifications Frameworks – International Practice (June 2006)
- Report on Transfer and Progression into Undergraduate Programmes Leading to University Awards (Oct 2006)
- Review of Professional Doctorates (Oct 2006)
- Verification of Compatibility of Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the Bologna Framework (Nov 2006)

INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS

- National Approach to the Recognition of International Awards in Ireland (Spring 2004)
- A Guide to Comparing Qualifications in Ireland and the UK (June 2005)
- National Action Plan for Recognition (Dec 2006)

CORPORATE, ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURES & PROCESSES

- Annual Accounts (2001-2005)
- Corporate Plan (2003-2006)
- Fees Review-Review of Fees to be Charged by the Further Education and Training Awards Council and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (March 2003)
- Customer Charter (2004)
- Complaints and Review Procedures (2004)
- Code of Business Conduct - Intent, scope and objectives (2004)
- Corporate Plan (2006-2008)
- 5 year report of first Authority (February 2006)
- Financial Policies and Procedures (document folder, updated on an ongoing basis)
- Human Resources Policies and Procedures (document folder, updated on an ongoing basis)
- Staff Handbook and Job Procedures (document folder, updated on an ongoing basis)

QUALITY ASSURANCE

- External Review of Agencies: Overview of National and International Practice (November 2005)
- Dublin Institute of Technology: Agreed Quality Assurance Procedures
 - Initial procedures (June 2002)
 - Revised procedures (January 2007)
- Review of effectiveness of DIT Quality Assurance Procedures
 - Terms of Reference and Review Guidelines (2004)
 - EUA Reviewers' Report (January 2006)
 - Follow-up Process
 - DIT responses (April 2006/January 2007)
 - Authority Response (June 2006)
- Review of performance by HETAC of its functions
 - Expert panel's Report - incorporating terms of reference for review (May, 2006)
 - Follow-up Process
 - HETAC response (June 2006)
 - Authority Response (July 2006)
- Review of performance by FETAC of its functions – Terms of reference and Protocol for the Review (March 2007)
- Internal Quality Assurance and Accountability Policy (March 2007)
- External Quality Assurance Procedures (March 2007)

COMMUNICATIONS DOCUMENTATION

- The National Framework of Qualifications - An Overview (Oct 2003)
- Grid of Level Indicators (Oct 2003)
- The NFQ: An Introduction (Oct 2003)
- The NFQ: A Brief Technical Guide (Oct 2003)
- Faisnéis (2004)
- Faisnéis 2 (2005)
- Awards in the Framework (Sept 2005)
- Europass Publicity CD and Leaflets (2006)
- Europass folder of sample documents (2006)
- Fan Diagram Poster (revised August 2006)
- Qualifications Matter: a brief guide to the National Framework of Qualifications (August 2006)

- Qualifications Matter: Recognition leaflet (Jan 2007)
- Application Form for Recognition of a Foreign Qualification (revised Jan 2007)

EXTERNAL DOCUMENTATION RELATED TO THE QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY'S FUNCTIONS

- International Policy Documents
 - Bologna Declaration (June 1999), Prague Communiqué (May 2001), Berlin Communiqué (Sept 2003), Bergen Communiqué (May 2005)
 - Copenhagen Declaration (Nov 2002), Maastricht Communiqué (Dec 2004), Helsinki Communiqué (Dec 2006)
 - Report of Working Group on Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (Feb 2005)
 - Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (Mar 2005)
 - Commission Staff Consultative Paper on a European Qualifications Framework (Sept 2005)
 - Chinese Qualifications Recognition Agreement (Feb 2006)
 - OECD Report on Qualifications Systems, Bridges to Lifelong Learning (April 2007)
- National Policy Documents
 - OECD Review of Irish Higher Education (Sept 2003)
 - Enterprise Strategy Group – Ahead of the Curve (July 2004)
 - Internationalisation of Irish Education Services (Nov 2004)
 - The Universities and the National Framework of Qualifications (Oct 2005)
 - FÁS and the National Framework of Qualifications (Dec 2006)
 - Forfás – National Skills Strategy (March 2007)

THE IRISH EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEM: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

1. INTRODUCTION

The following document aims to provide a brief overview of the key components of the Irish education and training system, that is: types of provision, public bodies responsible for education and training, the National Framework of Qualifications and national quality assurance arrangements.

2. PRIMARY, POST-PRIMARY, FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION & TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL BODIES

PRIMARY SCHOOL

Although children are not obliged to attend school until the age of six, the majority attend at age four or five. Primary schools operate an eight-year programme, consisting of two kindergarten years, followed by classes one to six. The primary curriculum provides for an extensive learning experience and promotes a rich variety of approaches to teaching and learning.

The Irish primary education sector consists of state-funded primary schools, special schools and private primary schools. State funded schools include religious schools, non-denominational schools, multi-denominational schools and Gaelscoileanna (Irish language schools).

POST-PRIMARY SCHOOL

The post-primary education sector in Ireland comprises secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive schools. The majority of these schools are state-funded, and with the exception of a relatively small number, do not charge tuition fees. The types of schools mainly differ on the basis of administration and sources of funding.

Secondary schools, which account for the greatest percentage of second-level schools, are state funded but generally privately owned and managed. Vocational schools are administered by the Vocational Education Committees (VECs) of local government. In addition to providing second level education, the vocational education system has become increasingly involved in devising and implementing a range of continuing education and training services to post second-level students. Community and Comprehensive schools are managed by Board of Management and receive individual budgets from the State. These schools combine academic and technical education as well as having a community dimension in terms of facilitating adult education programmes and facilities for community use.

Second level education in Ireland generally starts at the age of twelve and consists of a three year junior cycle followed by a two or three year senior cycle. The Junior Certificate Examination is taken at the end of the junior cycle. The senior cycle offers a Transition Year which provides an opportunity for some students to experience a wide range of educational inputs.

At the end of the senior cycle, the Leaving Certificate Examination is taken. Students normally sit for this examination at seventeen or eighteen years of age. Students may choose one of three Leaving Certificate Programmes: the Leaving Certificate Programme, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, or the Leaving Certificate Applied.

FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The term Further Education and Training embraces education and training which occurs outside of second-level schooling but which is not part of the higher education and training system. Further education and training programmes are run by a wide range of both public and private colleges and institutions.

Programmes leading to Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) awards are offered by a wide range of providers in diverse settings, including Fáilte Ireland, FÁS and Teagasc centres, Vocational Education Committees (VECs), adult and community education and training centres and in the workplace.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Traditionally the system of higher education and training in Ireland has comprised the university sector, the Institutes of Technology, the Dublin Institute of Technology, the Colleges of Education and other State aided Institutions. In more recent years, a number of independent private colleges and other institutions have been established.

There are seven universities recognised under the Universities Act, 1997, they are, University College Cork – National University of Ireland Cork, University College Dublin – National University of Ireland Dublin, National University of Ireland Galway, National University of Ireland Maynooth, Trinity College Dublin, the University of Limerick and Dublin City University. The universities validate and award their own qualifications as well as the qualifications of institutions such as the Colleges of Education, which have academic agreements with the universities. The first four of the universities named above are constituent universities of the National University of Ireland (NUI), a federal university constituting the largest element of the Irish university system, with approximately fifty thousand full-time students. In addition to the four constituent universities, there are five Recognised Colleges of the National University of Ireland.

There are thirteen Institutes of Technology (IoTs), which are designated under the Regional Technical Colleges Act 1992. The institutions are Athlone IT, IT Blanchardstown, Cork IT, IT Carlow, Dundalk IT, Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Letterkenny IT, Galway-Mayo IT, Limerick IT, IT Sligo, IT Tallaght, IT Tralee and Waterford IT. All of the IoTs have been delegated awarding powers by HETAC to at least level 8 on the National Framework of Qualifications.

The Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) which has made its own awards for many years was awarded degree awarding powers in 1997. The DIT Act 1992 gives the DIT a good deal of authority to regulate its own affairs. As DIT is an awarding body, its statutory academic council and governing body can make all the necessary decisions in the academic domain.

There are five Colleges of Education, which specialise in the training of primary school teachers. Generally, they offer programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate level. There are also teacher training colleges that specialise in the training of post-primary level home economics teachers, teachers of religion and physical education.

PROFESSIONAL BODIES

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. 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.

3. PUBLIC BODIES RESPONSIBLE FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The principal government departments with responsibility for education and training are the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. They are assisted in this task by a number of agencies:

The State Examinations Commission (SEC) is responsible for the development, assessment, accreditation and certification of the national second-level examinations: the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) leads developments in second level curriculum and assessment and supports the implementation of changes resulting from this work.

The Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) was established under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. FETAC is the only national awarding body for further education and training.

The Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) which was also established as part of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 is the qualifications awarding body for the Institutes of Technology and other non-university higher education colleges and institutions. HETAC may also delegate the authority to make awards to the Institutes of Technology.

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) is responsible for furthering the development and assisting in the co-ordination of State investment in higher education.

Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS) / The Training and Employment Authority has a role in contributing to Ireland's further development as a competitive, inclusive, knowledge-based economy. It does this through the provision of tailored training and employment programmes that address individual, enterprise and community needs.

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland was established under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999, and is responsible for: establishing and maintaining the National Framework of Qualifications, developing access, transfer and progression within and across education and training, and facilitating the recognition of international awards.

4. THE NATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF QUALIFICATIONS

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was launched in 2003 by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland. The Framework is a ten level system that incorporates awards made for all kinds of learning, large and small, whether it is gained in schools, the workplace, the community, training centres, colleges or universities. For each level of the Framework, standards of knowledge, skill and competence have been set out, defining the outcomes to be achieved by a learner seeking to gain an award.

Four classes of award-type have been determined for the Framework, *major, minor, special purpose and supplemental*. This is to ensure that the Framework can capture all types and sizes of learning undertaken by a learner.

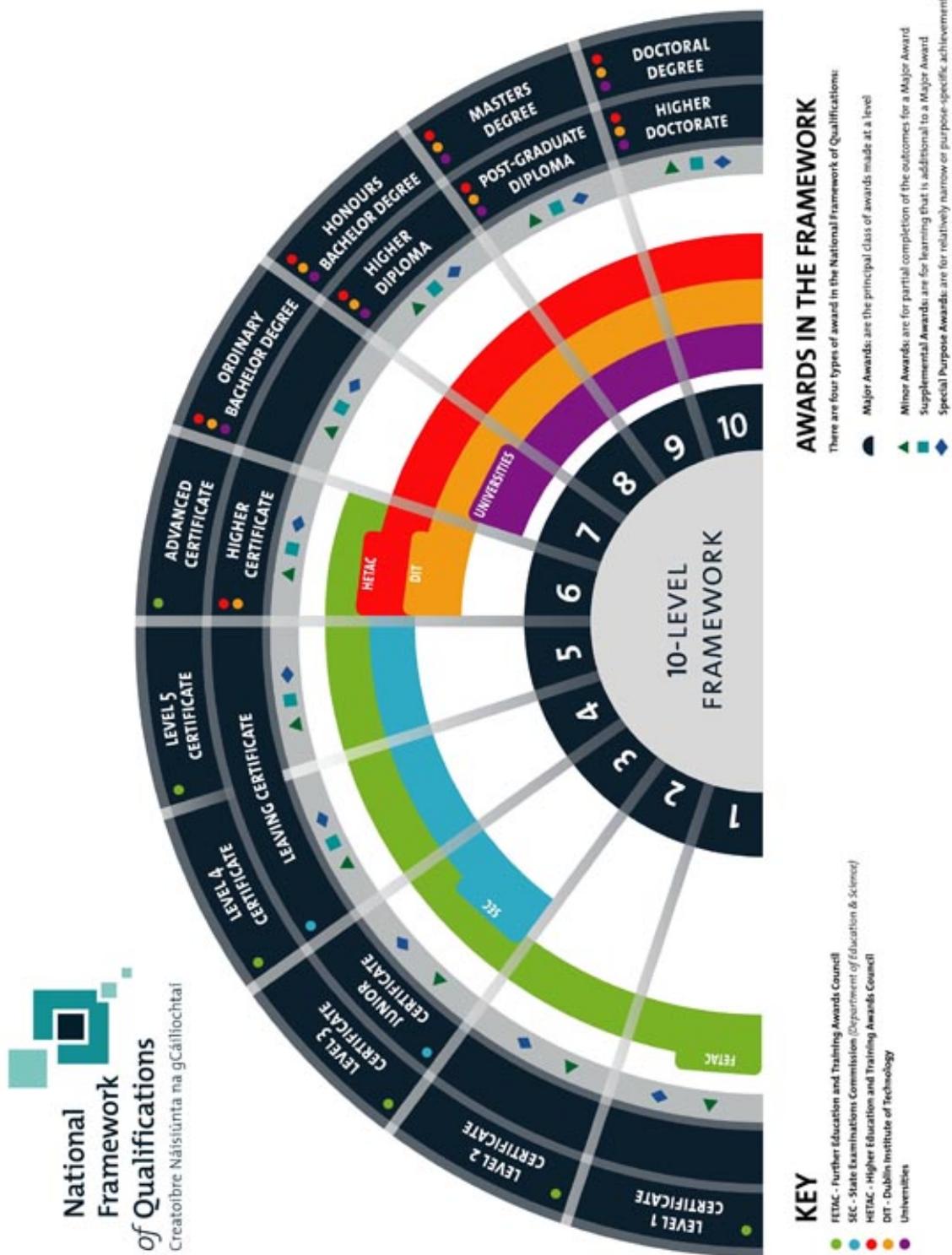
5. NATIONAL QUALITY ASSURANCE ARRANGEMENTS

The quality assurance of the schools sector is reviewed directly by the Department of Education and Science through an inspectorate. FETAC set out the requirements for quality assurance for further education and training providers as part of its responsibilities under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999.

The principal legislation underpinning quality assurance in higher education and training in Ireland is the Universities Act 1997 and the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. The HEA has a statutory function under the Universities Act 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. The Irish Universities Quality Board (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. The IUQB also plays a key role in working with the universities on the implementation of the findings from these reviews. The IUQB was established as an independent body in February 2006.

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 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 role of the Qualifications Authority in reviewing the performance by FETAC and HETAC of their functions and the effectiveness of the quality assurance arrangements of the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT).

THE NATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF QUALIFICATIONS: A DIAGRAMMATIC REPRESENTATION



NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY OF IRELAND

FUNCTIONS UNDER THE QUALIFICATIONS (EDUCATION AND TRAINING) ACT 1999

THE FUNCTIONS OF THE AUTHORITY UNDER THE ACT ARE SUMMARISED AS FOLLOWS:

- Under section 7 (a), the establishment of the national framework of qualifications, based on standards of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by learners.
- Under section 7 (a), the maintenance of the national framework of qualifications
- Under section 7 (b), the establishment, and the promotion of the improvement, of the standards of the awards of the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the Dublin Institute of Technology and any new university that may be established.
- Under section 8 (2)(a), the establishment of the policies and criteria on which the national framework of qualifications shall be based.
- Under section 8 (2)(b), the review of the operation of the national framework of qualifications.
- Under section 8 (2)(c), the establishment, in consultation with the Further Education and Training Awards Council and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, of procedures for the performance by them of their functions and the review those procedures.
- Under section 8(2)(d), the determination of procedures to be implemented by providers for access, transfer and progression.
- Under section 8(2)(d), ensuring that its procedures for access, transfer and progression are implemented by the Dublin Institute of Technology and any university established under section 9 of the Universities Act, 1997
- Under section 8(2)(f), facilitating and advising the universities in implementing the procedures in relation to access, transfer and progression and reviewing the implementation of those procedures by universities.
- Under section 8(2)(g), consulting with and advising the Minister for Education and Science or any other Minister, as the case may be, on such matters in respect of its functions as the Minister or any other Minister may request or as the Authority sees fit
- Under section 8(h), liaison with bodies outside the state which make awards for the purposes of facilitating the recognition in the state of those awards and by which the Authority would facilitate recognition outside the state of awards made in the state.
- Under section 8(3)(i), informing itself of the requirements of industry and the promotion of practices to meet these requirements
- Under section 8(3)(ii), informing itself of practices outside the State in respect of matters relevant to its functions

- Under section 8(3)(iii), giving effect to the policies relating to education and training which from time to time are established, and notified in writing to the Authority, by the Minister for Education and Science, or by any other Minister with the agreement of the Minister, following consultation with the Authority,
- Under section 8(3)(iv), consulting with universities, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Dublin Institute of Technology, recognised institutions, FÁS, Fáilte Ireland, Teagasc, An Bord Iascaigh Mhara, educational or training institutions established by a vocational education committee, other providers of education and training, persons, or bodies of persons, who represent employees of providers of education and training or who represent learners, the Higher Education Authority, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and such other persons or bodies of persons as the Authority considers appropriate, and the Authority shall consider the views, if any, of those bodies for the purpose of determining the procedures to be implemented by providers for access, transfer and progression
- Under section 9, the review of the performance by the Further Education and Training Awards Council or the Higher Education and Training Awards Council of its functions and the making of such recommendations to the Council concerned in respect of that performance, as the Authority thinks fit
- Under section 10, the differentiation between further education and training and higher education and training.
- Under section 11, the payment of an annual grant to either of the two Councils and the attachment of any conditions to such grants.
- Under sections 17 or 27, the appeal by a provider against refusal or withdrawal of validation of a programme by either of the two Councils.
- Under sections 18 and 28, the determination of the form and manner of which the report of an awards Council on the quality assurance procedures of a provider is published.
- Under sections 18 and 28, the direction to a Council to commence a review of the effectiveness of a provider's quality assurance procedures
- Under sections 19 and 29, the agreement of procedures and criteria for a review in relation to the delegation of authority to a provider by either of the Councils.
- Under sections 19 and 29, the agreement with either of the Councils in relation to the final outcome of any such review.
- Under sections 20 and 30, the direction to a Council to commence a review of a provider with delegated authority
- Under sections 20 and 30, the agreement of procedures for a review of a provider with delegated authority.
- Under sections 20 and 30, the appeal by a provider against withdrawal of delegated authority
- Under section 31, consultation with the governing body of recognised institution in relation to its Charter

- Under section 32, the approval of any awarding body and / or the approval of any arrangements in relation to having awards made following programmes in recognised institutions, other than where the arrangement arises as a result of a joint awarding agreement involving either the Higher Education and Training Awards Council or the Further Education and Training Awards Council.
- Under section 39, the agreement of quality assurance procedures with the Dublin Institute of Technology.
- Under section 39, the making of recommendations to the Dublin Institute of Technology following the outcome of such implementation of such procedures.
- Under section 39, the review of the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures of the Dublin Institute of Technology.
- Under section 40(5), consultation with the Higher Education Authority in relation to its quality assurance review role for the universities
- Under section 42, the agreement of quality assurance procedures with any university established under section 9 of the 1997 Universities Act.
- Under section 42, the making of recommendations to any university established under section 9 of the 1997 Universities Act following the outcome of such implementation of such procedures.
- Under section 42, the review of the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures of any university established under section 9 of the 1997 Universities Act, and the determination of the outcome of such a review.
- Under section 43, the publication of the registers of the Councils of programmes in respect of which arrangements for the protection of learners are in place
- Under section 50, the appointment of a Chief Executive.
- Under section 52, the appointment of staff
- Under section 52 and the third schedule, the determination of a superannuation scheme for its employees
- Under section 56, the establishment of committees of the Authority.
- Under section 57, the keeping of accounts and the publication of these annually.
- Under section 58, the approval of a corporate plan for at least a two year period
- Under section 58, the amendment and approval, as appropriate, of the corporate plans of the awards Councils.
- Under section 59, the approval of a bi-annual report.
- Under section 61, advising the Minister for Education and Science in respect of the level of fees to be charged by the Authority or either of the two Councils.
- Under section 61, the determination of the policy approach to reviewing the fee levels of either of the two councils and the determination of the outcome of any such review

STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

FOREWORD

In the Berlin communiqué of 19 September 2003 the Ministers of the Bologna Process signatory states invited the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) 'through its members, in cooperation with the EUA, EURASHE, and ESIB', 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'. The Ministers also asked ENQA to take due account 'of the expertise of other quality assurance associations and networks'.

This report forms the response to this mandate and comes with the endorsement of all the organisations named in that section of the communiqué. The achievement of such a joint understanding is a tribute to the spirit of co-operation and mutual respect that has characterised the discussions between all the players involved. I would therefore like to extend my thanks to the EUA, EURASHE and ESIB together with the ENQA member agencies for their constructive and most valuable input to the process.

This report is directed at the European Ministers of Education. However, we expect the report to achieve a wider circulation among those with an interest in quality assurance in higher education. These readers will hopefully find the report useful and inspirational.

It must be emphasised that the report is no more than a first step in what is likely to be a long and possibly arduous route to the establishment of a widely shared set of underpinning values, expectations and good practice in relation to quality and its assurance, by institutions and agencies across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). What has been set in motion by the Berlin mandate will need to be developed further if it is to provide the fully functioning European dimension of quality assurance for the EHEA. If this can be accomplished, then many of the ambitions of the Bologna Process will also be achieved. All the participants in the work to date look forward to contributing to the success of that endeavour.

CHRISTIAN THUNE

President of ENQA
February 2005

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1 CONTEXT, AIMS AND PRINCIPLES

2 EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

Background of the Standards and Guidelines

Introduction to parts 1 and 2: European standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance for higher education

Part 1: European standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions

Part 2: European standards and guidelines for the external quality assurance of higher education

2.2 Introduction to part 3: European standards and guidelines for external quality assurance agencies

Part 3: European standards and guidelines for external quality assurance agencies

3 PEER REVIEW SYSTEM FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

International context

Cyclical reviews of agencies

Register of external quality assurance agencies operating in Europe

European Consultative Forum for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

4 FUTURE PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES

Annex: Cyclical review of quality assurance agencies - a theoretical model

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report has been drafted by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)¹, through its members, in consultation and co-operation with the EUA, ESIB and EURASHE and in discussion with various relevant networks. It forms the response to the twin mandates given to ENQA in the Berlin Communiqué of September 2003 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’.

The report consists of four chapters. After the introductory chapter on context, aims and principles, there follow chapters on standards and guidelines for quality assurance²; a peer review system for quality assurance agencies; and future perspectives and challenges.

The main results and recommendations of the report are:

- There will be European standards for internal and external quality assurance, and for external quality assurance agencies.
- European quality assurance agencies will be expected to submit themselves to a cyclical review within five years.
- There will be an emphasis on subsidiarity, with reviews being undertaken nationally where possible.
- A European register of quality assurance agencies will be produced.
- A European Register Committee will act as a gatekeeper for the inclusion of agencies in the register.
- A European Consultative Forum for Quality Assurance in Higher Education will be established.

When the recommendations are implemented:

- The consistency of quality assurance across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) will be improved by the use of agreed standards and guidelines.
- Higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies across the EHEA will be able to use common reference points for quality assurance.
- The register will make it easier to identify professional and credible agencies.
- Procedures for the recognition of qualifications will be strengthened.
- The credibility of the work of quality assurance agencies will be enhanced.
- The exchange of viewpoints and experiences amongst agencies and other key stakeholders (including higher education institutions, students and labour market representatives) will be enhanced through the work of the European Consultative Forum for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.
- The mutual trust among institutions and agencies will grow.
- The move toward mutual recognition will be assisted.

¹ENQA's General Assembly confirmed on 4 November 2004 the change of the former European Network into the European Association.

²The term “quality assurance in this report includes processes such as evaluation, accreditation and audit.

SUMMARY LIST OF EUROPEAN STANDARDS FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

This summary list of European standards for quality assurance in higher education is drawn from Chapter 2 of the report and is placed here for ease of reference. It omits the accompanying guidelines. The standards are in three parts covering internal quality assurance of higher education institutions, external quality assurance of higher education, and quality assurance of external quality assurance agencies.

PART 1: EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

- 1.1 **POLICY AND PROCEDURES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE:** Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards. They should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture which recognises the importance of quality, and quality assurance, in their work. To achieve this, institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality. The strategy, policy and procedures should have a formal status and be publicly available. They should also include a role for students and other stakeholders.
- 1.2 **APPROVAL, MONITORING AND PERIODIC REVIEW OF PROGRAMMES AND AWARDS:** Institutions should have formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review and monitoring of their programmes and awards.
- 1.3 **ASSESSMENT OF STUDENTS:** Students should be assessed using published criteria, regulations and procedures which are applied consistently.
- 1.4 **QUALITY ASSURANCE OF TEACHING STAFF:** Institutions should have ways of satisfying themselves that staff involved with the teaching of students are qualified and competent to do so. They should be available to those undertaking external reviews, and commented upon in reports.
- 1.5 **LEARNING RESOURCES AND STUDENT SUPPORT:** Institutions should ensure that the resources available for the support of student learning are adequate and appropriate for each programme offered.
- 1.6 **INFORMATION SYSTEMS:** Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes of study and other activities.
- 1.7 **PUBLIC INFORMATION:** Institutions should regularly publish up to date, impartial and objective information, both quantitative and qualitative, about the programmes and awards they are offering.

PART 2: EUROPEAN STANDARDS FOR THE EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

- 2.1 **USE OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCEDURES:** External quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines.
- 2.2 **DEVELOPMENT OF EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESSES:** The aims and objectives of quality assurance processes should be determined before the processes themselves are

developed, by all those responsible (including higher education institutions) and should be published with a description of the procedures to be used.

- 2.3 **CRITERIA FOR DECISIONS:** Any formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit published criteria that are applied consistently.
- 2.4 **PROCESSES FIT FOR PURPOSE:** All external quality assurance processes should be designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them.
- 2.5 **REPORTING:** Reports should be published and should be written in a style, which is clear and readily accessible to its intended readership. Any decisions, commendations or recommendations contained in reports should be easy for a reader to find.
- 2.6 **FOLLOW-UP PROCEDURES:** Quality assurance processes which contain recommendations for action or which require a subsequent action plan, should have a predetermined follow-up procedure which is implemented consistently.
- 2.7 **PERIODIC REVIEWS:** External quality assurance processes should be undertaken on a cyclical basis. The length of the cycle and the review procedures to be used should be clearly defined and published in advance.
- 2.8 **SYSTEM-WIDE ANALYSES:** Quality assurance agencies should produce from time to time summary reports describing and analysing the general findings of their reviews, evaluations, assessments etc.

PART 3: EUROPEAN STANDARDS FOR EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

- 3.1 **USE OF EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCEDURES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION:** The external quality assurance of agencies should take into account the presence and effectiveness of the external quality assurance processes described in Part 2 of the European Standards and Guidelines.
- 3.2 **OFFICIAL STATUS:** Agencies should be formally recognised by competent public authorities in the European Higher Education Area as agencies with responsibilities for external quality assurance and should have an established legal basis. They should comply with any requirements of the legislative jurisdictions within which they operate.
- 3.3 **ACTIVITIES:** Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities (at institutional or programme level) on a regular basis.
- 3.4 **RESOURCES:** Agencies should have adequate and proportional resources, both human and financial, to enable them to organise and run their external quality assurance process(es) in an effective and efficient manner, with appropriate provision for the development of their processes and procedures.
- 3.5 **MISSION STATEMENT:** Agencies should have clear and explicit goals and objectives for their work, contained in a publicly available statement.
- 3.6 **INDEPENDENCE:** Agencies should be independent to the extent both that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations and that the conclusions and recommendations made in their reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.
- 3.7 **EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE CRITERIA AND PROCESSES USED BY THE AGENCIES:** The processes, criteria and procedures used by agencies should be pre-defined and publicly available. These processes will normally be expected to include:
- a self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance process;
 - an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, (a) student member(s), and site visits as decided by the agency;
 - publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes;
 - a follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report.
- 3.8 **ACCOUNTABILITY PROCEDURES:** Agencies should have in place procedures for their own accountability.

1 CONTEXT, AIMS AND PRINCIPLES

In the Berlin communiqué of 19 September 2003 the Ministers of the Bologna Process signatory states invited ENQA ‘through its members, in cooperation with the EUA, EURASHE, and ESIB’, 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’. The Ministers also asked ENQA to take due account ‘of the expertise of other quality assurance associations and networks’.

ENQA welcomed this opportunity to make a major contribution to the development of the European dimension in quality assurance and, thereby, to further the aims of the Bologna Process.

The work has involved many different organisations and interest groups. First, ENQA members have been extensively involved in the process. Members have participated in working groups, and draft reports have been important elements in the agenda of the ENQA General Assemblies in June and November 2004. Secondly, the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB) and the European Commission have participated through regular meetings in the ‘E4 Group’. Thirdly, the contacts with and contributions from other networks, such as the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) and the Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies (CEE Network), have been particularly valuable in the drafting process. Finally, ENQA and its partners have made good use of their individual international contacts and experiences and in this way ensured that relevant international perspectives were brought into the process.

Quality assurance in higher education is by no means only a European concern. All over the world there is an increasing interest in quality and standards, reflecting both the rapid growth of higher education and its cost to the public and the private purse. Accordingly, if Europe is to achieve its aspiration to be the most dynamic and knowledge-based economy in the world (Lisbon Strategy), then European higher education will need to demonstrate that it takes the quality of its programmes and awards seriously and is willing to put into place the means of assuring and demonstrating that quality. The initiatives and demands, which are springing up both inside and outside Europe in the face of this internationalisation of higher education, demand a response. The commitment of all those involved in the production of these proposals augurs well for the fulfilment of a truly European dimension to quality assurance with which to reinforce the attractiveness of the EHEA’s higher education offering.

The proposals contained in this report are underpinned by a number of principles which are described in more detail in the two chapters which cover the two parts of the Berlin mandate. However, some fundamental principles should permeate the whole work:

- the interests of students as well as employers and the society more generally in good quality higher education;
- the central importance of institutional autonomy, tempered by a recognition that this brings with it heavy responsibilities;
- the need for external quality assurance to be fit for its purpose and to place only an appropriate and necessary burden on institutions for the achievement of its objectives.

The EHEA with its 40 states is characterised by its diversity of political systems, higher education systems, socio-cultural and educational traditions, languages, aspirations and expectations. This

makes a single monolithic approach to quality, standards and quality assurance in higher education inappropriate. In the light of this diversity and variety, generally acknowledged as being one of the glories of Europe, the report sets its face against a narrow, prescriptive and highly formulated approach to standards. In both the standards and the guidelines, the report prefers the generic principle to the specific requirement. It does this because it believes that this approach is more likely to lead to broad acceptance in the first instance and because it will provide a more robust basis for the coming together of the different higher education communities across the EHEA. The generic standards ought to find a general resonance at the national³ level of most signatory states. However, one consequence of the generic principle is that the standards and guidelines focus more on what should be done than how they should be achieved. Thus, the report does include procedural matters, but it has given a priority to standards and guidelines, especially in Chapter 2.

Finally, it must be emphasised that reaching agreement for this report is not the same thing as fulfilling the Bologna goal of a quality assurance dimension for the EHEA. Ahead lies more work to implement the recommendations of the report and secure the implied quality culture among both the higher education institutions and the external quality assurance agencies.

³ Throughout the report, the term “national” also includes the regional context with regard to quality assurance agencies, national contexts and authorities etc.

2 EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

The Ministers' mandate to develop 'an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance' raised a number of important questions. 'Quality assurance' is a generic term in higher education which lends itself to many interpretations: It is not possible to use one definition to cover all circumstances. Similarly, the word 'standards' is employed in a variety of ways across Europe, ranging from statements of narrowly defined regulatory requirements to more generalised descriptions of good practice. The words also have very different meanings in the local contexts of national higher education systems.

Moreover, the drafting process itself has made evident that, within the quality assurance community itself, there are some quite fundamental differences of view of the appropriate relationship that should be established between higher education institutions and their external evaluators. Some, mainly from agencies which accredit programmes or institutions, take the view that external quality assurance is essentially a matter of 'consumer protection', requiring a clear distance to be established between the quality assurance agency and the higher education institutions whose work they assess, while other agencies see the principal purpose of external quality assurance to be the provision of advice and guidance in pursuit of improvements in the standards and quality of programmes of study and associated qualifications. In the latter case a close relationship between the evaluators and the evaluated is a requirement. Yet others wish to adopt a position somewhere between the two, seeking to balance accountability and improvement.

Nor is it just the quality assurance agencies that have different views on these matters. The interests of the higher education institutions and student representative bodies are not always the same, the former seeking a high level of autonomy with a minimum of external regulation or evaluation (and that at the level of the whole institution), the latter wanting institutions to be publicly accountable through frequent inspection at the level of the programme or qualification.

Finally, the standards and guidelines relate only to the three cycles of higher education described in the Bologna Declaration and are not intended to cover the area of research or general institutional management.

BACKGROUND OF THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

This section of the report contains a set of proposed standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the EHEA. The standards and guidelines are designed to be applicable to all higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies in Europe, irrespective of their structure, function and size, and the national system in which they are located. As mentioned earlier, it has not been considered appropriate to include detailed 'procedures' in the recommendations of this chapter of the report, since institutional and agency procedures are an important part of their autonomy. It will be for the institutions and agencies themselves, co-operating within their individual national contexts, to decide the procedural consequences of adopting the standards contained in this report.

As their starting point, the standards and guidelines endorse the spirit of the 'July 2003 Graz Declaration' of the European University Association (EUA) which states that 'the purpose of a European dimension to quality assurance is to promote mutual trust and improve transparency while respecting the diversity of national contexts and subject areas'. Consonant with the Graz declaration, the standards and guidelines contained in this report recognise the primacy of national systems of higher education, the importance of institutional and agency autonomy

within those national systems, and the particular requirements of different academic subjects. In addition, the standards and guidelines owe much to the experience gained during the ENQA-coordinated pilot project 'Transnational European Evaluation Project' (TEEP), which investigated, in three disciplines, the operational implications of a European transnational quality evaluation process.

The standards and guidelines also take into account the quality convergence study published by ENQA in March 2005, which examined the reasons for differences between different national approaches to external quality assurance and constraints on their convergence. Further, they reflect the statement of Ministers in the Berlin communiqué that 'consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself and this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework'. In these standards and guidelines, therefore, an appropriate balance has been sought between the creation and development of internal quality cultures, and the role which external quality assurance procedures may play.

In addition, the standards and guidelines have also benefited particularly from the 'Code of Good Practice' published in December 2004 by the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) and other perspectives included in ESIB's 'Statement on agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines at a European level' (April 2004) and 'Statement on peer review of quality assurance and accreditation agencies' (April 2004), EUA's 'QA policy position in the context of the Berlin Communiqué' (April 2004) and the EURASHE 'Policy Statement on the Bologna Process' (June 2004). Finally, an international perspective has been included by comparing the standards on external quality assurance with the "Guidelines for good practice" being implemented by the international network INQAAHE.

INTRODUCTION TO PARTS 1 AND 2:

EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance, which follow, have been developed for the use of higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies working in the EHEA, covering cover key areas relating to quality and standards.

The purpose of these standards and guidelines is to provide a source of assistance and guidance to both higher education institutions in developing their own quality assurance systems and agencies undertaking external quality assurance, as well as to contribute to a common frame of reference, which can be used by institutions and agencies alike. It is not the intention that these standards and guidelines should dictate practice or be interpreted as prescriptive or unchangeable.

In some countries of the EHEA the ministry of education or an equivalent organisation has the responsibility for some of the areas covered by the standards and guidelines. Where this is the case, that ministry or organisation should ensure that appropriate quality assurance mechanisms are in place and subject to independent reviews.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

The standards and guidelines are based on a number of basic principles about quality assurance, both internal in and external to higher education in the EHEA.

These include:

- providers of higher education have the primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance;
- the interests of society in the quality and standards of higher education need to be safeguarded;
- the quality of academic programmes need to be developed and improved for students and other beneficiaries of higher education across the EHEA;
- there need to be efficient and effective organisational structures within which those academic programmes can be provided and supported;
- transparency and the use of external expertise in quality assurance processes are important;
- there should be encouragement of a culture of quality within higher education institutions;
- processes should be developed through which higher education institutions can demonstrate their accountability, including accountability for the investment of public and private money;
- quality assurance for accountability purposes is fully compatible with quality assurance for enhancement purposes;
- institutions should be able to demonstrate their quality at home and internationally;
- processes used should not stifle diversity and innovation.

PURPOSES OF THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

The purposes of the standards and guidelines are:

- to improve the education available to students in higher education institutions in the EHEA;
- to assist higher education institutions in managing and enhancing their quality and, thereby, to help to justify their institutional autonomy;
- to form a background for quality assurance agencies in their work;
- to make external quality assurance more transparent and simpler to understand for everybody involved.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

The objectives of the standards and guidelines are:

- to encourage the development of higher education institutions which foster vibrant intellectual and educational achievement;

- to provide a source of assistance and guidance to higher education institutions and other relevant agencies in developing their own culture of quality assurance;
- to inform and raise the expectations of higher education institutions, students, employers and other stakeholders about the processes and outcomes of higher education;
- to contribute to a common frame of reference for the provision of higher education and the assurance of quality within the EHEA.

EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

The standards and guidelines proposed in this report envisage an important role for external quality assurance. The form of this varies from system to system and can include institutional evaluations of different types; subject or programme evaluations; accreditation at subject, programme and institutional levels; and combinations of these. Such external evaluations largely depend for their full effectiveness on there being an explicit internal quality assurance strategy, with specific objectives, and on the use, within institutions, of mechanisms and methods aimed at achieving those objectives.

Quality assurance can be undertaken by external agencies for a number of purposes, including:

- safeguarding of national academic standards for higher education;
- accreditation of programmes and/or institutions;
- user protection;
- public provision of independently-verified information (quantitative and qualitative) about programmes or institutions;
- improvement and enhancement of quality.

The activities of European quality assurance agencies will reflect the legal, social and cultural requirements of the jurisdictions and environments in which they operate. European standards relating to the quality assurance of quality assurance agencies themselves are contained in Part 3 of this chapter.

The processes carried out by quality assurance agencies will properly depend upon their purposes and the outcomes they are intended to achieve. The procedures adopted by those agencies that are concerned to emphasise principally the enhancement of quality may be quite different from those whose function is first to provide strong 'consumer protection'. The standards that follow reflect basic good practice across Europe in external quality assurance, but do not attempt to provide detailed guidance about what should be examined or how assurance activities should be conducted. Those are matters of national autonomy, although the exchange of information amongst agencies and authorities is already leading to the emergence of convergent elements.

There are, however, already some general principles of good practice in external quality assurance processes:

- institutional autonomy should be respected;

- the interests of students and other stakeholders such as labour market representatives should be at the forefront of external quality assurance processes;
- use should be made, wherever possible, of the results of institutions' own internal quality assurance activities.

The 'guidelines' provide additional information about good practice and in some cases explain in more detail the meaning and importance of the standards. Although the guidelines are not part of the standards themselves, the standards should be considered in conjunction with them.

PART 1: EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

1.1 POLICY AND PROCEDURES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard:

Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards. They should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture which recognises the importance of quality, and quality assurance, in their work. To achieve this, institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality.

The strategy, policy and procedures should have a formal status and be publicly available. They should also include a role for students and other stakeholders.

Guidelines:

Formal policies and procedures provide a framework within which higher education institutions can develop and monitor the effectiveness of their quality assurance systems. They also help to provide public confidence in institutional autonomy. Policies contain the statements of intentions and the principal means by which these will be achieved. Procedural guidance can give more detailed information about the ways in which the policy is implemented and provides a useful reference point for those who need to know about the practical aspects of carrying out the procedures.

The policy statement is expected to include:

- the relationship between teaching and research in the institution;
- the institution's strategy for quality and standards;
- the organisation of the quality assurance system;
- the responsibilities of departments, schools, faculties and other organisational units and individuals for the assurance of quality;
- the involvement of students in quality assurance;
- the ways in which the policy is implemented, monitored and revised.

The realisation of the EHEA depends crucially on a commitment at all levels of an institution to ensuring that its programmes have clear and explicit intended outcomes; that its staff are ready, willing and able to provide teaching and learner support that will help its students achieve those outcomes; and that there is full, timely and tangible recognition of the contribution to its work by those of its staff who demonstrate particular excellence, expertise and dedication. All higher education institutions should aspire to improve and enhance the education they offer their students.

1.2 APPROVAL, MONITORING AND PERIODIC REVIEW OF PROGRAMMES AND AWARDS

Standard:

Institutions should have formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review and monitoring of their programmes and awards.

Guidelines:

The confidence of students and other stakeholders in higher education is more likely to be established and maintained through effective quality assurance activities which ensure that programmes are well-designed, regularly monitored and periodically reviewed, thereby securing their continuing relevance and currency.

The quality assurance of programmes and awards are expected to include:

- development and publication of explicit intended learning outcomes;
- careful attention to curriculum and programme design and content;
- specific needs of different modes of delivery (e.g. full time, part-time, distance-learning, e-learning) and types of higher education (e.g. academic, vocational, professional);
- availability of appropriate learning resources;
- formal programme approval procedures by a body other than that teaching the programme;
- monitoring of the progress and achievements of students;
- regular periodic reviews of programmes (including external panel members);
- regular feedback from employers, labour market representatives and other relevant organisations;
- participation of students in quality assurance activities.

1.3 ASSESSMENT OF STUDENTS

Standard:

Students should be assessed using published criteria, regulations and procedures which are applied consistently.

Guidelines:

The assessment of students is one of the most important elements of higher education. The outcomes of assessment have a profound effect on students' future careers. It is therefore important that assessment is carried out professionally at all times and takes into account the extensive knowledge which exists about testing and examination processes. Assessment also provides valuable information for institutions about the effectiveness of teaching and learners' support.

Student assessment procedures are expected to:

- be designed to measure the achievement of the intended learning outcomes and other programme objectives;
- be appropriate for their purpose, whether diagnostic, formative or summative;
- have clear and published criteria for marking;
- be undertaken by people who understand the role of assessment in the progression of students towards the achievement of the knowledge and skills associated with their intended qualification;

- where possible, not rely on the judgements of single examiners;
- take account of all the possible consequences of examination regulations;
- have clear regulations covering student absence, illness and other mitigating circumstances;
- ensure that assessments are conducted securely in accordance with the institution's stated procedures;
- be subject to administrative verification checks to ensure the accuracy of the procedures.

In addition, students should be clearly informed about the assessment strategy being used for their programme, what examinations or other assessment methods they will be subject to, what will be expected of them, and the criteria that will be applied to the assessment of their performance.

1.4 QUALITY ASSURANCE OF TEACHING STAFF

Standard:

Institutions should have ways of satisfying themselves that staff involved with the teaching of students are qualified and competent to do so. They should be available to those undertaking external reviews, and commented upon in reports.

Guidelines:

Teachers are the single most important learning resource available to most students. It is important that those who teach have a full knowledge and understanding of the subject they are teaching, have the necessary skills and experience to transmit their knowledge and understanding effectively to students in a range of teaching contexts, and can access feedback on their own performance. Institutions should ensure that their staff recruitment and appointment procedures include a means of making certain that all new staff have at least the minimum necessary level of competence. Teaching staff should be given opportunities to develop and extend their teaching capacity and should be encouraged to value their skills. Institutions should provide poor teachers with opportunities to improve their skills to an acceptable level and should have the means to remove them from their teaching duties if they continue to be demonstrably ineffective.

1.5 LEARNING RESOURCES AND STUDENT SUPPORT

Standard:

Institutions should ensure that the resources available for the support of student learning are adequate and appropriate for each programme offered.

Guidelines:

In addition to their teachers, students rely on a range of resources to assist their learning. These vary from physical resources such as libraries or computing facilities to human support in the form of tutors, counsellors, and other advisers. Learning resources and other support mechanisms should be readily accessible to students, designed with their needs in mind and responsive to feedback from those who use the services provided. Institutions should routinely monitor, review and improve the effectiveness of the support services available to their students.

1.6 INFORMATION SYSTEMS

Standard:

Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes of study and other activities.

Guidelines:

Institutional self-knowledge is the starting point for effective quality assurance. It is important that institutions have the means of collecting and analysing information about their own activities. Without this they will not know what is working well and what needs attention, or the results of innovatory practices.

The quality-related information systems required by individual institutions will depend to some extent on local circumstances, but it is at least expected to cover:

- student progression and success rates;
- employability of graduates;
- students' satisfaction with their programmes;
- effectiveness of teachers;
- profile of the student population;
- learning resources available and their costs;
- the institution's own key performance indicators.

There is also value in institutions comparing themselves with other similar organisations within the EHEA and beyond. This allows them to extend the range of their self-knowledge and to access possible ways of improving their own performance.

1.7 PUBLIC INFORMATION

Standard:

Institutions should regularly publish up to date, impartial and objective information, both quantitative and qualitative, about the programmes and awards they are offering.

Guidelines:

In fulfilment of their public role, higher education institutions have a responsibility to provide information about the programmes they are offering, the intended learning outcomes of these, the qualifications they award, the teaching, learning and assessment procedures used, and the learning opportunities available to their students. Published information might also include the views and employment destinations of past students and the profile of the current student population. This information should be accurate, impartial, objective and readily accessible and should not be used simply as a marketing opportunity. The institution should verify that it meets its own expectations in respect of impartiality and objectivity.

PART 2: EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR THE EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

2.1 USE OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCEDURES

Standard:

External quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines.

Guidelines:

The standards for internal quality assurance contained in Part 1 provide a valuable basis for the external quality assessment process. It is important that the institutions' own internal policies and procedures are carefully evaluated in the course of external procedures, to determine the extent to which the standards are being met.

If higher education institutions are to be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their own internal quality assurance processes, and if those processes properly assure quality and standards, then external processes might be less intensive than otherwise.

2.2 DEVELOPMENT OF EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESSES

Standard:

The aims and objectives of quality assurance processes should be determined before the processes themselves are developed, by all those responsible (including higher education institutions) and should be published with a description of the procedures to be used.

Guidelines:

In order to ensure clarity of purpose and transparency of procedures, external quality assurance methods should be designed and developed through a process involving key stakeholders, including higher education institutions. The procedures that are finally agreed should be published and should contain explicit statements of the aims and objectives of the processes as well as a description of the procedures to be used.

As external quality assurance makes demands on the institutions involved, a preliminary impact assessment should be undertaken to ensure that the procedures to be adopted are appropriate and do not interfere more than necessary with the normal work of higher education institutions.

2.3 CRITERIA FOR DECISIONS

Standard:

Any formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit published criteria that are applied consistently.

Guidelines:

Formal decisions made by quality assurance agencies have a significant impact on the institutions and programmes that are judged. In the interests of equity and reliability, decisions should be based on published criteria and interpreted in a consistent manner. Conclusions should be based on recorded evidence and agencies should have in place ways of moderating conclusions, if necessary.

2.4 PROCESSES FIT FOR PURPOSE*Standard:*

All external quality assurance processes should be designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them.

Guidelines:

Quality assurance agencies within the EHEA undertake different external processes for different purposes and in different ways. It is of the first importance that agencies should operate procedures which are fit for their own defined and published purposes. Experience has shown, however, that there are some widely-used elements of external review processes which not only help to ensure their validity, reliability and usefulness, but also provide a basis for the European dimension to quality assurance.

Amongst these elements the following are particularly noteworthy:

- insistence that the experts undertaking the external quality assurance activity have appropriate skills and are competent to perform their task;
- the exercise of care in the selection of experts;
- the provision of appropriate briefing or training for experts;
- the use of international experts;
- participation of students;
- ensuring that the review procedures used are sufficient to provide adequate evidence to support the findings and conclusions reached;
- the use of the self-evaluation/site visit/draft report/published report/follow-up model of review;
- recognition of the importance of institutional improvement and enhancement policies as a fundamental element in the assurance of quality.

2.5 REPORTING*Standard:*

Reports should be published and should be written in a style which is clear and readily accessible to its intended readership. Any decisions, commendations or recommendations contained in reports should be easy for a reader to find.

Guidelines:

In order to ensure maximum benefit from external quality assurance processes, it is important that reports should meet the identified needs of the intended readership. Reports are sometimes intended for different readership groups and this will require careful attention to structure, content, style and tone.

In general, reports should be structured to cover description, analysis (including relevant evidence), conclusions, commendations, and recommendations. There should be sufficient preliminary explanation to enable a lay reader to understand the purposes of the review, its form, and the criteria used in making decisions. Key findings, conclusions and recommendations should be easily locatable by readers.

Reports should be published in a readily accessible form and there should be opportunities for readers and users of the reports (both within the relevant institution and outside it) to comment on their usefulness.

2.6 FOLLOW-UP PROCEDURES

Standard:

Quality assurance processes which contain recommendations for action or which require a subsequent action plan, should have a predetermined follow-up procedure which is implemented consistently.

Guidelines:

Quality assurance is not principally about individual external scrutiny events: It should be about continuously trying to do a better job. External quality assurance does not end with the publication of the report and should include a structured follow-up procedure to ensure that recommendations are dealt with appropriately and any required action plans drawn up and implemented. This may involve further meetings with institutional or programme representatives. The objective is to ensure that areas identified for improvement are dealt with speedily and that further enhancement is encouraged.

2.7 PERIODIC REVIEWS

Standard:

External quality assurance processes should be undertaken on a cyclical basis. The length of the cycle and the review procedures to be used should be clearly defined and published in advance.

Guidelines:

Quality assurance is not a static but a dynamic process. It should be continuous and not “once in a lifetime”. It does not end with the first review or with the completion of the formal follow-up procedure. It has to be periodically renewed. Subsequent external reviews should take into account progress that has been made since the previous event. The process to be used in all external reviews should be clearly defined by the external quality assurance agency and its demands on institutions should not be greater than are necessary for the achievement of its objectives.

2.8 SYSTEM-WIDE ANALYSES

Standard:

Quality assurance agencies should produce from time to time summary reports describing and

analysing the general findings of their reviews, evaluations, assessments etc.

Guidelines:

All external quality assurance agencies collect a wealth of information about individual programmes and/or institutions and this provides material for structured analyses across whole higher education systems. Such analyses can provide very useful information about developments, trends, emerging good practice and areas of persistent difficulty or weakness and can become useful tools for policy development and quality enhancement. Agencies should consider including a research and development function within their activities, to help them extract maximum benefit from their work.

INTRODUCTION TO PART 3:

EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

The growth of European external quality assurance agencies has been expansive since the early 1990's. At the same time cooperation and sharing of best practices among agencies have been an integrated element in this development. Already in 1994/95 the so-called European Pilot Projects initiated by the European Commission resulted in the mutual recognition by agencies of the basic methodology of quality assurance: independent agencies, self-evaluations, external site visits and public reporting. The creation of ENQA in 2000 was therefore a natural formalisation of this development in cooperation, and ENQA has been able to build on the state-of-the-art consensus arrived at during the 1990's.

The European standards for external quality assurance agencies, which follow, have been developed on the premises of this development in the young history of European external quality assurance. Moreover it is the conscious ambition that the standards should be neither too detailed nor too prescriptive. They must not reduce the freedom of European quality assurance agencies to reflect in their organisations and processes the experiences and expectations of their nation or region. The standards must, though, ensure that the professionalism, credibility and integrity of the agencies are visible and transparent to their stakeholders and must permit comparability to be observable among the agencies and allow the necessary European dimension.

It should be added that in this way the standards do also contribute naturally to the work being done towards mutual recognition of agencies and the results of agency evaluations or accreditations. This work has been explored in the Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA) and is part of the 'Code of Good Practise' by the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA).

Several 'guidelines' have been added to provide additional information about good practice and in some cases explain in more detail the meaning and importance of the standards. Although the guidelines are not part of the standards themselves, the standards should be considered in conjunction with them.

PART 3: EUROPEAN STANDARDS FOR EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

USE OF EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCEDURES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Standard:

The external quality assurance of agencies should take into account the presence and effectiveness of the external quality assurance processes described in Part 2 of the European Standards and Guidelines.

Guidelines:

The standards for external quality assurance contained in Part 2 provide a valuable basis for the external quality assessment process. The standards reflect best practices and experiences gained through the development of external quality assurance in Europe since the early 1990's. It is therefore important that these standards are integrated into the processes applied by external quality assurance agencies towards the higher education institutions.

The standards for external quality assurance should together with the standards for external quality assurance agencies constitute the basis for professional and credible external quality assurance of higher education institutions.

3.2 OFFICIAL STATUS

Standard:

Agencies should be formally recognised by competent public authorities in the European Higher Education Area as agencies with responsibilities for external quality assurance and should have an established legal basis. They should comply with any requirements of the legislative jurisdictions within which they operate.

3.3 ACTIVITIES

Standard:

Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities (at institutional or programme level) on a regular basis.

Guidelines:

These may involve evaluation, review, audit, assessment, accreditation or other similar activities and should be part of the core functions of the agency.

3.4 RESOURCES

Standard:

Agencies should have adequate and proportional resources, both human and financial, to enable them to organise and run their external quality assurance process(es) in an effective and efficient manner, with appropriate provision for the development of their processes and procedures.

3.5 MISSION STATEMENT

Standard:

Agencies should have clear and explicit goals and objectives for their work, contained in a publicly available statement.

Guidelines:

These statements should describe the goals and objectives of agencies' quality assurance processes, the division of labour with relevant stakeholders in higher education, especially the higher education institutions, and the cultural and historical context of their work. The statements should make clear that the external quality assurance process is a major activity of the agency and that there exists a systematic approach to achieving its goals and objectives. There should also be documentation to demonstrate how the statements are translated into a clear policy and management plan.

3.6 INDEPENDENCE

Standard:

Agencies should be independent to the extent both that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations and that the conclusions and recommendations made in their reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.

Guidelines:

An agency will need to demonstrate its independence through measures, such as:

- Its operational independence from higher education institutions and governments is guaranteed in official documentation (e.g. instruments of governance or legislative acts).
- The definition and operation of its procedures and methods, the nomination and appointment of external experts and the determination of the outcomes of its quality assurance processes are undertaken autonomously and independently from governments, higher education institutions, and organs of political influence.
- While relevant stakeholders in higher education, particularly students/learners, are consulted in the course of quality assurance processes, the final outcomes of the quality assurance processes remain the responsibility of the agency.

3.7 EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE CRITERIA AND PROCESSES USED BY THE AGENCIES

Standard:

The processes, criteria and procedures used by agencies should be pre-defined and publicly available.

These processes will normally be expected to include:

- a self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance

- process; an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, (a) student member(s), and site visits as decided by the agency;
- publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes;
- a follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report.

Guidelines:

Agencies may develop and use other processes and procedures for particular purposes.

Agencies should pay careful attention to their declared principles at all times, and ensure both that their requirements and processes are managed professionally and that their conclusions and decisions are reached in a consistent manner, even though the decisions are formed by groups of different people.

Agencies that make formal quality assurance decisions, or conclusions which have formal consequences should have an appeals procedure. The nature and form of the appeals procedure should be determined in the light of the constitution of each agency.

3.8 ACCOUNTABILITY PROCEDURES

Standard:

Agencies should have in place procedures for their own accountability.

Guidelines:

These procedures are expected to include the following:

1. A published policy for the assurance of the quality of the agency itself, made available on its website;
2. Documentation which demonstrates that:
 - the agency's processes and results reflect its mission and goals of quality assurance;
 - the agency has in place, and enforces, a no-conflict-of-interest mechanism in the work of its external experts;
 - the agency has reliable mechanisms that ensure the quality of any activities and material produced by subcontractors, if some or all of the elements in its quality assurance procedure are subcontracted to other parties;
 - the agency has in place internal quality assurance procedures which include an internal feedback mechanism (i.e. means to collect feedback from its own staff and council/board); an internal reflection mechanism (i.e. means to react to internal and external recommendations for improvement); and an external feedback mechanism (i.e. means to collect feedback from experts and evaluated institutions for future development) in order to inform and underpin its own development and improvement.
3. A mandatory cyclical external review of the agency's activities at least once every five years

3 PEER REVIEW SYSTEM FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

In Berlin the Ministers called ‘upon ENQA, through its members, in cooperation with the EUA, EURASHE, and ESIB, to ... explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies’.

ENQA and its partners have met this call by building on the interpretation of the mandate that a system of peer review of agencies must include not only the peer review process itself, but also a careful consideration of the quality standards on which a review could build. Further, there has been agreement in the process that peer review of agencies should be interpreted as basically the means to achieve the goal of transparency, visibility and comparability of quality of agencies.

Therefore, this report has as a major proposal the creation of a register of recognised external quality assurance agencies operating in higher education within Europe. This proposal is in essence a response to expectations that there is likely soon to be an increase of quality assurance bodies keen to make a profit from the value of a recognition or accreditation label. Experience elsewhere has shown that it is difficult to control such enterprises, but Europe has a possibly unique opportunity to exercise practical management of this new market, not in order to protect the interests of already established agencies, but to make sure that the benefits of quality assurance are not diminished by the activities of disreputable practitioners.

The work on these proposals has principally taken into consideration the European context and demands. At the same time there has been awareness in the process that similar experiences and processes are developing internationally. This chapter therefore opens with a brief analysis of the international experiences and initiatives relevant for the drafting of this part of the report. It then outlines the proposed peer review system based on the subsidiarity principle and the European standards for external quality assurance agencies. This outline leads to a presentation of the recommended register of external quality assurance agencies operating in Europe. The peer reviews and the agencies’ compliance with the European standards play a crucial role in the composition of the register. Finally, a European Consultative Forum for Quality Assurance in Higher Education is proposed.

INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Europe is not the only area where dynamic developments in the field of higher education quality assurance are currently taking place. This section describes some of the experiences and initiatives of organisations such as the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), the International Association of University Presidents (IAUP), the Council for Higher Education Accreditation in the United States (CHEA), OECD and UNESCO. The work of these organisations in relation to quality assurance have been found useful during the drafting of this report. Even though these international experiences have not been directly included in the specific recommendations, some key international elements are presented below in a manner that relates to the recommendations in this chapter.

The identification of good quality and good practices of external quality assurance agencies has also been on the international agenda for several years. INQAAHE discussed in 1999 and onwards a quality label for external quality assurance agencies, an idea originally initiated by the IAUP, in order to meet the need for higher education institutions to identify which agencies are qualified to fulfil the external quality assurance role. The quality label met widespread opposition and instead INQAAHE has focused on formulating good practice criteria for agencies. The result is a set of principles that presents common denominators of good practice while at the same time recognising the international diversity of agencies in terms of purposes and historical-cultural contexts.

In terms of the recommendations on peer review of agencies, the work done by CHEA is relevant. CHEA is a non-governmental organisation functioning as an umbrella body for the US regional, specialised, national and professional accreditation agencies. Accrediting organisations that seek recognition by CHEA must demonstrate that they meet CHEA recognition standards. Accrediting organisations will be expected to advance academic quality, demonstrate accountability, encourage improvement, employ appropriate procedures, continually reassess accreditation practices and possess sufficient resources. CHEA will demand that members undergo so-called recognition reviews every six years. There are basic similarities and compatibility between the CHEA approach and the proposals of this report, for instance in terms of cyclical reviews. However, this report has given a priority to a distinct focus on the quality assurance of agencies.

A separate initiative has been taken jointly by OECD and UNESCO to elaborate guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education. The OECD-UNESCO guidelines will be finalised in 2005, but the drafting process has identified the contrast between the need to regulate the internationalisation of higher education and the fact that existing national quality assurance capacity often focuses exclusively on domestic delivery by domestic institutions. Therefore, it is posed as a challenge for the current quality assurance systems to develop appropriate methodologies and mechanisms to cover foreign providers and programmes in addition to national providers and programmes in order to maximise the benefits and limit the potential disadvantages of the internationalisation of higher education.

The proposed OECD-UNESCO guidelines recommend that external quality assurance agencies ensure that their quality assurance arrangements include foreign and for-profit institutions/providers as well as distance education delivery and other non-traditional modes of educational delivery. However, the drafting process of the guidelines also recognises that the inclusion of foreign providers in the remit of national agencies will in most cases require changes in national legislation and administrative procedures.

This report recognises the importance and implications of internationalisation for the quality assurance of higher education institutions. Although it has been considered too early to include a reference to this in the proposed European standards for external quality assurance, the proposal for a European register does explicitly include agencies from outside Europe operating here as well as European agencies with cross-border operations.

It should also be recognised that the continuing European process fully meets the OECD-UNESCO recommendation that agencies should sustain and strengthen the existing regional and international networks.

CYCLICAL REVIEWS OF AGENCIES

The field of external quality assurance of higher education in Europe is relatively young. However, it may be considered an element of growing maturity among agencies that recent years have evidenced an interest in enhancing credibility of agency work by focusing on internal and external quality assurance of agencies themselves. An ENQA workshop in February 2003 in Sitges, Spain, had quality assurance of agencies as its theme. The participants discussed existing experiences of external evaluation of agencies and one conclusion of the workshop was a recommendation that ENQA should work towards making cyclical external reviews of member agencies. Accordingly, ENQA received the Berlin mandate at a time when discussion of external reviews of agencies had already begun in ENQA and been an element in E4 meetings.

This report recommends that any European agency should at no more than five-year intervals conduct or be submitted to a cyclical external review of its processes and activities. The results

should be documented in a report which states the extent to which the agency is in compliance with the European standards for external quality assurance agencies (see Chapter 2, Part 3).

In the EHEA the map of providers and operators in external quality assurance of higher education will no doubt be more complicated in the future. Therefore, it is important that non-ENQA members are included in considerations on quality assurance of agencies. And it is even more important that agencies from outside Europe have an open opportunity, if they want it, to measure themselves against the recommended European standards. Therefore, the report does not wish to confine the focus of this recommendation to nationally recognised European agencies and thus by implication only actual or potential ENQA members. On the contrary, agencies from outside Europe, but operating in Europe, or European agencies that are not nationally recognised, must also be allowed to opt for a review that assesses its compliance with the European standards.

The general principles for cyclical reviews are proposed to be as follows:

- External quality assurance agencies established and officially recognised as national agencies by a Bologna signatory state should normally be reviewed on a national basis, thus respecting the subsidiarity principle – even if they also operate beyond national borders. These European national agencies may on the other hand also opt for reviews organised by ENQA rather than internal nationally based reviews. The reviews of agencies should include an assessment of whether the agencies are in compliance with the European standards for external quality assurance agencies.
- Agencies not established and officially recognised in a Bologna signatory state may on their own initiative opt to be reviewed against the European standards for external quality assurance agencies.
- The reviews should follow the process comprising a self-evaluation, an independent panel of experts and a published report.

An external review will typically be initiated at the national or agency level. It is therefore expected that reviews of agencies will usually follow from national regulations or from the internal quality assurance processes in place in the agency. This report wishes strongly to emphasise the importance of respecting the subsidiarity principle, and it is therefore proposed that ENQA, in respect of its own members, takes the initiative toward an agency only in the case where after five years no initiative has been taken nationally or by the agency itself. In case the agency is a non-ENQA member and after five years no initiative has been taken nationally or by the agency itself, the European Register Committee is responsible for initiating the review.

When national authorities initiate reviews, the purpose could obviously be quite broad and include the agency's fulfilment of the national mandate, e.g. However, it is a core element in this proposal that reviews – regardless of whether they are initiated at a national, agency or ENQA level – must always explicitly consider the extent to which the agency conforms with the European standards for external quality assurance agencies. The ENQA General Assembly decided at its meeting in November 2004 that the membership criteria of ENQA should conform with the proposed European standards for external quality assurance agencies. Accordingly, the review of an agency will not only make evident the level of conformity with the European standards, but also at the same time indicate the level of compliance with ENQA membership criteria.

Finally, the report stresses that the involvement of international experts with appropriate expertise and experience will provide substantial benefit to the review process.

The follow-up of a cyclical review will first and foremost be the responsibility of the national authorities or owners of the agency and, of course, of the agency itself. ENQA will have a role in the follow-up only in the case of member agencies where ENQA must certify the degree to which the member agency meets the European standards for external quality assurance agencies according to the review. ENQA regulations will specify the consequences if this is not the case.

An illustrative outline of an exemplary process of external review of an agency is shown in the annex to this report.

REGISTER OF EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES OPERATING IN EUROPE

ENQA committed itself before the Berlin ministerial meeting of 2003 to develop in cooperation with the relevant stakeholders a European register of quality assurance agencies, covering public, private, and thematic agencies, operating or planning to operate in Europe.

The register would meet the interest of higher education institutions and governments in being able to identify professional and credible quality assurance agencies operating in Europe. This interest has firstly its basis in the complicated area of recognition of non-national degrees. Recognition procedures would be strengthened if it were transparent to what extent providers were themselves quality assured or accredited by recognised agencies. Secondly, it is increasingly possible for higher education institutions to seek quality assurance from agencies across national borders. Higher education institutions would of course be helped in this process by being able to identify professional agencies from a reliable register.

The most valuable asset of the register would thus be its informative value to institutions and other stakeholders, and the register could in itself become a very useful instrument for achieving transparency and comparability of external quality assurance of higher education institutions.

The register must make evident the level of compliance of entrants with the European standards for external quality assurance agencies. However, it is important to stress that this report does not aim at proposing the register as a ranking instrument.

The register should be open for applications from all agencies providing services within Europe, including those operating from countries outside Europe or those with a transnational or international basis. The agencies will be placed into different sections of the register depending on whether they are peer reviewed or not, whether they comply with the European standards for external quality assurance agencies or not, and whether they operate strictly nationally or across borders.

A possible structure for the register is therefore:

SECTION 1. Peer reviewed agencies, divided into the following categories:

- European national agencies that have been reviewed and fulfil all the European standards for external quality assurance agencies.
- European national agencies that have been reviewed, but do not fulfil all the European standards for external quality assurance agencies.
- Non-national and extra-European agencies that operate in Europe, have been reviewed and fulfil all the European standards for external quality assurance agencies.
- Non-national and extra-European agencies that operate in Europe and have been reviewed, but do not fulfil all the European standards for external quality assurance agencies.

SECTION 2. Non-reviewed agencies

- European national agencies, non-national agencies and extra-European agencies that have not been reviewed and are therefore listed according to information gained from their application for inclusion in the register.

PRESENTED IN A GRID, THE STRUCTURE OF THE REGISTER IS THIS

PROPOSED REGISTER STRUCTURE		Reviewed		Not reviewed
		Compliance with European Standards	No Compliance with European Standards	
European national agencies	National operators			
	Cross-border operators			
European non-national agencies				
Extra-European agencies operating in Europe				

A European Register Committee will decide on admissions to the European register. The committee will use the agency's compliance with the European standards for external quality assurance agencies as identified in the cyclical review as one criterion for placement in the register. Other criteria should be developed which will take account of the diversity of the higher education systems.

The committee will be a light, non-bureaucratic construction with nine members nominated by EURASHE, ESIB, EUA, ENQA and organisations representing European employers, unions and professional organisations plus government representatives. These members will act in an individual capacity and not as mandated representatives of the nominating organisations. ENQA will perform the secretarial duties for the committee which will meet at least on a semi-annual basis.

The European Register Committee will as one of its first implementation tasks formalise the ownership of the register.

Another immediate task for the European Register Committee must be to establish an independent and credible appeals system to secure the rights of those that have been refused or that cannot accept their placement in the register. This appeals system should be an element in the protocol to be drafted by the committee soon after it has become operational.

EUROPEAN CONSULTATIVE FORUM FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Since the Prague meeting in 2001 the E4 group, consisting of ENQA, EUA, ESIB and EURASHE, has met on a regular basis to discuss respective views on the Bologna Process and European quality in higher education. Since the Berlin meeting in 2003 the E4 meetings have had as their major focus the implementation of the mandate of the Ministers on quality assurance in higher education.

This cooperation at the European level has proved constructive. The four organisations have therefore agreed that a European Consultative Forum for Quality Assurance in Higher Education will continue to exist building from the E4 group. The foundation of such a forum would in practical terms establish the current cooperation between ENQA, EUA, EURASHE and ESIB on a more permanent basis. The Forum would function primarily as a consultative and advisory forum for the major European stakeholders and it would resemble the current arrangements where the four respective organisations finance their own expenses and participation without the creation of a new administrative structure. In the longer term the forum should also include labour market representatives.

4 FUTURE PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES

This report contains proposals and recommendations that have been developed and endorsed by the key European players in the world of quality assurance in higher education. The very existence of the report is a testimony to the achievement of a joint understanding in a field where such an understanding might be thought inherently unlikely, given the different interests in play. The proposals offer increased transparency, security and information about higher education for students and society more generally. They equally offer higher education institutions recognition and credibility and opportunities to demonstrate their dedication to high quality in an increasingly competitive and sceptical environment. For the quality assurance agencies the proposals enhance their own quality and credibility and connect them more productively to their wider European professional fraternity.

The proposals will remain no more than proposals, however, if they are not accompanied by an effective implementation strategy. If approved by the Ministers in Bergen, immediate steps will be taken to begin to introduce some of the key elements of this report. The register of quality assurance agencies should be envisaged as being started during the latter half of 2005 and to be ready to go on-line in 2006. The ENQA secretariat has made provision for the extra resources that will be necessary for this purpose. Following the ministerial meeting, ENQA will take the necessary concrete initiatives towards establishing the European Register Committee. The committee will begin its work with formalising the ownership of the register and drafting a protocol based on the preliminary work done by ENQA in the spring of 2005. The first of the cyclical reviews should be expected to take place during 2005.

The European Consultative Forum for Quality Assurance in Higher Education will also be an early initiative. Thus, the outcomes of the Bergen Ministerial meeting, and the establishment of the forum will be the main theme of the next meeting between ENQA and its E4 partners in June 2005. In addition, the future cooperation with other key stakeholders such as labour market representatives will be subject to discussions. ENQA has also arranged a meeting with the other European quality assurance networks prior to the next ENQA General Assembly in September 2005.

The possibility of rapid implementation of certain of the proposals of this report should not be taken to mean that the task of embedding the rest of them will be easy. It will take longer for the internal and external quality assurance standards to be widely adopted by institutions and agencies, because their acceptance will depend on a willingness to change and develop on the part of signatory states with long-established and powerful higher education systems. What is proposed in the internal quality assurance standards will be challenging for some higher education institutions, especially where there is a new and developing tradition of quality assurance or where the focus on students' needs and their preparation to enter the employment market is not embedded in the institutional culture. Similarly, the standards for external quality assurance and for quality assurance agencies themselves will require all participants, and especially the agencies, to look very carefully at themselves and to measure their practices against the European expectation. The new cyclical review procedure will provide a timely focus for this purpose. It will only be when the benefits of adoption of the standards are seen that there is likely to be general acceptance of them.

The EHEA operates on the basis of individual national responsibility for higher education and this implies autonomy in matters of external quality assurance. Because of this the report is not and cannot be regulatory but makes its recommendations and proposals in a spirit of mutual respect among professionals; experts drawn from higher education institutions including students; ministries; and quality assurance agencies. Some signatory states may want to enshrine the standards and review process in their legislative or administrative frameworks. Others may wish to take a longer view of the appropriateness of doing so, weighing the advantages of change against the strengths of the status quo. The proposed European Consultative Forum for Quality Assurance in Higher Education should prove a useful place in which to discuss, debate and learn about new thinking, the experiences of other systems and the similarities and dissimilarities of national experiences.

All in all, there will be a considerable and challenging workload for ENQA, its E4 partners and other key stakeholders to get to grips with in the coming years. The report therefore makes it clear that completion of this report is not the same thing as fulfilling the Bologna goal of a quality assurance dimension for the EHEA. Ahead lies more work to implement the recommendations of the report and secure the implied quality culture among both the higher education institutions and the external quality assurance agencies. What has been set in motion by the Berlin mandate will need continuing maintenance and coaxing if it is to provide the fully functioning European dimension of quality assurance for the EHEA.

A European higher education area with strong, autonomous and effective higher education institutions, a keen sense of the importance of quality and standards, good peer reviews, credible quality assurance agencies, an effective register and increased co-operation with other stakeholders, such as employers, is now possible and the proposals contained in this report will go a long way towards making that vision a reality.

ANNEX:

CYCLICAL REVIEW OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES⁴ - A THEORETICAL MODEL

The model presented below is a proposed indicative outline for a process of external review of an external quality assurance agency. It is presented as an example of a credible process suited to identifying compliance with the European standards for external quality assurance agencies. However, note must be taken that the purpose is instructive and illustrative. Therefore, the level of detail is high and most likely higher than what will be perceived as needed in individual peer reviews of agencies. It follows from this that in no way must the process presented here be considered as a standard in itself. Further, it should be noted that in the presented example the term “evaluation” or “audit”, might as well be applied.

The process covers the following elements:

- formulating terms of reference and protocol for the review;
- nomination and appointment of panel of experts;
- self-evaluation by the agency;
- site visit;
- reporting.

1 TERMS OF REFERENCE

The terms of reference must identify the goals of the review in terms of the perspectives and interests of authorities, stakeholders and the agency itself. All the main tasks and operations of the agency must be covered and in such a manner that it is evident that no hidden agendas are present.

2 SELF-EVALUATION

2.1 BACKGROUND INFORMATION REQUIRED FROM AGENCY AS BASIS OF REVIEW

Relevant background information is necessary to understand the context in which the agency is working. The section is expected to include:

2.1.1 A BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE NATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM, INCLUDING:

- degree structure;
- institutional structure;
- procedures and involved parties in establishing new subjects, programmes and institutions;
- other quality assurance procedures;
- status of higher education institutions in relation to the government.

⁴ The structure of the annex approximates the one documented recently in a manual of a project on mutual recognition of quality assurance agencies in the Nordic countries.

2.1.2 A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE HISTORY OF THE PARTICULAR AGENCY AND OF THE EVALUATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN GENERAL:

- mission statement;
- establishment of the agency (government, higher education institutions, others);
- description of the legal framework and other formal regulations concerning the agency (e.g. parliamentary laws, ministerial orders or decrees);
- the financing of the agency;
- placement of the right to initiate evaluations;
- internal organisation of the agency; including procedures for appointment and composition of board/council;
- other responsibilities of the agency than the evaluation of higher education;
- international activities of the agency, including formal agreements as well as other activities, e.g. participation in conferences, working groups and staff exchange;
- role of the agency in follow-up on evaluations: consequences and sanctions.

2.2 EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE UNDERTAKEN BY THE AGENCY

Evidence should be produced indicating that the agency undertakes on a regular basis external quality assurance of higher education institutions or programmes. This quality assurance should involve either evaluation, accreditation, review, audit, assessment, and these are part of the core functions of the agency.

By 'regular' it is understood that evaluations are planned on the basis of a systematic procedure and that several quality assessments have been conducted over the last two years.

This evidence should include:

- a description of the methodological scope of the agency;
- an account of the number of quality assessments conducted and the number of units evaluated.

2.3 EVALUATION METHOD APPLIED BY THE AGENCY

2.3.1 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

An account of the overall planning of an evaluation and other fundamental issues is needed to be able to determine if the agency is working on the basis of transparent methodological procedures.

This account should include:

- the procedures for briefing of and communication with the evaluated institutions;
- the agency strategy for student participation;
- the procedures related to establishing the terms of reference/project plan of the individual assessment;
- the reference(s) for evaluation (predefined criteria, legal documents, subject benchmarks, professional standards, the stated goals of the evaluated institution);

- the extent to which the methodological elements are modified to specific reviews.

2.3.2 ELEMENTS OF METHODOLOGY

An account giving evidence that the methodology the agency is working on is pre-defined and public and that review results are public.

The methodology includes:

- self-evaluation or equivalent procedure of the given object of evaluation;
- external evaluation by a group of experts and site visits as decided by the agency;
- publication of a report with public results.

The agency can also work out and apply other methodologies fit for special purposes.

The agency's decisions and reports are consistent in terms of principles and requirements, even if different groups form the judgements.

If the agency makes evaluation decisions, there is an appeals system. This methodology is applied to the needs of the agencies.

If the agency is to make recommendations and/or conditional resolutions, it has a follow-up procedure to check on the results.

2.3.3 AN ACCOUNT OF THE ROLE OF THE EXTERNAL EXPERT GROUP

The account on the role of the external expert group should include:

- procedures for nomination and appointment of experts, including criteria for use of international experts, representatives of stakeholders such as employers and students;
- methods of briefing and training of experts;
- meetings between experts: number, scope and time schedule in relation to the overall evaluation process;
- division of labour between agency and experts;
- role of the agency's staff in the evaluations;
- identification and appointment of the member(s) of staff at the agency to be responsible for the evaluation.

2.3.4 DOCUMENTATION

Several accounts of the agency's procedures for collecting documentation are needed to determine the procedures related to the self-evaluation of the agency and site visits:

2.3.4.1 An account of the procedures related to self-evaluation

This account should include:

- specification of content in the guidelines provided by the agency;
- procedural advice provided by the agency;
- requirements for composition of self-evaluation teams, including the role of students;

- training/information of self-evaluation teams;
- time available for conducting the self-evaluation.

2.3.4.2 An account of the procedures related to the site visit

This account should include:

- questionnaires/interviewing protocols;
- principles for selection of participants/informants (categories and specific participants);
- principles for the length of the visit;
- number of meetings and average length;
- documentation of the meetings (internal/external, minutes, transcriptions etc.);
- working methods of the external expert group.

2.3.4.3 The reports

The documentation should include the following information on the reports:

- purpose of the report;
- drafting of the report (agency staff or experts);
- format of report (design and length);
- content of report (documentation or only analysis/recommendations);
- principles for feedback from the evaluated parties on the draft report;
- publication procedures and policy (e.g. handling of the media);
- immediate follow-up (e.g. seminars and conferences);
- long-term follow-up activities (e.g. follow-up evaluation or visit).

2.3.5 SYSTEM OF APPEAL

The agency documents a method for appeals against its decisions and how this methodology is applied to the needs of the agency. It must be evident from the documentation to what extent the appeals system is based on a hearing process through which the agency can provide those under evaluation a means to comment on and question the outcomes of the evaluation.

Basically, the agency must provide evidence that the appeals system provides for those under evaluation an opportunity to express opinions about evaluation outcomes.

2.4 ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION

This additional documentation should provide an account of the use of surveys, statistical material or other kinds of documentation not mentioned elsewhere. This material should be public.

2.5 PROCEDURES FOR A QUALITY SYSTEM FOR AGENCIES

The agency must document that it has in place internal quality assurance mechanisms that conform to those stipulated in the European standards for external quality assurance agencies.

2.6 FINAL REFLECTIONS

An analysis of the agency's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats is needed in order to give an account of the capacity of the agency to adapt to new demands and trends and to permanently improve its actions while maintaining a solid and credible methodological framework and governance model.

3 GUIDELINES FOR THE EXTERNAL REVIEW PANEL

These guidelines describe the expectations to the external review panel. They comprise guidance on:

- appointment and general organisation;
- site visit;
- drafting of the report.

As described above, the agency under review should provide a self-evaluation report according to the provided guidelines. The self-study should be sent to the external review panel no later than a month before the visit.

3.1 APPOINTMENT OF THE EXTERNAL REVIEW PANEL

This section concerns the appointment of the experts that should conduct the review. The external expert group should consist of the following experts:

- one or two quality assurance experts (international);
- representative of higher education institutions (national);
- student member (national);
- stakeholder member (for instance an employer, national).

One of these experts should be elected Chair of the external review panel.

It is also recommended that the panel should be supplemented with a person who, in an independent capacity from the agency, would act as a secretary.

Nominations of the experts may come from the agencies, stakeholders or local authorities but in order to ensure that the review is credible and trustworthy, it is essential that the task of appointing the experts be given to a third party outside the agency involved. This third party could for instance be ENQA or an agency not involved in the process. The basis for the recognition of the experts should be declarations of their independence. However, the agency under review should have the possibility to comment on the final composition of the panel.

3.2 SITE VISIT

A protocol must be available for the site visit along lines such as the following:

The visit is recommended to have a duration of two-three days, including preparation and follow-up, depending on the external review panel's prior knowledge of the agency under review and its context. The day before the visit the panel will meet and agree on relevant themes for the visit. The purpose of the site visit is to validate the self-study. Interview guides should be drafted

with this perspective in mind.

The visit could include separate meetings with members from the agency board, management, staff, experts, owners/key stakeholders and representatives from evaluated institutions at management level as well as members from the internal self-evaluation committees.

3.3 PREPARATION OF THE REPORT

Apart from fulfilling the general terms of reference the report must focus in a precise manner on compliance with the European standards for external quality assurance agencies as specified in the self-study protocol, as well as with possibilities for and recommendations on future improvements.

After the visit the external review panel assisted by the secretary will draft a report. The final version should be sent to the agency under review for comments on factual errors.

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