

# GOOD PRACTICE

## FOR THE APPROVAL, MONITORING AND PERIODIC REVIEW OF PROGRAMMES AND AWARDS IN IRISH UNIVERSITIES

A series of booklets produced by  
the Irish Universities Quality Board

### 6



## *Irish Universities Quality Board*

The mission of the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) is to support and promote a culture of quality in Irish higher education and independently evaluate the effectiveness of quality processes in Irish universities. Since its foundation in 2002, it has established itself as an important voice both nationally and internationally in the area of quality assurance. IUQB has been delegated with the statutory responsibility for organising the periodic review of the effectiveness of the quality assurance systems in place in the seven Irish universities, as required by the Universities Act (1997)<sup>1</sup>. IUQB is funded by subscriptions from the seven Irish universities and an annual grant from the Higher Education Authority (HEA) through the National Development Plan (2007-2013). However, the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Bill 2011* provides for the creation of a new national agency, Qualifications and Quality Assurance Ireland (QQAI)<sup>2</sup>. This single agency is intended to replace IUQB, the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), the Higher Education and Awards Council (HETAC) and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), with the current activities of these four bodies being taken over by QQAI.

## *National Guidelines of Good Practice*

This booklet is one of a series produced by IUQB, the aim of which is to establish and publish good practice in the key areas of Teaching and Learning, Research, Strategic Planning/Management and Administration. This is in keeping with the IUQB aim to increase the level of inter-university and inter-institutional co-operation in developing quality assurance processes. Each booklet is the result of an inter-university/institutional project on a topic selected, organised and driven by the Board with the close collaboration of the universities and of other providers of higher education in Ireland. The selection of the projects arise from recommendations for improvement contained in the reviews of departments and faculties required by the Universities Act 1997<sup>3</sup>, from recommendations from institutional reviews of the universities, and from a need to update prior publications in the series to ensure they reflect the current environment, including the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education area (ESG)* (2005<sup>4</sup>, 2009<sup>5</sup>).

## *Other Booklets in the Series:*

*\*No 1: Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Universities (2005)*

*No 2: Good Practice in the Organisation of Student Support Services in Irish Universities (2006)*

*No 3: Good Practice for Institutional Research in Irish Higher Education (2008)*

*No 4: Good Practice in Strategic Planning for Academic Units in Irish Universities (2008)*

*No 5: Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Universities (2nd Edition) (2009)*

*\*Reprinted 2006*

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1 Universities Act (1997); Section 35 (4 & 5) Government of Ireland, Dublin.

2 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Bill 2011, July 2011, Department of Education and Skills, Dublin.

3 Universities Act (1997); Section 35 (2a & 2b) Government of Ireland, Dublin.

4 Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European higher education area, (2005); European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), Helsinki.

5 Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European higher education area, 3rd edition, (2009); European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), Helsinki.



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# Abbreviations and terminology

## Abbreviations

AHEAD	Association for Higher Education Access and Disability
BF	Bologna Framework
CAO	Central Applications Office
CEPES	Centre Européen pour l'enseignement supérieur/ UNESCO European Centre for Higher Education
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ESG	European Standards and Guidelines
EUA	European Universities Association
FAQs	Frequently Asked Questions
FETAC	Further Education and Awards Council
FIN	University Framework Implementation Network
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI(s)	Higher Education Institution(s)
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
IHEQN	Irish Higher Education Quality Network
IUA	Irish Universities Association
IUQB	Irish Universities Quality Board
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
NUI	National University of Ireland
QA	Quality Assurance
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (UK)
QQAI	Qualifications and Quality Assurance Ireland
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SIF	Strategic Innovation Fund
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

## Terminology

Terminology in use for main university bodies, offices and officers. The list is not exhaustive.

### Used in this booklet

Academic Council

Centre for Teaching and Learning

Governing Authority

President

Programme Co-ordinator

Quality Office(r)

Study Programme

Registrar

### Other terms in use across the Irish university sector

University Council

Learning Innovation Unit; Centre for Academic Practice and eLearning

Governing Body; College Board

Provost

Programme leader/director/chair.

Quality (Assurance/Promotion/Support) Unit/Office(r)

Denominated programme, single honours degree (programme), joint honours degree (programme), two-subject moderatorship,

Vice-Provost and Chief Academic Officer;

Vice-President Academic Affairs





# Introduction

*‘The quality of their learning experiences and the environment in which students learn will shape the future development of our society.’ (Introduction to Hunt Report, page 9)<sup>6</sup>*

In a host of reports, commentaries and presentations, high quality in Irish education has been cited as essential to Ireland’s future, economically, culturally and socially. In particular, many see higher education as where a wide range of important attitudes, competences and skills needed throughout society and throughout the lives of graduates may be fostered or imparted. Graduates are needed who can contribute effectively to society and to enterprises, and live full lives, because they have a range of general competences as well as the skills necessary for particular occupations. These competences include the ability to work confidently and professionally, analyse complex information and assess options critically, communicate clearly, lead or interact well with others and, when appropriate, act decisively. Given the diversity of entering students and the diversity of study programmes, meeting such learning objectives for all graduates is a challenge for any higher education institution (HEI).

In Irish universities, formal procedures aimed at the assurance and enhancement of quality in teaching, research and administration have been developed and improved for over 15 years; latterly with the oversight of the IUQB and in line with the Bologna declaration<sup>7</sup> and its associated communiqués. The (Irish) National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (in particular its 10-point scale, which is widely understood and used) defines the levels of expected skills, knowledge and competences associated with qualifications/awards. It also provides a way to compare qualifications recognised in the framework between Irish HEIs and across the whole European HE area. As a national policy initiative, the NFQ articulates some of the objectives of the Bologna process and other related European initiatives, and is a benchmark for programme/award development. The Framework is also central to the newly-proposed legislation and as such will be a key reference for the proposed agency QQAI<sup>8</sup>.

The ‘Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area’ (ESG)<sup>9</sup> are the cornerstone of European efforts to improve the quality of higher education provision (Part 1 of the third and latest edition of the ESG<sup>10</sup> is reproduced in its entirety in Appendix 2). Although, many national systems for the evaluation of HEIs in Europe are focused on ‘accreditation’, the ESG are fully in accord with the Irish system, which supports and values institutional autonomy and is focused on quality enhancement. For example, the first of the principles on which the ESG are based is that “providers of higher education have the primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance”.

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6 National strategy for higher education into 2030: Report of the Strategy Group (2011); Department of Education and Skills, Dublin. (Commonly referred to as the Hunt Report).

7 The joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education convened in Bologna on the 19th of June 1999; at the meeting the declaration was adopted by Ministers of Education of 29 European countries.

8 This was the working title used for referring to the proposed Governmental agency as of 2011.

9 See footnotes 4 and 5.

10 See footnotes 5.

Importantly, there are also independent regulators that have statutory responsibilities for the accreditation of study programmes leading to professional qualifications. Such regulators include, for instance, the Medical Council and Engineers Ireland, and their operations affect colleges/faculties in all universities. A range of options for the outcomes of the activities of such agencies are in use. Such options include to: approve, approve with conditions, amend or remove conditions, withhold approval, or withdraw approval from a programme and/or from a university. In some instances, regulators also have statutory responsibility for approving the educational institution as a body which may deliver the professional programme(s)<sup>11</sup>. These regulators and their roles must be taken fully into account (not least to avoid unnecessary duplication) as relevant programmes are developed, amended, monitored and reviewed. There are also voluntary external accreditation processes in operation, such as that undertaken by the Royal Society of Chemistry for the accreditation of degrees in chemistry, which may have to be considered.

The title of these guidelines makes clear that they are concerned with measures that may be necessary before (approval) and after (monitoring and review) students are registered. Optimally, approval procedures help to ensure that the first graduates of a new programme will be empowered for immediate employment or further study — and prepared for fulfilling and ethical professional and personal lives. Deficient or ineffective approval procedures may result in adverse effects on students' careers and lives and, in turn, damage the reputation of an HEI. Monitoring and periodic review are also essential because high standards are never achieved without continuous effort. The effectiveness of the associated procedures may depend on the achievement of a series of sometimes subtle balances between frequency and intensity, 'top-down' and 'bottom-up', formality and informality, and a unanimous acceptance that regular feedback, particularly from students, is essential — and that all feedback loops be closed (Hunt Report, Teaching and Learning, Recommendation 2)<sup>12</sup>.

It is for each university to decide for itself how best to assure the quality and relevance of its study programmes, thereby defining the ways in which it takes responsibility and is accountable for the academic standards of all awards made in its name. However, given the very large numbers of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes offered in every university, any overall system must take this scale and complexity into account in order to be both practical and effective. Ideally, such a system would have all the following elements:

- i. Thorough processes for programme design and (internal) accreditation that include external inputs
- ii. Effective monitoring and reporting processes for every programme that ensure two-way communications with students and inform management

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, the Nurses Act, 1985, (Part 4 [34]) confers statutory responsibility to An Bord Altranais for the approval of hospitals and third level institutions which are suitable for the provision of educational programmes leading to registration with the Board. The Medical Practitioners Act (2007) Part 10 (88[2a][j]–[ll]) confers similar responsibility to the Medical Council to approve the bodies which may deliver programmes of basic medical education and training.

<sup>12</sup> See footnote 6.



- iii. Periodic reviews of study programmes at agreed intervals e.g. 5 years for four-year undergraduate programmes but more frequently for (shorter) taught postgraduate programmes. Approaches could include:
  - » Joint reviews of (small) groups of cognate study programmes
  - » Specific reviews of large omnibus study programmes and other single, very large programmes or programmes nominated by an agreed process
  - » Less onerous or 'lean' reviews of study programmes that are clearly viable and have consistently good feedback and outcomes
  - » The outcomes of external accreditation reviews by external regulatory organisations inform/complement the internal programme review process, avoiding unnecessary duplication of effort
- iv. Periodic reviews of effectiveness of the colleges/faculties and schools that are responsible for the delivery of study programmes
- v. Periodic reviews of all academic support units; that is, relevant units such as the library, the teaching support centre, and student services.

However it is achieved, what is needed is the *combined and balanced operation of an integrated system* of approval, monitoring and review processes. In addition, given that, in the words of the ESG<sup>13</sup> (Section 1.4), "teachers are the single most important learning resource available to students", the above processes should also, and perhaps above all, assure the competence, capability and motivation of teachers, and should complement institutional procedures for the recruitment, promotion, professional development and support of teachers.

These guidelines were developed by means of a process involving all seven universities that was both exploratory and consultative (Appendix 3), the aim being to arrive at an overall vision for study programme management that is firmly grounded on good practices that are already in place. In fact, all seven Irish universities currently have elements that would be exemplary in an integrated and balanced system. The intention also is to be minimally prescriptive by leaving open how conditions or outcomes may be achieved, thereby allowing for the influence of institutional cultures, traditions and established procedures.

Current practices in operation in various professional accrediting organisations and other oversight bodies were taken into account and the opinions of such entities were sought during the pre-publication consultation exercise. In addition, early drafts were reviewed against experience in universities abroad by means of a number of international experts. Groups of students also influenced the drafting of these guidelines; during the consultative stage, by means of focus groups held in each university and later, when student union officers and student representatives were asked to review drafts of the booklet.

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<sup>13</sup> See footnote 5 and Appendix 2.

As with other 'Good Practice' projects in this IUQB series, the development process, as well as the final booklet, is intended to raise awareness of high standards in a certain domain; through the many meetings and interim documents the universities become much more aware of what is happening already across the sector. The series of IUQB national guideline booklets themselves have also aroused interest abroad<sup>14</sup>. 'Good Practice for the Approval, Monitoring and Periodic Review of Programmes and Awards in Irish Universities' is intended to maintain and enhance this tradition.

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<sup>14</sup> Examining Quality Culture Part II: Processes and tools - participation, ownership and bureaucracy by Andree Sursock; (2011); European University Association, Belgium.



# Using these guidelines

## *Purpose*

The purpose of these guidelines is to facilitate and inform the review and enhancement of policies, regulations, procedures and documentation governing the approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards<sup>15</sup> in Irish universities. Appendix 1 includes important ancillary material in support of some specific guidelines. In all, they should be seen as an important resource for the universities to build on at the beginning of a crucial new phase for Irish higher education — and society.

Where reference is made to other national or international publications, it is appropriate and important that they are also taken into account.

## *The Sections*

Each guideline section begins with an outline and a brief discussion of the key topics pertaining to that section. Their purpose is to place in context the associated guideline statements.

Each guideline item is in the form of a non-prescriptive statement that represents a ‘good practice’. In most cases, there are a variety of ways in which a particular ‘good practice’ may be achieved and it is recognised that diversity in this respect may exist, and indeed, is to be welcomed. It is anticipated that every university and linked programme provider will progressively ensure that any present policy, regulation or procedure that is ineffective in achieving or maintaining ‘good practices’ is changed as soon as is practicable. Procedures in each university for assuring or achieving universal good practice in the management of study programmes are essential.

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<sup>15</sup> Both of the terms ‘programme’ and ‘award’ are included in the title of this publication and used in the text. Here, a programme of study is defined as any process by which learners (students) may acquire knowledge, skills or competences which on successful completion leads to an award being made to the learner by the awarding body (i.e. a university). However, different learners can undertake different programmes of study which lead to the same university award (BA or BSc, for example). Therefore, given that programmes can change without any change to the corresponding award, the need to distinguish between programmes and awards is clear.

Correspondingly, the standards of knowledge, skill and competence required to earn a specific award require monitoring and periodic review, just as do the programmes leading to those awards. Such reviews may be distinct from programme reviews, and are informed by over-arching university policies on awards and generalised standards. Therefore, while the text and guidelines in this booklet deal directly almost entirely with study programmes, by extension they are also concerned with awards, particularly if monitoring or a review is focused on a collection of programmes leading to the same award.





# The Guidelines







# 1 Institutional context

The last fifteen years have seen the introduction in universities around the world and in Ireland of a range of new measures to promote quality in study programmes and their delivery. While these initiatives often led to positive outcomes, many were introduced piecemeal, with no extra supports for teaching staff, leading to frequent shortfalls in the improvements anticipated. In a recent European Universities Association (EUA) publication on quality systems, the results of a Europe-wide survey of universities were analysed<sup>16</sup>; two sub-sections (5.2 and 5.4) of the Executive Summary are directly relevant here:-

*The most effective internal QA arrangements are those that derive from effective internal decision-making processes and structures. Having clear accountability lines and clarifying responsibilities at all levels ensure that the quality assurance system is kept as simple as possible while closing the feedback loops and this should, if anything, reduce bureaucracy by limiting data collection, reports and committees to what is absolutely necessary. It is crucial to identify who needs to know what and, furthermore, to distinguish between what is necessary vs. what would be nice to know. In addition, students and staff feel at home, first and foremost, in their faculties and departments. This argues in favour of an optimal balance between the need for a strong institutional core and a degree of faculty responsibilities, between the need for an institution-wide QA approach and some local variations in faculties.*

*It is essential to invest in people through staff development to avoid internal quality assurance arrangements becoming punitive. It is encouraging to note the pace at which staff development schemes are growing in universities but professionally-staffed centres that support teaching and learning are still a rarity. This will require attention in the years ahead particularly because of the renewed emphasis on student-centred learning in the Bologna Process.*

These guidelines concern the assurance and support of the quality of a university's study programmes, which, together with research and service to the community, represent its *raison d'être*. Generally, the purpose and intentions of a university are laid out in statements of vision, mission and lists of strategic objectives. Where governance and management value the opinions of staff, students and external stakeholders, these statements will, in due course, emphasise innovation and quality enhancement in its study programmes. If, in addition, the associated procedures for programme approval, monitoring and review of programmes are grounded in academic values, and responsibilities at all levels are clearly defined, they may truly engage the whole university community with acceptance of the concomitant administrative processes.

Good study programmes are impossible without good teachers who often need supports and training to contribute effectively in all the modes necessary. Relevant modes and skills include promoting active

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<sup>16</sup> See footnote 14.

learning in large auditoria with hundreds of students, in tutorials and in specialised small classes; organising and leading practical and fieldwork groups; exploiting new and emerging technologies (e.g. internet-assisted audio-visual presentations, virtual learning environments such as Blackboard or Moodle, student response devices ['clickers'], assistive technologies in cases of special needs); and assessing a wide range of intended learning outcomes. While participation in professional development activities is still voluntary, much is being done in this area in Irish universities, where professionally-staffed teaching centres and awards and prizes for exemplary practice are common. In the words of the Hunt Report: "Such developments are evidence of the commitment and dedication of academic support staff to the teaching mission. However, they are not uniform or consistent across higher education, and the challenge now is to convert best practice into standard practice"<sup>17</sup>. (See also Hunt Report pages 59-60 and Teaching and Learning Recommendation 8; and Sections 1.4 and 1.3 of Part 1 of the ESG <sup>18</sup>.)

Other aspects of learning environments are also important such as suitably-designed and well-equipped facilities, information in forms accessible to all students, support services and flexible timetables (e.g. that allow for fieldwork or intensive projects). 'Learning support centres', where graduate or senior students are available to give advice on learning issues to students who may just 'drop in', can also have valuable roles to play (relates to ESG 1.5<sup>19</sup>).

In the words of the ESG Standard for section 1.6<sup>20</sup>, "Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes of study". This is because issues like student success or non-progression, graduate employability, the effectiveness of teaching and assessment, may, when analysed appropriately, lead directly to the identification of measures to effect improvements. Having recently augmented their institutional research capacities (supported by recent Irish Universities Association (IUA)<sup>21</sup> and IUQB<sup>22</sup> projects), Irish universities should already be well positioned to meet and exceed this Standard.

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<sup>17</sup> See footnote 6, page 52.

<sup>18</sup> See footnote 5 and appendix 2.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> The IUA received funding through the HEA-funded Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) Cycle 2 for a three-year project on *Building Strategic Information/Decision Support Capacity*. This proposal builds on a HEA-funded SIF cycle 1 project on *Strategic Planning and Decision Support*. The projects seek to establish key performance indicators for the universities, together with associated data models. The outputs of both these projects should provide a "superset" of sectoral performance indicators, detailed institutional indicators, and data models required to generate them. These are key enablers for institutional decision-making and essential for long-term university strategy. The SIF cycle 2 proposal intends to create the data-warehousing capability to extract relevant data from institutional systems to feed local/national performance indicators. The project links with other IUA SIF cycle 1 and 2 funded projects which are aimed at developing a Full Economic Cost model and are part of a strategic drive to effectively manage, plan, and deliver value for money, increased transparency in decision-making and resource allocation. (Adapted from the IUA website ([www.iua.ie/iua-activities/strategic-innovation-fund.html](http://www.iua.ie/iua-activities/strategic-innovation-fund.html))).

<sup>22</sup> *National Guidelines of Good Practice for Institutional Research in Irish Higher Education* (2008); IUQB, Dublin.



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## GUIDELINES (INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT)

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- G.1.** The university's vision, mission and strategic objectives emphasise policies, procedures and resources that support innovation and quality enhancement in its study programmes. They are periodically revised, with inputs from staff, students and external stakeholders.
- G.2.** The university regards the opinions of students as essential inputs to the management and delivery of study programmes, and acts to ensure that all students in every college/faculty have opportunities to give and receive feedback and to be informed of progress on issues raised by them.
- G.3.** The university ensures and promotes the competence and effectiveness of all of its teaching staff through its appointment, development and promotion procedures. Professional development opportunities are regular and continuous, and cover all relevant teaching modes and skills.
- G.4.** University management sees data and information on all its processes as a fundamental resource, augments this information with external data and by means of surveys, and provides the resources to enable analysis and use of this information in support of the enhancement of study programmes.
- G.5.** Effective pedagogical practice and planned innovations in teaching and assessment inform all decisions concerning the design and provision of all relevant new or refurbished facilities and equipment.
- G.6.** The university regularly evaluates its policies, regulations and procedures related to the approval, monitoring and review of programmes, to ensure that they continue to be effective and are fit for purpose.
- G.7.** The university acts continuously to enhance public confidence in the quality and standard of its education provision by making publicly available easily accessible, impartial and up-to-date information and analyses about its study programmes and awards, including current guidelines for approval, monitoring and review processes, review reports, and information on the employment destinations of graduates.





## 2 Roles, responsibilities and regulations

Over recent decades, as student numbers at Irish universities have increased, the numbers of study programmes on which they could register also increased dramatically. The responsibilities of universities for the quality of study programmes offered by linked providers have also become increasingly more explicit and formalised. In addition, there are increasing numbers of multi-institutional study programmes (some of which are international) that result in 'dual' or joint awards or at a minimum (as with returning Erasmus students) require the recognition of externally-provided modules and associated student grades. The constituent universities of the National University of Ireland (NUI) have also assumed responsibility for the approval of new programmes (formerly a task of the NUI Board of Studies) and for external examiners.

Irish universities are legally autonomous and have the authority to "provide courses of study, conduct examinations and award degrees and other qualifications", (Universities Act, 1997<sup>23</sup>). In essence, the 'accreditation' of programmes rests with the providing university; the State is not directly involved, unlike in many other countries. It is also of relevance that the functions of academic councils are defined in the 1997 Act as including 'to design and develop programmes of study' and 'to establish structures to implement those programmes',<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, each Irish university, through its statutory academic council, is fully responsible for all of its study programmes and the academic standards of the associated awards it makes. Therefore, the importance of each university having competent policies, regulations and procedures in operation for the assurance of the quality and standards of its programmes and awards cannot be overstated.

In an era of accumulating national cutbacks in funding and resources, the academic and financial sustainability of study programmes has to be a significant concern. Methods to identify programmes at risk (because of insufficient students or the retirement of specialist staff) are essential, and there should be an equal willingness to discontinue as to initiate programmes. Where programmes are to be protected (because of strategic objectives or to provide a balanced spectrum of academic offerings) other programmes may have to subsidise them.

If passed into law unchanged, new legislation proposed in 2011 governing higher education in Ireland<sup>25</sup> will not alter the present universities' status, autonomy or authority to make their own awards. However,

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23 Universities Act (1997) Section 13 (2a), Government of Ireland, Dublin.

24 Universities Act (1997) Section 27 (2a and 2b) Government of Ireland, Dublin.

25 See footnote 2.

each university may be required to consult with the newly-formed agency (QQAI) on its procedures ‘for the purpose of establishing, ascertaining, maintaining and improving the quality of education, training, research and related services the provider provides’. In addition, in developing such procedures, a university will be required to take cognisance of the quality assurance guidelines of QQAI<sup>26</sup>. The legislation also provides for a greater role for the awarding body in the quality assurance of any linked providers associated with it<sup>27</sup>.

In practice, the relationship between a university and a college that have a ‘linkage agreement’ may be more fruitful, beneficial to the relevant students, and integrated than is implied by the simple classifications of ‘awarding body’ and ‘linked provider’. The specialisation and ethos of the provider may be particularly relevant and important. The partnership may also operate in terms of shared provision, services and integrated academic and academic-related management structures.

The core of the ESG<sup>28</sup> document has three main parts corresponding to ‘internal quality assurance’, ‘external quality assurance’ and ‘external quality assurance agencies’. Part 1 on internal quality assurance, which is the part of direct concern here, consists of simple statements of seven standards and their associated guidelines (Appendix 2). The primary standard begins with the statement that “Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards”. The associated guideline recognises that “formal policies and procedures provide a framework within which HEIs can develop and monitor the effectiveness of their quality assurance systems” and that they “help to provide public confidence in institutional autonomy.”<sup>29</sup>

Section 1.2 of the ESG<sup>30</sup> ‘Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards’ specifies nine important areas to be given attention. These national guidelines take all of these areas into account, while promoting the attainment of even higher standards where current practice in Irish universities and good international practice indicate that this is already being achieved, or is feasible and desirable.

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26 See footnote 2 - see specifically sections 26, 27 and 28 (a).

27 Ibid - see specifically section 32.

28 See footnote 5.

29 See footnote 5 and appendix 2.

30 Ibid.



While it is the university as a whole that formally accredits study programmes, it is individual staff, programme boards, departments/schools and colleges/faculties that play the primary roles in the development and maintenance of programmes. It is at these levels that the most valuable dedication and expertise are to be found and where the beneficial effects of appropriate and effective structures and procedures are needed most. The effectiveness of any set of enabling institutional structures and systems may be interrogated by reference to criteria such as the following:

- i. Do they facilitate the development of high quality new programmes and the maintenance/enhancement of high standards for all existing programmes to ensure that the integrity and quality of the final award is preserved and in keeping with the appropriate level of the National Framework of Qualifications?
- ii. Do they facilitate programme co-ordinators<sup>31</sup> and teachers as they organise and deliver modules and programmes, and assess learning?
- iii. Do they facilitate administrative staff and procedures in the smooth operation of essential support and delivery processes throughout each academic year and throughout each full programme of study?
- iv. Do they alert and inform responsible officers and bodies of issues that may require action at college/faculty and university levels?
- v. By means of all of the above, do they facilitate effective learning for the wide diversity of students, and a good student experience throughout each and every study programme?

Consideration of all new programme proposals by a specialist sub-committee of academic council may be seen as complementary to what can be done at discipline and faculty levels. This is already the case in most Irish universities and can ensure that:

- i. Pedagogic strategies and methods, and intended learning outcomes are in accord with the stated standards and ambitions of the university.
- ii. New programmes accord with strategic aims and objectives, in the context of the whole portfolio of offerings by the university, with university policy regarding the Bologna process, and with agreed national guidelines.

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<sup>31</sup> The term programme co-ordinator is used to describe an academic member of staff who is delegated overall responsibility for a programme. This is separate to any role played by an administrator who may be assigned responsibility for day-to-day operational matters and who works with the programme co-ordinator. The terms programme leader and director are also in use.

It is also very important that staff and students (and external stakeholders, as appropriate) can readily access clear descriptions of the various responsibilities and delegated authority of each of the university's various committees, boards, offices and officers. It should also be clear to staff, students and stakeholders how they interplay with one another on matters related to academic programmes, student progression, student complaints/appeals, and the quality of the student experience. Understanding is enhanced greatly if, across all colleges/faculties, structures and functions are similar or equivalent with respect to titles and roles. Students, in particular, need to understand how their own study programmes are managed. Finally, because students also benefit greatly from personal contacts with responsible staff, systems that facilitate such contacts are to be preferred.





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## GUIDELINES (ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES AND REGULATIONS)

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- G.8.** The university, as the accreditor and guarantor of its study programmes and awards, acts through its academic council and responsible officers to assure their academic validity and quality, and financial sustainability, and to ensure that the required standards of knowledge, skills and competences are in line with the appropriate level of award in the NFQ.
- G.9.** Final decisions by academic council with respect to academic standards, programme approval/ accreditation and discontinuation, and other important outcomes of programme monitoring and review, are made with advice from a specialist group reporting to council, that through its membership is capable of expertly assessing study programmes. Such assessments take into account appropriate good practices, the NFQ, the ESG<sup>32</sup>, and the vision, mission, strategic objectives and policies of the university.
- G.10.** For study programmes where the university makes awards but where the programmes are delivered in whole or in part outside the university, special provisions are made<sup>33</sup>:
- i. For linked providers, there are oversight mechanisms to ensure that all of the standards and procedures of the university apply to the approval, monitoring and review of all relevant programmes.
  - ii. For joint awards with other universities, suitable arrangements are established for each relevant programme that ensure the attainment and maintenance of the university's normal standards and quality, and the well-being and quality of experience of the students concerned. There are also provisions to safeguard the rights of students in the event of unanticipated difficulties.
  - iii. For transnational programme offerings (See specialist guidelines from UNESCO and CEPES<sup>34</sup>).
- G.11.** University policies, regulations and procedures governing and related to the approval, monitoring, periodic review, improvement and discontinuation of study programmes are fit for purpose and up to date (see Appendix 1.1 for a range of situations that may need to be taken into account).

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<sup>32</sup> See footnote 5 and appendix 2.

<sup>33</sup> Under legislation being proposed in 2011 (see footnote 2, in particular section 32), it is anticipated that awarding bodies will play a greater role in the quality assurance processes of linked providers for which the university (or other HEI) makes the award.

<sup>34</sup> The development of programmes and the associated procedures and regulations for international collaborations are in keeping with the guidelines and principles set out in the UNESCO 2005 publication 'Guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education' and the UNESCO-CEPES/Council of Europe 2001 'Code of Good practice in the provision of transnational education'.

- G.12.** The responsibilities and powers of all bodies, offices, officers and staff related to study programme development, approval, management, monitoring and review are formally defined with clear reporting lines, and, while respecting important traditions, they have consistent names and titles across the university. All of this is readily accessible and publicly available to staff, students and external stakeholders.
- G.13.** Notwithstanding the importance accorded to standardisation and coherence in regulations and in the operation of committees, officers and procedures, across all its academic units, the university respects and allows for differences in roles and procedures that are required by specific disciplines and by external accreditation procedures.
- G.14.** There are student representatives as full members on all relevant bodies who are eligible to attend all meetings, except where agreed general practice indicates that this is not appropriate or that abstention for certain reserve agenda items is appropriate. Students members are provided with clear and concise information (and training when appropriate) on the roles and powers of bodies on which they serve, and on the roles and responsibilities of members.
- G.15.** Study programmes are supervised and managed by means of systems that ensure explicit ownership, individual responsibility and collegial oversight (see Appendix 1.2 for one model by which this may be achieved).
- G.16.** The senior academic officer submits an annual report to academic council on the performance of the university's study programmes. (See Appendix 1.3 for a list topics/headings that could be included.)
- G.17.** Every student is informed during induction, and reminded as appropriate thereafter via printed, on-line and oral media, of how their study programme is managed and its quality is assured. Programme co-ordinators are made known to their students and are readily accessible via defined channels and in person at designated times.



### 3 Design and approval of new programmes

Design and approval/accreditation of study programmes are, in principle, entirely separate, but in practice, good approval processes contribute to good design by providing expert feedback and specified requirements for improvements. In practice also, the personnel involved in approval are often the best situated to provide advice and guidance to the designer of a new study programme. However, design and approval do need to be separate in the jurisprudential sense; any person involved in an approval process should not have any conflict of interest with respect to decisions being made.

An aspect of programme design, now widely recognised as fundamental and stressed in the ESG, is the “development and publication of explicit intended learning outcomes” (ESG 1.2<sup>35</sup>). In Ireland, in an important recent publication<sup>36</sup>, the seven universities, together with the NQAI, considered study programme design and learning outcomes together in the context of the NFQ. There is also increasing recognition of the need for robust teaching, learning and assessment strategies that can assure the achievement of learning outcomes. Though the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) is now well embedded in Irish HEIs, there are still some aspects of its use that add unnecessary complexity and sometimes impede the automatic recognition of previous education for students transferring between HEIs at home and abroad.

Ireland (through the NQAI) has been at the forefront in Europe in introducing and promoting the widespread use of a national framework of qualifications; almost all HEI awards are aligned to the NFQ and it was used for the section on ‘educational qualifications attained’ in the 2011 Irish census of population. The NFQ is referenced to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)<sup>37</sup> and to the Bologna Framework (BF)<sup>38</sup>. The BF is based on the ‘Dublin descriptors’, which indicate the learning outcomes to be associated with bachelors, masters and doctoral awards.

The Hunt Report<sup>39</sup> highlighted several themes and issues related to programme design and content that are of current national importance. Several of those themes were echoed during the consultation phase in the development of these guidelines. Such areas include:

- i. The importance of all graduates having a good range of generic skills (Hunt Report, page 35, and Teaching and Learning, Recommendation 6.).
- ii. The transformative potential of experiential (or authentic) learning, including service learning, work placements and periods at HEIs abroad (Hunt Report, pages 58–59).
- iii. The need for greater involvement of external stakeholders (including employers and graduates) as advisors at multiple levels, and particularly in the design and content of study programmes (Hunt Report, Engagement with the wider society, Recommendation 14, sub-point 4.).

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<sup>35</sup> See footnote 5 and appendix 2.

<sup>36</sup> *University Awards and the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ): Issues around the design of programmes and the use and assessment of learning outcomes* (2009); The University Sector Framework Implementation Network (FIN); Joint publication of the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the NQAI, Dublin.

<sup>37</sup> Full name: European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning.

<sup>38</sup> Full name: Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.

<sup>39</sup> See footnote 6.

- iv. Multiple replication of equivalent or similar study programmes across the HEI sector (Hunt Report, page 107).

However, although most of these are supported explicitly or implicitly throughout this document, they largely concern programme content (a wide area not directly pertinent here); or, because of limited internal resources or external constraints, are very difficult to implement on a large scale; or require sectoral as opposed to institutional change. For example, although much more can and should be done in this respect (and new communication tools may be vital aids), external persons who are or could be effective advisors are generally extremely busy and subject to abrupt changes of schedule; this limits their potential for influence in practice. In summary, these themes and issues are raised here to underline their importance and to stress the need for fresh approaches and innovations.

New programme development may be significantly facilitated if university policies and procedures are in line with published NQAI documents on 'Policies, actions and procedures for access, transfer and the progression of learners' (2003)<sup>40</sup> and on 'Principles and operational guidelines for the recognition of prior learning in further and higher education and training' (2005)<sup>41</sup>, or more recently 'Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the University Sector: Policies, case studies and issues arising'(2011).<sup>42</sup> The importance of RPL in relation to the need for "clear routes of progression and transfer" is also emphasised in the Hunt Report (Page 55 and Teaching and Learning, Recommendation 4<sup>43</sup>).

All universities now have supports in place as they seek to ensure that the university environment (academic and otherwise) is inclusive for students with disabilities and for international students. However, increasing emphasis is now being placed on greater depth in the consideration of teaching, learning and assessment methodologies and strategies for these students. AHEAD, the Association for Higher Education, Access and Disability, has published a charter on inclusive provision for students with disabilities and those from other minority groups <sup>44</sup> Likewise the Irish Higher Education Quality Network (IHEQN) publication on the provision of education to international students<sup>45</sup> should be taken into account, so that the needs of international students can be met from the time a new programmes starts, as opposed to 'fixes' being applied retrospectively. Consideration of the provision of education to international students is given particular attention in the legislative changes now being proposed for higher education. These provide specifically for the introduction of a code of practice for this area and for an international education mark to indicate that a provider is in compliance with the code<sup>46</sup>.

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40 *Policies, actions and procedures for access, transfer and the progression of learners* (2003); NQAI, Dublin.

41 *Principles and operational guidelines for the recognition of prior learning in further and higher education and training* (2005); NQAI, Dublin.

42 *Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the University Sector: Policies, case studies and issues arising* (2011); The University Sector Framework Implementation Network (FIN); Joint publication of the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the NQAI, Dublin.

43 See footnote 6.

44 *Charter for Inclusive Teaching and Learning*; Association for Higher Education, Access and Disability (AHEAD) (2009); AHEAD Education Press, Dublin.

45 *Provision of Education to international students: code of practice and guidelines for Irish higher education institutions* (2009); Irish Higher Education Quality Network; Dublin, Ireland.

46 See footnote 2, specifically Part 5 of the Bill.



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## GUIDELINES (DESIGN AND APPROVAL OF NEW PROGRAMMES)

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- G.18.** Approval and accreditation are guided by a set of principles that encapsulate the university's ethos, the standards of its awards, the desired generic competences of graduates and relevant aspects of the vision, mission, strategic objectives, policies and reform timetables of the university.
- G.19.** Staff with ideas for new or revised study programmes are facilitated at all stages of the process by clear guidance documentation, access to relevant information, expert help and advice and efficient procedures (see Appendix 1.4 for supports etc. that could be useful).
- G.20.** University procedures for the approval of study programmes act largely to facilitate the development of new programmes and (as necessary) the enhancement of existing programmes, while ensuring high standards (Appendix 1.5 provides a list of possible ideas for consideration).
- G.21.** College/faculty and university procedures ensure that the design of new programmes is of a high standard, support alignment to the intended NFQ level and compliance with national and international standards for professional and legal recognition of graduates, and incorporate all relevant elements and provisions, and, as appropriate, allows for multiple options (see Appendix 1.6 for lists of possible requirements and options).
- G.22.** Proposers and evaluators of new programmes value and take into account appropriate external inputs at all levels and stages in the development of the programme, including from regulatory bodies (if appropriate), envisaged employers, relevant graduates, societal partners and academic/professional experts (see Appendix 1.7 for a more complete list of possible sources.).
- G.23.** The viability of proposed new study programmes is assured by an associated business plan that contains a range of stated assumptions and calculations that follow a prescribed format (see Appendix 1.8 for a list of possible assumptions).
- G.24.** Persons with a relevant conflict of interest do not participate in an approval decision.
- G.25.** There is a range of defined options to choose from, when requirements (if any) are specified for approval of a programme (see Appendix 1.9 for a list of possible options).
- G.26.** University procedures ensure compliance with requirements identified during the approval process.
- G.27.** Approval requires that a review of the new programme is carried out after a designated number of years.





## 4 Monitoring and enhancement

Effective monitoring includes many aspects, informal and formal, numeric and descriptive, direct and by survey, module/teacher- or programme-focused, and related to student and graduate experience. However, there can be no definitive list of essential methods and channels, and overly onerous or intrusive monitoring may be as bad as, or worse than, doing nothing. In any case, monitoring is simply a very important support to good programme management. Nevertheless, collecting, assessing, and always acting on students' feedback, when appropriate, and always reporting back (even to following cohorts of students), form the core of effective programme monitoring.

The monitoring of the outcomes of study programmes (and of modules) by external examiners is a long-established feature of systems for assuring the quality of study programmes in the Irish universities. External examiners are charged with assuring the maintenance of standards, ensuring that examination regulations are upheld and that students are treated fairly. Given that the Irish universities' external examiner system is derived from that in the UK and that many of the examiners are from UK universities, changes and developments that have occurred or are being considered in the UK are highly relevant. In 2011, 'Universities UK' issued a relevant report and recommendations<sup>47</sup> and HETAC has also issued relevant guidelines<sup>48</sup>. Such is the perceived importance of this system, the Hunt Report (Teaching and Learning, recommendation 7, sub-point 2) called for "a comprehensive and independent review [ ] of the external examiner system and the grading system more generally".<sup>49</sup> In the meantime, as well as the above HETAC and Universities UK documents, the relevant guideline (opposite) and the supplementary sub-guidelines in Appendix 1 (section 1.12) may be useful.

Each university should also have (outside the normal feedback mechanisms) a clearly advertised formal complaints procedure that any student can use at any time when s/he is experiencing serious issues with a study programme.

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<sup>47</sup> *Review of external examining arrangements in universities and colleges in the UK: Final report and recommendations* (2011); Universities UK.

<sup>48</sup> *Effective practice guidelines for external examining* (2010); HETAC, Dublin.

<sup>49</sup> See footnote 6.

Effective monitoring leads to ongoing, informed change and enhancement when this is necessary, ensuring that programmes remain up-to-date with current thinking, practices and research advances within the relevant discipline(s), and are adapted to take into account the developing external environment. Small changes should be easy to implement, but when proposed changes are more substantial, it may be appropriate that the revised programme be processed through the normal programme approval system, perhaps via a 'fast-track' process.





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## GUIDELINES (MONITORING AND ENHANCEMENT)

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- G.28.** All study programmes are monitored routinely to a sufficient degree, and in just sufficient detail, to assure the quality of their management, teaching, learning assessments and the student experience.
- G.29.** Programme boards and programme co-ordinators are the primary agents responsible for monitoring and enhancement (see Appendix 1.10 for some procedures and processes that may be needed for effective monitoring).
- G.30.** A variety of monitoring procedures and channels are used that, in combination, are sufficient to provide assurance of quality and identify where changes to programmes (and how they are delivered) may be needed or desirable (see Appendix 1.11 for a wide range of options).
- G.31.** Focused monitoring activities are undertaken for all substantial collaborative provisions nationally or internationally, with reporting to both the host institution and the associated institutions.
- G.32.** University and college/faculty systems minimise the workloads associated with monitoring and reporting; for example, data and information are collected and processed just once and are readily available in suitable formats.
- G.33.** Training, guidance, templates, support and back-up to facilitate feedback from students and other monitoring methods are provided centrally.
- G.34.** Students are assured of the preservation of their anonymity when contributing to surveys, regardless of the format used (paper or on-line) to elicit feedback.
- G.35.** The university has regulations, guidelines and supporting documentation (including templates for reports etc.) that define generically the roles and responsibilities of external examiners, and minimum standards for their appointment and their reports. These allow for flexibility, and differences between disciplines (See Appendix 1.12 for some areas that might be included).
- G.36.** There are regulations and procedures governing improvements and changes to study programmes that facilitate enhancements while preserving academic integrity and protecting students' interests (see Appendix 1.13 for one approach to how this might be done).
- G.37.** Programme co-ordinators and boards monitor closely the impact of implemented changes on student workloads, timelines and general experience, particularly with respect to changes to modules that are shared between programmes.

- G.38.** Annual reports by programme boards include sufficient information to allow higher management levels to identify recurring issues as well as important isolated issues (including examples of exemplary practice) (see Appendix 1.14 for a list of data and information that could be included, and also Appendix 1.3).
- G.39.** Students have access to a formal university student complaints process that is separate from routine feedback mechanisms, and information about this process is made available to all students.



## 5 Periodic review

Within the very broad requirements of the Universities Act, 1997<sup>50</sup>, the Irish universities have developed collectively a holistic and successful approach to quality assessment and enhancement. This is focused on self-assessment and involves staff, students, external experts and the major stakeholders, thereby ensuring broad participation and public accountability, and facilitating comparisons with international norms. (This approach will also inform any new quality assurance procedures developed in response to any new Act that arises from the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Bill 2011*<sup>51</sup>). For academic units, a holistic approach means that planning and management, resources and facilities, teaching and research, monitoring and feedback, the experience of students and staff, are all considered; and any of these may be the subject of recommendations. This ensures that contextual factors determining quality in general and the student experience are always taken into account.

The ESG standard 1.2<sup>52</sup> states that “Institutions should have formal mechanisms for the [ ] periodic review [ ] of their programmes and awards” and the associated guideline is “The quality assurance of programmes and awards are expected to include: regular periodic reviews of programmes (including external panel members)”. Therefore, by means of the above systems, Irish universities are formally in compliance with the ESG.

However, since 1997, all of the universities have reformed their academic structures to a greater or lesser extent; now, instead of up to 90 or more academic departments, all have smaller numbers of ‘schools’ in fewer colleges/faculties. This has had — in some universities — the effect of reducing greatly the numbers of reviews of academic units. Thematic reviews, for example of ‘the first year student experience’, or with a focus on research, are now more feasible and common. However, with reviews of larger academic units, it is often extremely difficult in practice for sufficient time or expertise to be focused on each of the associated academic programmes.

For programmes of study, periodic formal reviews have specific and important roles to play because they:

- i. Have a formality and focus that facilitate critical self-assessment by programme co-ordinator and board, by college/faculty and by university management.
- ii. Provide an opportunity for an overall evaluation, with a range of inputs and analyses that would be impractical otherwise.
- iii. Provide assurance to the college/faculty, university, students and external stakeholders and, when necessary, facilitate large-scale change to, or discontinuation of, a programme.

While some universities have been reviewing individual academic programmes for many years, any system that sets out to review periodically all denominated programmes including large omnibus

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<sup>50</sup> See footnote 1.

<sup>51</sup> See footnote 2.

<sup>52</sup> See footnote 5 and appendix 2.

programmes (such as BA, BSc, BComm or a two-subject moderatorship programme) faces a formidable challenge, but one that can be overcome by “limiting data collection, reports and committees to what is absolutely necessary”<sup>53</sup>. Possibilities include:

- i. Programme management systems could facilitate combined reviews of cognate programmes.
- ii. Monitoring could inform and contribute substantially to review processes.
- iii. External accreditation reviews could be seen as complementary and largely satisfying university requirements.
- iv. Relevant data and information could be readily available in suitable formats from central sources.
- v. Review procedures could be sufficiently flexible to take account of a range of possible ‘intensities’ and modes of review, depending on the outcomes of monitoring procedures.
- vi. Reviews of academic units and academic support units could be carried out so as to take account of the occurrence of reviews of related study programmes, to ensure complementarity with such reviews and to avoid duplication or ‘review fatigue’.

The above list of options cannot be exhaustive and other approaches to the regular review of programmes that are of sufficient depth and rigour may be entirely fit for purpose and acceptable, provided they can be shown to meet the quality assurance requirements of the university and of the proposed QQA<sup>54</sup>. As quoted above, the only explicit requirement of the ESG is the participation of ‘external panel members’.

It is also impossible to recommend a universal or normal interval between reviews of a programme. Programme cycles themselves vary between less-than-one to six years, and this should largely determine the interval. But so also could a ‘decision mechanism’ influenced by the outcomes of thorough annual monitoring and reporting processes. In addition, where applicable, the agreed frequencies of reviews by external regulatory bodies should be respected, and internal processes aligned with them. However, intervals of longer than seven to eight years for internally-initiated reviews could be difficult to justify.

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<sup>53</sup> See footnote 14.

<sup>54</sup> See footnote 2.



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## GUIDELINES (PERIODIC REVIEW)

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- G.40.** University policies and regulations regard 'monitoring' and 'periodic review' of programmes as complementary processes that, together, assure students and external stakeholders of the continued fitness for purpose and relevance of its study programmes to students, employers and society. Periodic reviews of programmes take place at agreed intervals and all associated review reports and action plans are made easily available to internal and external stakeholders.
- G.41.** The university has defined criteria, regulations and guidelines requiring and governing procedures for programme review, that ensure effectiveness and efficiency, and that result in the recommendations arising being discussed, evaluated and acted upon (Appendix 1.15 outlines some options for review processes).
- G.42.** Procedures for reviews of collaborative study programmes are agreed with the participating partners and satisfy the normal requirements of the university for programme reviews.
- G.43.** Reviews by external professional accrediting organisations inform the internal programme review processes. The associated review reports and action plans are considered, processed and monitored as for internally-organised programme reviews.
- G.44.** Reviews of large omnibus programmes with multiple subjects and choices (e.g. leading to awards of BA or BSc) have a focus on the overall structure as it affects student experiences, graduate suitability for employment or further study. They also consider any implications for the standard of the common award (Appendix 1.16 lists some areas that may be relevant to such reviews).
- G.45.** A group of cognate programmes administered by a single programme board is normally reviewed together.
- G.46.** If substantial issues arise, the senior academic officer, with the approval of academic council, may commission at any time a full review of any particular study programme.
- G.47.** The university's system of reviews of academic support services and, in particular, of academic units such as of schools or colleges/faculties is operated so as to complement reviews of study programmes. (Appendix 1.17 further discusses this issue).





# Appendix 1 (EXPANDED GUIDELINES)

To enhance the readability of the main sections above, where a guideline justified a set of sub-guidelines or a list of options, it is repeated here below with the extra text.

## ***Roles, responsibilities and regulations***

- 1.1. [G.11] University policies, regulations and procedures governing and related to the approval, monitoring, periodic review, improvement and discontinuation of study programmes are fit for purpose and up to date.

Good sets of regulations are short, clear but sufficiently comprehensive to cover the wide range of situations that are standard or may easily arise.

- i. Ownership and responsibility for inter-disciplinary programmes are ensured by requirements that they are assigned (for defined terms) to one academic unit, be it a department, school or college/faculty. Each also has a programme board and a designated co-ordinator who is given the necessary transversal authority.
- ii. Regulations and procedures exist to ensure that the same university standards apply to programmes in linked providers (and in any overseas campuses or colleges<sup>55</sup>) that result in awards by the university.
- iii. Regulations and procedures covering collaborative programmes with external HEIs/bodies allow for the negotiation of specific arrangements that meet university standards; for example, differences in module credit assignments and transferability of grades.
- iv. Where study programmes are subject to accreditation by external professional bodies, the university's regulations specify that internal accreditation is also required (and formally takes precedence) to ensure compliance with university standards and objectives. To avoid unnecessary duplication, internal accreditation may recognise and correspond in very large part with the externally-initiated process.
- v. Regulations and procedures allow for the discontinuation of study programmes while protecting the interests of relevant students.
- vi. University policies, regulations and procedures are revised periodically against national and international requirements and standards, against comparisons with selected 'competitors' and, not least, with inputs from staff, student representatives and other stakeholders. There are also defined mechanisms that ensure that the necessary changes are made in statutes, policy documents, regulations and procedures when this is required by decisions of governing authority or academic council.

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<sup>55</sup> See also footnote 34.

- 1.2. [G.15] Study programmes are supervised and managed by means of systems that ensure explicit ownership, individual responsibility and collegial oversight.

Clearly, there are many models that could be highly effective. Most Irish universities have some of the elements in this possible model.

- i. For every study programme there is a programme co-ordinator and a programme board. Normally, each programme has its own co-ordinator who is a designated member of academic staff. A suite of related or cognate programmes may have a single oversight board.
- ii. Large omnibus programmes with multiple subjects and choices (e.g. leading to awards of BA or BSc) also have a programme board (separate from the college/faculty council) and a designated co-ordinator (who may be a dean or a designated academic officer) to ensure effective oversight of the entire programme. There are also members of academic staff designated as co-ordinators at subject and/or year levels (as numbers of students require).
- iii. The membership of programme boards is representative of the subjects and specialties taken by the students and of contributing staff. For boards responsible for multiple programmes, all co-ordinators are members. For large omnibus programmes, membership is representative of the subject/year co-ordinators. Where appropriate and feasible, boards have external members representing the employers of graduates. The terms of reference, duties and normal schedule of meetings for all boards are broadly equivalent across the university.
- iv. Programme co-ordinators are foci for the students taking their programmes, are responsible for the routine management of programmes, and have sufficient authority to ensure the compliance of contributing staff. The associated workloads of co-ordinators are recognised in the assessment of their total workloads, and their performance and contributions are taken into account explicitly when promotions are being considered.
- v. The inter-relationships, roles, responsibilities, reporting lines, and procedures for the appointment, terms of office and length of service of programme boards and co-ordinators are defined. They are explicit and clear in relation to the roles and responsibilities of subject or department heads and can be readily understood by staff and students.





- 1.3. [G.16] The senior academic officer submits an annual report to academic council on the performance of the university's study programmes.

The mechanism for the collation of such reports will differ from university to university; in some, they may be informed directly by individual programme reports. In others, the institution-wide report may be informed mainly by college/faculty level reports. The 'quality office' or/and 'institutional research function' could be directly involved. Whatever the method, the annual report should inform members of council of the university's academic performance — including trends and relevant issues such as:

- i. The collective and cross-college/faculty comparative performances of the university's study programmes (including data related to viability and student performance) with comments on any relevant areas of concern.
- ii. Important and recurring issues arising from the monitoring of individual programmes, and associated actions.
- iii. Short summary reports of reviews of study programmes.
- iv. Progress with the attainment of relevant strategic objectives and relevant data on important trends.
- v. Issues arising related to compliance with, and the effectiveness of, the university's mechanisms for programme approval, monitoring and review.

### Design & approval of new programmes

- 1.4 [G.19] Staff with ideas for new or revised study programmes are facilitated at all stages of the process by clear documentation, information, expert help and advice and efficient procedures.

Among the seven universities, there are many examples of good practices and documentation to support the introduction of new study programmes. This list summarises some of them:

- i. Clear information is readily available to facilitate staff who identify an opportunity, including 'what to do first', requirements to show need and viability, stages and timelines, sources of advice, when external accreditation is necessary or beneficial, the roles of departments/schools and colleges/faculties, and templates for use when making an initial submission and when designing a programme.
- ii. Specifically, information and expert advice is available on how to gather information and build an argument in support of financial viability and the attainment of strategic objectives.

- iii. The centre for teaching and learning (or another university function) ensures access to information, provides supports, advice and training on modern programme design, modes of delivery, module design, ECTS and notional learning hours<sup>56</sup>, learning outcomes (including how to build towards the achievement of the overall learning outcomes of the programme and the associated standards of the intended award), teaching and assessment strategies, and on novel options in the facilitation of active learning.

1.5 [G.20] University procedures for the approval of study programmes act largely to facilitate the development of new programmes, and (as necessary) the enhancement of existing programmes, while ensuring high standards.

Approval procedures could easily become overly onerous and act as a serious brake on academic innovation.

- i. Duplication of effort across successive stages is minimised by the use of corresponding structures and terminology for *prima facie* and formal application stages.
- ii. The length of time necessary for approval and internal accreditation, and for each stage, the related timelines and the schedules for approval meetings are such that academic staff, in general, are facilitated. Normally, it is feasible for a new programme to commence within one year of a preliminary proposal, or 18 months when offered through the Central Applications Office (CAO) system. If necessary, to meet governmental or statutory regulatory body requirements, fast approval is possible but with adjustments and extra features to ensure the rigour and robustness of the process.
- iii. Generalities are standardised across and within colleges/faculties but procedures have options that allow flexibility for differences between disciplines.
- iv. When external/professional accreditation is to be sought, the internal procedures ensure thorough oversight with regard to institutional standards and objectives, while avoiding unnecessary duplication.
- v. Well-designed supporting documentation/web pages facilitate proposers and promote commonality. Answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs) are provided and specimen examples of completed applications or of more technical sections are available.
- vi. Each college/faculty has a designated officer with a well-recognised brief to support proposers of new programmes, including liaising between schools/departments

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<sup>56</sup> See 'Principles and operational guidelines for the implementation of a national approach to credit in Irish higher education and training' (2006); NQAI, Dublin.



and with other colleges/faculties when a cross-disciplinary programme is being considered and developed.

- vii. The university has a designated officer with the expertise and resources to advise and facilitate proposers at all stages, including completing applications, understanding policies, procedures and their implications, applying or adapting marks and standards and dealing with the issue of special requirements when collaborative programmes are being proposed.

- 1.6 [G.21] College/faculty and university procedures ensure that the design of new programmes is of a high standard, support alignment to the intended NFQ level and compliance with national and international standards for professional and legal recognition of graduates, and incorporate all relevant elements and provisions and, as appropriate, allows for multiple options.

The design of study programmes has become progressively more sophisticated; it must take many standards into account as well as requirements for relevant generic skills to prepare students for work, life and active citizenship, and can involve extensive documentation.

- i. The design of all programmes (including shared modules) is tested carefully (with student inputs) to ensure that modules contribute sufficiently to the learning outcomes for the whole programme, and are fit for purpose with respect to content, level and the stage of the programme at which they are offered.
- ii. A clear programme description, descriptions for each module, co-ordinated intended learning outcomes, and explicit teaching/learning assessment strategies serve to ensure the achievement of the final learning outcomes for the whole study programme as well as for each module.
- iii. When appropriate, the detailed requirements of external professional and regulatory bodies, and any relevant national and international standards and regulations for professional and legal recognition of graduates, are taken into consideration.
- iv. Programme learning outcomes are aligned with the relevant award standard of the NFQ and to the award type descriptors.
- v. University policies and procedures, guidelines and supports that are in place for the development of learning outcomes and the use of ECTS take cognisance of relevant national and international guidelines<sup>57</sup>.
- vi. When inter-disciplinary programmes are being developed, careful attention is paid to any differences in the use of ECTS credits, especially when external collaborative provisions are involved.

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<sup>57</sup> See footnote 36 for one useful resource centred on learning outcomes; for ECTS, see the *ECTS Users Guide* (2009), Education and Culture DG, Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Belgium.

- vii. Requirements for placements or years abroad, and provisions for the care and monitoring of relevant students are explicit, as are provisions for the recognition of credits (and/or arrangements for assessments) for such programme elements.
- viii. Entry requirements, including provisions for access or transfers, are defined.
- ix. Programme design takes account of matters related to facilitating student access, transfer and progression, as well as (and as appropriate) the requirements of students with special needs, international students, other special categories of students and of different modes of delivery (e.g. full-time, part-time, distance-learning, e-learning).
- x. Progression and possible career paths, including options for professional membership or recognition, are made clear.
- xi. Care is taken to ensure that the format and language used in all documentation (especially when it may be used eventually in items available to potential and current students) is appropriate, clear and free from jargon.

Options that may also need to be taken into account or allowed for:

- » Recognition of prior learning.
- » Transfers (mid-programme) to/from other programmes.
- » Exiting the programme at an earlier stage with an alternative award.

1.7

[G.22] Proposers and evaluators of new programmes value and take into account appropriate external inputs at all levels and stages in the development of the programme, including from regulatory bodies (if appropriate), envisaged employers, relevant graduates, societal partners and academic/professional experts.

Taking account of the multiple perspectives of a range of stakeholders is essential to ensure appropriate programme content and design — including as appropriate and feasible:

- i. If relevant, the independent regulator that will have statutory responsibility for (external) accreditation of the planned new study programme.
- ii. Envisaged employers of graduates.
- iii. Business, industrial and other societal partners of the college/faculty.
- iv. External examiners for cognate or equivalent programmes.
- v. Graduates of cognate or related programmes, particularly those with over-lapping or equivalent employment destinations.
- vi. A comparative study (benchmarking) of the curricula and other features of a reasonable number of equivalent (or as near equivalent as is feasible) programmes



offered in HEIs in Ireland and overseas (In many accreditation procedures in Ireland and worldwide, this is an essential element.)

- vii. (An) external expert assessor(s) who is/are independent of the university. The university sees this as a key element in the formal approval process.

1.8

[G.23] The viability of proposed new study programmes is assured by an associated business plan that contains a range of stated assumptions and calculations that follow a prescribed format.

Each new programme is a venture and proposals for new programmes should take this into account explicitly.

- i. Evidence that sufficient students will be attracted and that graduates will have career opportunities.
- ii. A timeline for when it is expected that the programme will become financially viable is indicated.
- iii. Where existing resources are to be used, there is evidence that a sufficient range of specialists and spare capacity exist, or rationales for expansion are included.
- iv. All extra resources — human, equipment, buildings etc. — are costed by means of supplied unit norms or official quotations.
- v. Evidence is included that relevant central services (e.g. library, computer services, buildings office, human resources) have been consulted.
- vi. A marketing strategy is included in sufficient detail to demonstrate that it may be effective without raising unrealistic expectations.
- vii. Programmes may be approved with a proviso that they prove their academic validity and financial viability within a designated period.

1.9.

[G.25] There is a range of defined options to choose from when requirements (if any) are specified for approval of a programme.

Having a set list of options may aid clarity, such as:

- i. Approved.
- ii. Approved if specified elements are changed and validated.
- iii. Issues listed must be re-submitted at a specified stage of the approval process.
- iv. Requires substantial re-design and may be resubmitted.
- v. Not approved for specified reasons.

## ***Monitoring and enhancement***

- 1.10. [G.29] Programme boards and programme co-ordinators are the primary agents responsible for monitoring and enhancement.

Programme boards provide support and oversight to programme co-ordinators. To be effective, they need clear guidelines and they need to place the emphasis on student learning and likely graduate success.

- i. Records of proceedings are maintained, classes/students always receive reports on significant issues that emerge in feedback, and all related action items are tracked until they are resolved or otherwise formally responded to.
- ii. Easily solvable issues are identified informally and are addressed as early as is feasible during each semester/term.
- iii. Programme boards have access to data arising from all modules of the programme (survey outcomes [including for service modules], grade distribution data, progression rates etc.).
- iv. Boards can delegate responsibilities and powers to co-ordinators to ensure timely responses to issues that may arise.
- v. Specific meetings, or sufficient dedicated time, is devoted to the consideration of monitoring outputs (grade profiles and comparative data, external examiner reports, survey results, performance and trend data etc.), feedback from employers (perhaps augmented by the opinions of employers who are board members), and the consideration and approval of (annual) reports to school/department or college/faculty.
- vi. Students, or the next cohort of students, are kept updated on progress and actions arising from student feedback.

- 1.11. [G.30] A variety of monitoring procedures and channels are used that, in combination, are sufficient to provide assurance of quality and identify where changes to programmes (and how they are delivered) may be needed.

The long list of possible channels and procedures below indicates that for monitoring to be adequate, effective and efficient, it should be based on a combination of centrally-supplied data and locally implemented channels (student representatives) and methods. The following may serve as effective monitoring tools:

- i. Programme boards that value two-way communication acting on behalf of students and staff.
- ii. Class and/or year student representatives on programme boards.
- iii. Student-staff committees with defined terms of reference that may be 'owned' by the students.



- iv. Senior officers of the students' union acting on behalf of student representatives or of individual students.
- v. Student surveys and other methods to assess individual teachers/modules.
- vi. Student surveys periodically and at graduation, and statistics or other methods to assess whole study programmes and student experience.
- vii. Surveys or other methods to assess all service teaching/modules provided by staff/units that are separate from the units participating substantially in the provision of a programme.
- viii. Reports (with inputs from students, staff and employers) related to student placements, or study visits externally or abroad.
- ix. Feedback from individual students who do not complete programmes.
- x. Graduate or 'first destination' surveys.
- xi. Reports by external examiners.
- xii. Student numbers with relevant statistics on non-completion and examination performance. Numbers and performance indicators that indicate exceptions to acceptable/average standards or norms are highlighted.

- 1.12. [G.35] The university has regulations, guidelines and supporting documentation (including templates for reports etc.) that define generically the roles and responsibilities of external examiners, and minimum standards for their reports. These allow for flexibility, and differences between disciplines

While the external examiner system is, and has long been, deeply embedded as a quality assurance and enhancement element in the Irish universities, its evolution and enhancement has been largely piecemeal.

Regulations and procedures should ensure:

- i. The use of appropriate criteria for suitability and appointment of external examiners.
- ii. Minimum standards for what is expected of examiners, including intensity/level of scrutiny of processes and scripts, appropriate co-operation with internal examiners, participation in oral examinations, on-site visits and attendance at examination boards.
- iii. That all study programmes benefit in their entirety from the scrutiny of external examiners.
- iv. That where external examiners are concerned only with individual modules, they are aware that the module learning outcomes contribute to programme learning outcomes, of which they are also made aware.

- v. That examiners are able to assess the attainment of the intended learning outcomes against the appropriateness of the teaching and assessment methods in use.
- vi. That examiners are informed of any recent changes that may be relevant.
- vii. That longitudinal data on recent and (provisionally) current student performance is provided, including grade distributions and progression rates.
- viii. That examiners are supplied with documentation related to recommendations made in previous examiner reports, including actions undertaken to address them and, where applicable, outcomes.
- ix. That in exceptional circumstances, external examiners may raise issues of concern directly (and confidentially) with the university president.
- x. That examiners may be removed when necessary.

University regulations also define minimum standards for the reports of external examiners and for responses to these reports.

- » Templates (on-line where practicable) require comments/recommendations on all relevant areas, including comparability of standards, fairness and rigour, and relevance and currency of the syllabus and outcomes.
- » Except in exceptional circumstances, all reports by visiting external examiners are completed before their departure.
- » Reports are considered and, where appropriate, action is taken by the relevant programme boards and co-ordinators.
- » Student representatives on programmes boards and higher bodies have access to relevant external examiner reports and related summaries and reports.
- » Reporting mechanisms ensure awareness by (senior) responsible officers at all levels of important issues raised by external examiners, especially recurring or widespread issues; when necessary, appropriate action is taken without delay.

- 1.13 [G.36] There are regulations and procedures governing improvements and changes to study programmes that facilitate enhancements while preserving academic integrity and protecting students' interests.

One approach to making enhancements to programmes relatively easy while maintaining standards is to provide definitions of changes as 'major', 'minor' or 'routine', with procedures appropriate to each level, for example:

- i. 'Routine' changes can be made by the co-ordinator with the approval of the programme board.





- ii. 'Minor' changes are made following a defined procedure (see below).
- iii. 'Major' changes require a programme to be subjected to the same approval process as an entirely new programme, but with the possibility of a 'fast-track' option.
- iv. Current cohorts of students are consulted regularly, kept fully informed and protected from adverse effects as changes of any level or type are implemented. 'Major' changes apply only to cohorts of students yet to enter the programme, or, with student agreement, to cohorts yet to enter the academic years affected by the changes.

The regulations and procedures governing 'minor' changes to study programmes could require that:

- » Proposals for changes to individual modules are notified in advance to the board(s) of all programmes that incorporate the module(s) in question.
- » The inter-dependence of intended learning outcomes for whole programmes and their constituent modules is recognised as changes are considered, planned and approved.
- » Timelines for submission of proposals for changes facilitate fast and efficient processing.

- 1.14. [G.38] Annual reports by programme boards include sufficient information to allow higher management levels to identify recurring issues as well as important isolated issues (including examples of exemplary practice).

Important or recurring issues in these reports should inform an annual university-wide report to academic council (See 1.3 above). To aid comprehension and collation, the formats and main topics should conform to agreed models and remain relatively constant from year to year.

Relevant data and information could include:

- i. Student performance data, including graphs showing changes over recent years, with commentary.
- ii. Data on, or estimates of, student attendance, and other indicators of student engagement.
- iii. A summary of student feedback and actions taken in response to issues raised.
- iv. Actions taken in response to external examiner recommendations, if any.
- v. Where relevant, summaries of feedback from hosts and students on external experiences (e.g. placements) and from employers of graduates (if available), and actions taken in response to issues raised.

- vi. Trends (for up to five years) in demand for places on the programme and actions, improvements or changes seen as necessary.
- vii. A summary of improvements/progress since the previous year's report. Where there is objective evidence in support, examples of exemplary practice or outstanding performance by students or staff are also included.

### *Periodic review*

- 1.15. [G.41] The university has defined criteria, regulations and guidelines requiring and governing procedures for programme review, that ensure effectiveness and efficiency, and that result in the recommendations arising being discussed, evaluated and acted upon.

Elements that could be included are:

- i. A self-evaluation report (much of which may involve the collation of readily available data and reports arising from monitoring exercises) that is the responsibility of the programme co-ordinator and board. Documents related to the outcomes of the last review of the programme and of recent relevant units are attached or readily available.
- ii. A clear focus on a full re-assessment of the overall programme structure, curriculum, roles of constituent modules, the integration of learning outcomes, quality of teaching, and of the overall teaching, learning and assessment strategies in use.
- iii. Processes that (when taken together with monitoring processes) are sufficient and fit for purpose; review teams (always including external members) may be small and visits may be short, provided they are adequate for the essential items on a common specified agenda.
- iv. Support by the university through its relevant offices and units (academic administration, quality, institutional research, faculty office, teaching support unit, etc) and the provision of guidelines, templates and training, to ensure common standards, but with the flexibility necessary to accommodate the needs of diverse programmes.
- v. Guidelines for review reports provide for the inclusion of: an explicit assessment of the degree to which the programme succeeds in attaining its stated objectives; and ensures the inclusion of an accurate summary of student opinions, experience, performance and data on first destination 'careers'.



- 1.16. [G.44] Reviews of large omnibus programmes with multiple subjects and choices (e.g. leading to awards of BA or BSc) have a focus on the overall structure as it affects student experiences and graduate suitability for employment or further study. They also consider any implications for the standard of the common award.

Historically, most university awards were BA or BSc, or BA (Mod) with students not choosing (or qualifying for) a 'major' subject until their second or third year. This flexibility is greatly appreciated by many students and other sets of programmes can have similar characteristics. Numbers of entering students per year for these programmes are in the thousands, making them central to the general student experience in many universities. In some, they have already been the focus of specific reviews. Because of their size, and the inclusion of multiple subjects and associated 'departments', their review may need to take some specific issues into account that could include:

- i. CAO entry options, possibilities and mechanisms for transfers.
- ii. Numbers of subjects to be taken each year, provisions for teaching generic skills and cross-subject competences, subject choices, ECTS designations, disallowed subject combinations.
- iii. Specialist options, joint and single honours.
- iv. Subjects with student quotas and related regulations.
- v. Suitability of all possible overall programmes with respect to the standard of the common award.

- 1.17. [G.47] The university's system of reviews of academic support services and, in particular, of academic units such as of schools or colleges/faculties, is operated so as to complement reviews of study programmes.

Such reviews are relevant because:

- i. As teaching and examining are core activities, the self-assessment report of the unit normally includes at least an informative table of all academic offerings (including service teaching). Programme review reports and programme board reports may also be provided, or may be requested by the review panel. These, together with meetings with staff and students, allow assessment of the overall effectiveness of the unit under review with respect to the delivery of study programmes, and may bring important issues to light.
- ii. Issues related to the management of inter-disciplinary or joint study programmes (intra- and inter-university) may also arise.

- iii. The opinions of students on relevant general administration, the delivery of programmes and the general quality of teaching and related facilities are central to the process.
- iv. A review team may identify a particular study programme as needing a follow-up review or other specific measures.



## Appendix 2

### ***Part 1: European standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions.<sup>58</sup>***

#### **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.

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<sup>58</sup> See footnote 5.

## **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 that it 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 innovative 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.





## Appendix 3

### **Background to the initiative**

In keeping with IUQB's commitment to support and promote a culture of quality in Irish universities, the Board at its meeting of November 30th 2009 approved an initiative for the production of '*National guidelines of good practice for the approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards in Irish Universities*'.

Publications in the IUQB national guideline series reflect the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area<sup>59</sup> (ESG) and this initiative continues this tradition. The initiative was timely for the university sector, which sees responsibility for external quality assurance falling under the remit of a Government agency — 'Qualifications and Quality Assurance Ireland'.

This initiative provides a means for the IUQB and the universities, working together, to produce guidelines that support existing good practice (at institutional, national and international level) while also identifying opportunities for improvements which the universities can use to enhance their internal processes. National guidelines in this area exist for other sections of the HEI community in Ireland, such as those provided by HETAC<sup>60</sup>, and this initiative serves to bridge any perceived gap, while reflecting the particular needs of the university sector.

### **Aim and driving principles**

The aim of this process is to produce national guidelines of good practice in the approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards of Irish universities for which the universities and key stakeholders have a sense of ownership and responsibility, and which are seen as both practical and supportive of high standards in the relevant processes and systems.

To achieve this, the process was guided by the following principles:

- i. The guidelines will be drafted, based on input from agreed constituencies in the higher education sector and from selected experts, in such a manner as to promote and maximise institutional ownership.
- ii. The style and substance of the guidelines will promote the attainment and maintenance of high standards within Irish universities and will be supportive of a culture of continual enhancement in the approval, monitoring and review of programmes and awards while facilitating institution-specific requirements that may arise.
- iii. Each contributing institution will participate in the process to a degree that is sufficient to ensure smooth development of the guidelines and (in line with best international practice) their suitability for their institution.

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<sup>59</sup> See footnotes 4 and 5.

<sup>60</sup> Various documents in this area are available on the HETAC web site of [www.hetac.ie](http://www.hetac.ie).

- iv. Each contributing institution recognises the importance of their institution having policies, regulations and procedures that are in harmony with the national guidelines.
- v. The approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards may form a part of any subsequent institutional review processes and may include consideration of the level of engagement of an institution with relevant national and international benchmarks.

### **Methodology**

The methodology used in this initiative centred on consultation with experts and key stakeholders with a view to establishing current good practices in Ireland and elsewhere. A range of activities were undertaken to achieve this objective.

#### **1. Project Chair and Secretariat Appointed**

Professor Jim Gosling was appointed to chair the Expert Panel meetings, to facilitate discussions held with key stakeholder groups in each of the universities, and to work with the IUQB Secretariat in the production of successive drafts of the guideline booklet for consideration by the Expert Panel, other stakeholders and during the final open consultation process.

Dr Teresa Lee, IUQB's Quality Enhancement Manager, was responsible for managing the initiative, for the collection and analyses of data and information on current practices in Ireland and elsewhere and for producing, in conjunction with the Chair, successive drafts of the booklet.

#### **2. Expert Panel Established**

An Expert Panel was established whose responsibilities were to:

- provide advice on the process to develop the guidelines, including an institutional questionnaire; and to
- provide input and advice on producing the national guidelines.

The Expert Panel met several times during the course of the initiative and was consulted at various stages of the initiative in the intervening period between these meetings.

#### **Membership of the Expert Panel was as follows:**

##### Chair

**Professor Jim Gosling**

##### Secretariat

**Dr Teresa Lee**, Quality Enhancement Manager (IUQB)



Dublin City University

**Ms Louise McDermott**, Assistant Registrar

Deputy - Ms Phylomena McMorrow, Director of Registry

NUI, Galway

**Professor Willie Golden**, Dean of College of Business, Public Policy & Law

Deputy - Mr Donnacha O'Connell, Lecturer in Law

NUI, Maynooth

**Dr Richard Watson**, Director of Quality

Deputy - Dr David Redmond, Registrar

Trinity College Dublin

**Dr Aileen Douglas**, Senior Lecturer, subsequently Professor Patrick Geoghan, Senior Lecturer,

Deputy - Ms Alex Anderson, Deputy Academic Secretary

University College Cork

**Ms Sharon Jones**, Academic Secretary and subsequently Ms Eleanor Fouhy

Deputy - Dr Norma Ryan, Director of Quality Promotion.

University College Dublin

**Dr Roy Ferguson**, Director of Quality

Deputy - Professor Jim Phelan, Dean of Agriculture

University of Limerick

**Mr Adrian Thomas**, Director of Quality

HEA

**Ms Mary Kerr**, Deputy Chief Executive

Deputy - Mr Fergal Costello

HETAC

**Dr Peter Cullen**, Head of Standards, Research and Policy Development Unit

Deputy - Ms Mary Sheridan, Head of Provider Monitoring.

NQAI

**Ms Trish O'Brien**, Head of Framework Implementation and Qualifications Recognition

Deputy - Ms Carmel Kelly, Project Officer

Union of Students of Ireland

**Mr Gary Redmond**, President (replaced his predecessor Mr Peter Mannion)

Deputy - Aengus Ó Maoláin, Education Officer

Irish Universities Association

**Mr Lewis Purser**, Director (Academic Affairs)

### **3. Institutional Questionnaire Administered**

IUQB developed institutional questionnaire/grids to help identify good practice that could be incorporated into the national guidelines and to establish current practices in the universities. The questionnaires covered the various areas associated with programme design and approval, monitoring and review, including information on practices and processes in place which related to bodies, officers and offices, and regulations and procedures.

The completed questionnaires from all seven universities were analysed and findings were used, together with findings from discussion group meetings held in each university (see below), to produce a sector-wide overview of university practices. The overview was used to inform the production of the guideline booklet.

### **4. Institutional Group Discussions Conducted**

The seven universities each hosted separate group discussions with three key stakeholder groups.

These groups comprised:

- i. Student representatives and Student Union members (nearly 40 participated in total)
- ii. Programme co-ordinators and academic members of staff involved in programme boards/committees (approximately 60 in total)
- iii. Senior management with institutional responsibility for programme approval/ monitoring/ review (approximately 60 in total)

During the course of the twenty-one focus groups' discussions held across the seven universities, students, student union members and staff from a range of disciplines and from various academic and administrative capacities participated. Discussions built on the information supplied by the university in the completed institutional questionnaire.

Outcomes from the discussion groups were compiled and analysed. Findings were used to inform the production of the sector-wide overview of practices; this overview was subsequently used to inform the guideline booklet.



## **5. Drafting of the Guidelines**

Several drafts of the guidelines were presented for consideration to the Expert Panel. Feedback and comments from the Panel were used to inform the drafting process.

## **6. External Experts Appointed**

Experts from across Europe with wide experience and knowledge of academic management and operations, and particularly of programme approval, monitoring and review practices, were invited to review a draft of the guideline booklet with feedback used to inform the booklet.

### **External Experts:**

Ms Sarah Butler, Special Advisor, Academic Quality, University of Sussex.

Professor Jacques Lanarès, Vice Recteur, Valorisation & Qualité, Université de Lausanne

Professor Denise McAlister, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning), University of Ulster.

## **7. Pre-publication Consultation Exercise Undertaken**

A pre-publication draft of the national guidelines of good practice was presented in an open consultation exercise, with the draft also distributed to key stakeholders for feedback. Feedback received was used to inform the publication.

## **8. Publication of Booklet**

National guidelines of good practice were published.











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