

1 Additional information on Accountability Procedures: March 2009

The ‘additional information’ here is structured around the vision, actions and opportunities for improvement identified in the HETAC Self-Evaluation Report (for the 2006 External Review of HETAC). [...] ¹ Here the current accountability-related activity is reported under the boxed quotations from the 2006 Self Evaluation Report.

Additional information on the Vision Items

HETAC will have established a management system based around key processes. The internal quality assurance system will sustain strengths, identify areas for improvement, monitor performance against operational targets and provide the information required by external quality assurance auditors and reviewers.

- HETAC appointed a new Chief Executive Officer in September 2008. The new CEO initiated a review of the HETAC executive’s operations and personnel assignments. A substantial restructuring followed. [...] The principal functions remain essentially the same as before. [The restructured organisation has three divisions leading to increased organisational coherence.]
- The new structure is based around the key processes and took full effect in February 2009.
- A formal Performance Management and Development System (PMDS) has been built into the new structure and is operating. The PMDS approach involves setting specific personal duties and responsibilities and targets for every member of staff and monitoring performance against those targets.
- The coordinated internal quality assurance of EQA processes is provided for: under the PMDS system the following responsibility has been assigned to heads of functional areas:
 - *All Heads of Function to agree internal QA procedures with the Standards, Research and Policy Development unit and collaborate with it in the operation of the Internal QA system*
- The Standards, research and Policy Development Unit in particular is responsible for
 - *Codification and modelling of internal processes and flows—procedural manual and flow-diagrams—gap analysis and identification of anomalies;*
 - *Enhancement and maintenance of an internal QA system meeting ENQA’s requirements (ESG)*
 - *Monitoring the quality of the operation of HETAC’s external quality procedures (running audit)*
 - *Randomly surveying panels and users of HETAC services*
 - *Reporting to the Audit Committee (via the Internal Auditor)*
- The HETAC Audit Committee is a key part of its accountability infrastructure. Its first Charter was approved in 2004. The charter was reviewed and modified in April 2007. The role of the Audit Committee is, as part of the ongoing systematic review of the control environment and governance procedures within HETAC, to report to and advise the CEO and the Council on internal control and audit matters. It also has a role in promoting good accounting practices, ensuring better and more informed decision-making and improved focus on value for money throughout the organisation. The Audit Committee is required to

¹ Minor edits for clarity were introduced in July 2009 and are indicated by [].

also oversee the internal audit function and advise the Council in relation to the operation and development of that function.

- The Internal Audit Charter was adopted in 2007. The following extract explains its purpose.

MISSION

To assist management by evaluating existing internal controls and offer recommendations for improvement. Internal Audit is also available for consultation to provide advice on changing or implementing new internal control procedures.

OBJECTIVES

- *To provide assurance on the adequacy of control within HETAC's systems and activities:*
 - *to comment on and recommend changes to the mechanisms put in place by management to ensure systems and activities achieve their objectives;*
 - *to follow up the implementation of agreed actions;*
 - *to bring deficiencies therein to the notice of the operating management and ultimately the Audit Committee.*
- *To facilitate the annual risk analysis.*
- *To carry out such audit, investigation and review work as may be requested by the Audit Committee.*
- *To liaise through the Audit Committee with the Comptroller and Auditor General to ensure that assurance from both internal and external resources is provided cost effectively.*
- *To advise management on cost effective controls for new systems and activities.*
- *To highlight opportunities to reduce costs through greater economy and efficiency within systems and activities.*
- *When necessary challenge the conventional thinking/mindset.*

SCOPE OF WORK

Internal Audit work will cover all systems and activities in all areas in HETAC, both currently existing and under development. Work will be prioritised according to risk, and the direction of the Audit Committee.

The excellence of the corporate governance and performance of the functions of HETAC will be assured by internal quality improvement processes and will have been measured by external accreditation.

- In 2006 HETAC conducted a Self-Evaluation for the purpose of external review by ENQA and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland. This review identified areas for improvement and HETAC has addressed the key areas.
- A draft Risk management Policy has been developed. [The policy is now finalised and adopted it is no longer a draft policy.] A risk management process has been running since 2008. The process is facilitated by the Internal Auditor. The (ten member) HETAC Senior Management Group coordinates the identification and quantification of risks and the establishment of appropriate controls and/or corrective actions and responsibilities. Identified risks are continually monitored.

Additional information on the Action Items

Key processes will be identified and documented.

- A list of over 100 documented processes [processes here includes policies and internal operational processes etc.] has been compiled and is being maintained as new processes are developed and older ones are reviewed or replaced. The responsibility for maintaining this list falls with the Standards, Research and Policy Development Unit (SRPU).
- Further processes will be documented as part of the continuing development and enhancement of the IQA system.

A formal self-assessment process for quality enhancement will be established.

- The Self-Assessment Process for the ENQA review has addressed this action point at an institutional level. The work of the Audit Committee and Internal Auditor address it at a corporate level.
- The restructuring of the HETAC executive and specifically the introduction of a PMDS system have provided tools for this kind of enhancement-oriented self-assessment to be undertaken at the level of the individual staff-member.
- It is planned that each new unit (created following the restructuring) will develop a set of internal quality procedures which integrate the procedures which are already in place facilitate institutional-level coordination and monitoring.

A system will be established for undertaking internal quality improvement evaluations on a random selection basis.

- Provision has been made for this (the task has been assigned to the Standards, Research and Policy Development Unit) with effect from February 2009. Such random reviews will be established in due course.

The approach in each functional area will be subject to assessment and review towards the enhancement of quality.

- The General Management of HETAC following restructuring (as outlined above) addresses this.

Research into the impact of HETAC's activities on the existing standards and quality of higher education and training provision will be undertaken.

- HETAC undertakes relevant research which seeks to shed light on its impact through understanding how higher education institutions (and their students/graduates) are performing in certain respects. For example:
 - In 2008 HETAC contributed a sectoral report to the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland Framework Implementation and Impact Study.
 - Annually HETAC undertakes a 'First Destinations Survey' i.e. it find out what graduates are doing at springtime following graduation. HETAC provides data to the Higher Education Authority which combines them with data from the universities and publishes a national report. HETAC feeds back institutional reports to participating providers.
 - Two major research projects are currently underway one aims to assess the change in generic skills attributable to higher education and training, the other is a survey of honours bachelor degree engineering graduates and their employers.

Additional information on the Opportunities for Improvement Items

Introduce a post-evaluation feedback questionnaire to be completed by expert panel members;

- This is being done on a systematic basis in some key areas (Research Approval/Accreditation since summer 2008 and Institutional Review from the outset) and these is being extended to other areas which employ expert panels.
- In the past *ad hoc* surveys have been undertaken for example in preparation for the review in 2006.
- Institutional Review is HETAC's most elaborate external quality procedure—a cycle of Institutional Reviews started in December 2008. The institutional review process gathers feedback from those involved for the purpose of continual improvement of the process and criteria. It uses questionnaires and other mechanisms including telephone interviews with panel members to gather information from expert panel members. It is planned to obtain feedback from each institution following completion of its review process.

Extend the formal no-conflict-of-interest mechanism to all areas;

- The current guideline is entitled 'Participating in an evaluation panel as an expert assessor: a Guideline' which was formally adopted by Council on 16 February 2009 and is published on HETAC's website. This covers all expert panel members.

[Addendum (July 2009): Higher Education exemplifies a culture of public service in many dimensions of its activities. One specific example is the generous participation of specialists in peer panels for the common good of education providers, their learners and society at large. This element of service to society is part of the essential mission inherent in higher education.

With the growth in the provision and diversity of higher education and training and the changes in demands of public governance, the use of peer panels in evaluation exercises has grown. The assistance of specialists working in a collegial manner in the conduct of evaluations and reviews is regarded as valuable and effective in ensuring standards and the validity of education provision. The review of panel membership, and policies and procedures around their population has received particular focus in HETAC during 2008/09.

During 2009 HETAC approved a revision of a document providing ethical guidance to persons serving on HETAC panels entitled Participating in evaluation panels as expert assessors: Guidelines. This has been followed during the year by the introduction of another process and a related document, Procedure to recruit and appoint persons to an evaluation panel. This new procedure identifies clear criteria for the appointment of persons to panels, and in addition establishes a process to maintain a register of specialists on an ongoing basis. This introduction of a formal register is being combined with a formal process for its population which has been implemented for the first time during early to mid Summer 2009. The procedure makes provision for the updating of the register on both an ongoing basis, and also at defined intervals.]

Implement an internal feedback mechanism;

- The restructuring of HETAC and the recently established PMDS system provides the structures that encourage and facilitate this.
- The Risk Management Policy is also relevant.

Publish a policy for the assurance of the quality of HETAC on the website.

- [... This document will be published on the HETAC website.]