

Review of the performance by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council of its functions by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

- 1 The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (hereafter referred to as the Authority) appointed a Panel Chaired by Professor William J Smyth, President Emeritus of the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, to review the performance of the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) with particular reference to its principal statutory functions as contained in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. The Panel was also asked to consider the extent to which, in performing these functions, HETAC complied with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. The Panel's full Terms of Reference, Protocol and Membership are contained in Appendices 1 and 2.

Review process

- 2 Panel members attended a briefing in the offices of the Authority on 7 March 2006. (The Chairman of the Panel and one Panel member joined by video conference link). The Chief Executive and representatives of the Authority and HETAC provided briefings on their respective organisations, as did the President of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, Peter Williams. Following this, the Panel drew up a programme of on-site meetings involving almost 80 people including: the Chairman and members of the HETAC Board, the HETAC Chief Executive and a number of his staff; representatives of a range of higher education institutions served by HETAC; representatives of key stakeholders, including the Authority; a selection of reviewers (including student reviewers) used by HETAC; and learners in institutions which had been given delegated authority by HETAC to grant awards, or whose programmes had been approved by HETAC. These meetings were held in the Dublin offices of HETAC between 27 and 29 March 2006. (A full list of all those whom the panel met is contained in Appendix 3). The Panel was asked to report its findings in the first instance to HETAC.

Evidence

- 3 A key document considered by the Panel was the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) prepared by HETAC. This was made available to all Panel members in advance of their initial briefing meeting. In addition, HETAC provided substantial documentation in support of its SER and additional documentation in response to requests by the Panel during its on-site review. (A full list of the documents consulted by the Panel, including the SER, is attached as Appendix 4). The on-site visit provided oral evidence.

Findings

- 4 In the light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the Panel:
- is satisfied that the Higher Education and Training Awards Council has performed effectively its principal statutory functions since its establishment and has developed policies and procedures for each function which are being implemented and are being operated as appropriate;
 - is satisfied that in the performance of these functions, HETAC complies with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*.

Recommendations

- 5 The Panel concurs broadly with HETAC's summary of notable features and areas for improvement as contained in its SER. In the development of a plan to implement the recommendations of this Report, as required under the Protocol for this Review, HETAC will wish, nevertheless, to note the Panel's views concerning HETAC's performance of some aspects of its statutory functions and some aspects of its compliance with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. Particular areas for consideration are summarised below.
- 6 The Panel recommends that HETAC:
- gives urgent attention to the provision of initial and ongoing training to its reviewers, including the requirement that no-one should normally be a member of a review team unless they have undergone such training;
 - reviews the qualifications, experience and expertise required of its reviewers, with the aim of enabling HETAC to take a more strategic as opposed to what appears currently to be a rather pragmatic approach to their selection and deployment.
- 7 In addition, the Panel recommends that HETAC:
- reviews the longer-term sustainability of the level and quality of support currently given by staff considering individual programmes submitted for validation;
 - considers how its current approach to validation might be varied, especially where a new programme, or a programme at a level not previously offered by provider, is involved;
 - considers publishing all its reports as a matter of principle, and publicising its intention in this regard.

Acknowledgements

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

Finally, on behalf of the Review Panel and myself as Chairman I would like to record appreciation for the professional and constructive support provided by the Secretary to the review process, Mr David Parry.

**Professor W J Smyth
Review Panel Chairman
May 2006**