



Higher Education and
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Comhairle na nDámhachtainí
Ardteachtas agus Olltána

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Participating in an evaluation panel as an expert assessor: Guidelines

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Guideline for participants in Programme Validation Panels

Guideline for participants in Quality Assurance Review Panels

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ECA Principles for the Selection of Experts (to which HETAC is a signatory)

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Appendix C of Validation process, policy and criteria for the accreditation of providers to maintain a register for a specified research degree in a specified discipline area, 2003

AND

ALL OTHER OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES FOR PANEL MEMBERS OPERATING CURRENTLY

Comhairle na nDámhachtainí Ardoideachais agus Oilíuna

Higher Education and Training Awards Council

Participating in evaluation panels as expert assessors: Guidelines

These Guidelines are of relevance to persons appointed to a panel by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) to carry out an evaluation for the purpose of:

- the validation of a taught programme, and any subsequent review of such validation
- the approval of a provider to submit research programmes for registration by HETAC in a particular field of learning, and any subsequent review of such approval
- the accreditation of a provider to maintain a register of students for research degrees in a specific field of study and at a particular level, and any subsequent review of such accreditation
- an institutional review
- as part of the Registration of a HETAC provider
- the granting of delegated authority to a recognised institution, and any subsequent review of same
- the inclusion or alignment of qualifications with the National Framework of Qualifications
- monitoring the implementation of quality assurance policies & procedures
- any other evaluation panel that may be convened

1 Introduction

HETAC takes great care to ensure that the highest ethical and professional standards apply and are seen to apply in all of its activities. It is fortunate in having available to it, in its evaluation and review operations, persons of the highest professional and personal calibre to assist it in its work. HETAC in preparing these Guidelines indicates some core principles informing the work of assessment panels. The purpose is to assist members of panels and members of the executive in performing their respective responsibilities to a high standard.

2 Composition & Conduct of Panel – Some Principles

It is understood that all panel members undertake their duties and responsibilities in a professional, thorough and objective manner.

- Panels operate as a team under the leadership of a Chairperson – a collegial environment is vital to the proper functioning of the panel
- Mix of expertise - each review panel is unique and, as such, requires different competencies; panels should have an appropriate mix and balance of expertise.

- There will be appropriate gender representation on every panel. While every effort will be made to achieve appropriate gender balance in the composition of panels, this is a secondary consideration to achieving an appropriate blend of expertise.
- No panel member is expected to be an expert in all areas.
- Panel members may contribute to any aspect or dimension of the dialogue that may occur during the evaluation.
- All panel members, including observers, are expected to treat all proceedings as confidential to HETAC. HETAC may seek information, orally or in writing, on the operation of a panel, administrative procedures or its policy context.
- Appropriate mechanisms are available to ensure that any issues of concern to a panel member arising out of the conduct of the business of the panel can be addressed (See Appendix A)

The following additional guidelines will be applied with respect to observers.

- The attendance of observers at any panel evaluation, and the extent of their access is subject to the agreement of HETAC, the panel Chairperson and the provider. The extent of involvement may be modified during the course of a review.
- Observers must outline a rationale for their involvement and declare any potential conflict of interest to HETAC, prior to agreement with the panel Chairperson and provider.
- Observers must commit to ensuring that observations made and any materials accessed as part of the process will be treated in the strictest confidence and will not be used outside of the process without the written consent of HETAC, the panel Chairperson and the provider.
- Observers do not participate in the decision making process.

3 Essential Criteria for the membership of expert panels

There are two main criteria for the participation of persons in expert panels. They are competence and independence.

3.1 Competence

Confidence that the review or evaluation is being conducted by competent persons who have appropriate levels of experience and knowledge and who can offer an informed, expert opinion on the activities and/or processes being evaluated is essential. Competence may be demonstrated through:

- Recognised professional standing and reputation, i.e. having particular knowledge and experience in higher education and training, and recognised expertise in a specific field of learning
- Expertise in quality assurance, programme accreditation/ review and other issues relating to, learning modes, teaching methodologies, assessment and learner support mechanisms

- Knowledge of other higher education systems; including an international context for awards/programmes/providers of a similar nature to that being assessed
- Expert knowledge of business/industrial/social/educational environment relevant to the field of learning
- Research publications and citations as relevant to the particular panel being convened

3.1.1 Induction

HETAC has a policy of providing relevant induction for all panel members. Panel members are encouraged to discuss with HETAC any learning needs they perceive relevant to the task assigned. They will be briefed by a member or members of HETAC's executive on their role and on the context within which they will be operating. This will include the national legislative environment that relates to the validation of programmes and Council policy, criteria, procedures and guidelines.

3.2 Capacity for Independent Judgement

A panel must arrive at its decision or recommendation in an independent manner, free of influence from the organisation or unit being evaluated and of other interests. Stakeholders must have confidence that the review has been conducted by independent experts. It is important that panel members engage in the review process without any conflict of interest, or perception of conflict of interest. It is in providers' interest and that of the public's that any review or evaluation is conducted in a transparent manner by independent external assessors, as HETAC accreditation is seen as a formal endorsement of their practice.

3.2.1 Conflicts of Interest

HETAC has a firm policy of not appointing persons in any case where there is any foreseen possibility of conflict of interest. Even the appearance of conflict of interest, where none exists, can damage the credibility of the person selected and the evaluation/review process as a whole.

The instances listed hereunder are given as examples and are not intended to comprise a complete or exhaustive list of examples in which a conflict of interest may arise. Independence could be compromised, or perceived to be compromised, in the following scenarios:-

- Holding a current or previous appointment in the organisation where the evaluation/review is being conducted (e.g. existing employees, consultant, guest lecturers, external examiner duties, research supervision, etc.)
- Normally former employees, governors, directors, consultants and graduates (except for learner representatives) of a provider are not eligible to serve as members of an evaluation/review group for that provider. It should be noted also that normally persons who have had long-standing service, or who are retired from their employment with a particular provider should not participate in any panel evaluation in that organisation.
- Participation in joint projects including research initiatives. Where an assessor is concerned regarding existing minor collaborations in a particular field of study or at any institutional level, he/she should consult the Executive for an adjudication on suitability.

- Membership of the Council of HETAC, Academic Committee or a HETAC constituted committee with a similar remit¹
- Membership of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) or its executive
- The existence of any other potential future conflict of interest
- In all cases, persons with family or other relationship with any members employed by or attending a provider should so inform HETAC prior to involvement in the evaluation or review process at the provider, so that an appropriate judgement can be made as to the advisability of the individual person's involvement.
- In the case of a private, for-profit provider, no panel member, appointed to evaluate or review an application, may have a direct financial interest of any sort, including the holding of shares in a company associated with that provider.
- Direct competitors in a particular industry or professional environment or in a specific geographical location *may* also be excluded, but will not automatically be so

Since cases can arise where the possible appearance of a conflict of interest is not generally known, the primary responsibility for disclosing such a possibility rests on the person approached by HETAC. Panel members are asked to declare any potential conflicts of interest prior to appointment. In addition the Provider involved will be asked to declare any potential conflicts of interest prior to appointment of the panel. Where a potential conflict of interest subsequently emerges, the responsibility for disclosing it rests with the person concerned or the provider in consultation with the panel Chairperson. In such cases, the Executive of HETAC will rule on the continuing eligibility of the panel member.

3.2.2 Consulting

As a matter of policy, HETAC recommends that persons appointed to an assessment, evaluation or review panel on behalf of HETAC should not normally serve as consultants to the evaluated provider for a grace period of at least one-year after the completion of the relevant assessment. Any proposed or appointed person who envisages such a relationship with the provider developing within that time-scale should inform HETAC of this relationship before becoming involved in the evaluation or review process.

4 Freedom of Information

HETAC is subject to Freedom of Information legislation, and this requirement extends to panels members. Panel members should return any relevant notes to HETAC on completion of the review/evaluation process in which they were involved.

5 Observers: some guidelines

Subject to the agreement of HETAC, the panel Chairperson and the organisation under evaluation, observers may be in attendance from time to time during an evaluation process (*e.g.* members of HETAC Executive, guests from international quality assurance agencies, researchers *etc.*). In addition certain types of panel evaluation may provide an opportunity for staff of other HETAC providers to observe a process for the purposes of disseminating good practice throughout the sector (*e.g.* newer providers might observe a process underway in a more established provider to gain experience of the process).

¹ This does not preclude persons in these categories from participating in internal quality assurance processes of varied providers.

Observers do not participate as part of the panel and do not contribute to panel discussions and deliberations. The extent of their involvement may vary. For example observers may be in attendance at the meetings between the panel and the provider only. There may be occasions where it is appropriate for the observer to be in attendance at some of the private meetings of the panel but not at their final deliberations. In some instances it may be appropriate that observers are in attendance for the entire process.

Appendix A

Procedure to address issues of concern that may arise at a panel evaluation

As indicated in this document (*Participating in an evaluation panel as an expert assessor: Guidelines*), good practice requires that an appropriate mechanism be in place to ensure that any issues of concern that may arise for a panel member, arising out of the conduct of the business of the panel, can be addressed.

A problem should always be best resolved by and with those closest to the problem. In this context the following steps apply:

- 1 a panel member with a concern relating to the operation of the panel should in the first instance speak with the chairperson of the panel explaining the matter of concern and seeking a resolution
- 2 Should an appropriate resolution not result from this communication, or if the concern relates to the role of the chairperson, the panel member should then raise the matter with the relevant HETAC Head of Function, or if unavailable, the Director of Registration and Accreditation.
- 3 The Chief Executive of HETAC shall have the final adjudicating role should resolution not be obtained at earlier stages.