

Self-Evaluation Report

March 2006

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) was established in June 2001 with the commencement of the relevant sections of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 (the Act). The Act made HETAC the successor to the National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA), which it dissolved, and it provided for a transitional period of five years for the introduction of new HETAC processes. The NCEA was established to serve as the awarding body for the Regional Technical Colleges founded in the early 1970s. It was paralleled on the Council for National Academic Awards in the United Kingdom. As the scale and diversity of education and training activities in Ireland increased into the 1990s and in response to changing national and international expectations around qualifications and quality assurance, the Act was passed by the Oireachtas, the Irish parliament.

HETAC was one of three new bodies established under the Act. The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (the Qualifications Authority) has responsibility for developing the National Framework of Qualifications and has responsibility for determining procedures for the awards Councils and acts as a conduit for State funding of their activities. The Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) is responsible for setting standards, making awards and assuring quality in the further education and training sector.

HETAC's responsibility extends to all parts of the higher education system other than the universities, while the Qualifications Authority's remit includes all of higher and further education in Ireland. The universities engage with the Qualifications Authority on the basis of agreement. Thirteen institutes of technology have a statutorily prescribed relationship with HETAC and other higher education institutions may avail of HETAC services on a voluntary basis. HETAC and the Qualifications Authority have attempted to ease any tension that might arise because of the way in which the Act allows for differential treatment of the two parts of the binary system in higher education.

The Council is a body corporate consisting of fifteen members. The chairperson is appointed by the Minister for Education and Science. The Council meets about six times a year. The Council has established two committees with delegated functions, the Programme Accreditation Committee and the Research Degree Programme Committee, which meet about four times a year. The Council is assisted by an executive. The chief executive was appointed on an interim basis on commencement of the Act in 2001 and was re-appointed following a public competition in 2004. The executive functions are organised as set out in the appendix.

Higher education in Ireland is provided by eight universities, fourteen institutes of technology and over thirty other institutions of various size and character. Higher education has grown rapidly in recent decades. The age participation rate has risen from 11% in 1965 to 57% in 2003. A major review of higher education was produced by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development in 2004 at the behest of the Department of Education and Science. This report acknowledged institutional diversity as one of the strengths of the Irish system. A number of reforms were proposed, some of which have been adopted by the Minister, notably the funding of the institutes as well as the universities through the Higher Education Authority. The report also recommended a common quality assurance system for universities and institutes of technology.

2 APPROACH TO REVIEW

The Act allows for review of the performance of HETAC by the Qualifications Authority. In May 2005, the Ministers for Education of the countries in the Bologna Process adopted Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. These require periodic external review of an external quality assurance agency's activities. In keeping with the principle of subsidiarity, such reviews are normally to be organised on a national basis. The Council requested that the Qualifications Authority would organise a review of HETAC's performance under both the European Standards and Guidelines and the provisions of the Act. The Council and the Qualifications Authority, following discussions with domestic and international stakeholders, agreed to combine these two reviews. The terms of reference for the review were published in December 2005.

The review consists of (i) a self-evaluation, the results of which are summarised in this report, followed by (ii) external review (including a site visit) by an expert panel, which will result in a report. The Council will consider the report and issue its plans for the implementation of any changes in policies and processes arising from the review. On foot of the panel findings HETAC will determine its plans to implement the panel's recommendations. The self-evaluation summary (this document), the panel report and HETAC's implementation plans will be published on HETAC's website.

This document is the outcome of a self-evaluation by HETAC carried out by the executive and Council jointly. The consultation and report drafting were carried out by the executive. The Council, at separate meetings, agreed the approach to self-evaluation, considered the main findings of the consultation and reviewed and approved the report.

The Council considered other similar agencies' documented experiences of self-evaluation and external review and consulted with stakeholders on the matter. The findings indicated that while the self-evaluation process should be open and inclusive it should avoid the pitfalls of becoming overly comprehensive or too drawn out.

The period under review has been one of transition, based on the terms of the legislation. Some of the activities in this period had the sole purpose of effecting the transition. While it is valuable to document the effectiveness with which those transitional functions were undertaken, it is more important in the long term for the self-evaluation to infer an assessment of HETAC's general approach from an examination of those activities.

Given the context of a combined statutory and European review, the fact that this is the first such review, and the unique range of transitional functions of HETAC in the period, it was decided not to attempt to benchmark against a peer agency or agencies for this self-evaluation.

3 SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Archival material

The Council has extensive records, including those inherited from the NCEA. Records include those relating to policies and decisions of the Councils, documentation of quality assurance activities at programme and institutional level, and records of awards conferred and inquiries for recognition. Summaries of activities are found in the biennial reports of the Council and in the annual reports of the NCEA for the years to 2000. The archives also include reports prepared at various stages to evaluate aspects of the NCEA's activities.

Public consultation

To promote transparency in the review process HETAC invited public submissions to its self-evaluation. These were invited through a notice on the official government gazette *Iris Oifigiúil*, advertisements in the national newspapers, through its website and through an email shot to the approximately 1100 stakeholders on its mailing list.

Survey of higher education institutions

Specific groups of stakeholders from higher education providers in the HETAC sector as key partner bodies in higher education were invited to submit their comments in writing or at meetings and interviews. Twenty-one submissions were received.

Survey of expert assessors

HETAC relies heavily on external expert assessors. Most of the processes undertaken by HETAC over the past five years rely on the contribution of such persons who work at the coalface of HETAC operations. In order to tap into the experience of these experts and to obtain their views on the effectiveness of the processes in which they engaged, an internet survey was undertaken. Three groups of external assessors were identified and surveyed, using a web-based questionnaire. The response rates were as follows: delegated authority reviewers 34/52 (65%); programme accreditation reviewers 66/86 (77%); and research accreditation reviewers 43/83 (52%). The overall response rate was 65%.

Learner consultation

The Act places considerable emphasis on learners as active agents in their learning. Therefore, there is an increased role for learners and their representatives at all levels of the quality assurance system. The activities of the Council are somewhat removed from the direct experience of learners, and indeed developments such as the delegation of authority may remove the Council further from their consciousness. Nevertheless, the policies of HETAC have an impact on learners, even if indirectly. We therefore carried out a series of three group interviews, one with student union representatives and two in selected institutions. Learner representatives on expert panels were included in the surveys mentioned above.

4 ANALYSIS OF STAKEHOLDER SUBMISSIONS

This analysis focuses on the overall thrust of the stakeholder submissions. Comments from stakeholders about individual functions are dealt with in subsequent sections.

All providers

Providers of higher education and training are the main direct clients of HETAC. They have extensive and repeated interaction with the Council at various levels and across a range of functions. Providers were the biggest source of feedback in the consultations for the self-evaluation.

The modal response of eighteen providers responding to survey of heads of institutions was that “HETAC’s functioning provides significant support in the maintenance of the quality of programmes and levels of learner attainment.” Providers also considered that the service provided by HETAC was effective, transparent, consistent, systematic, fair and very supportive.

Providers – Institutes of Technology

Institutes of Technology and HETAC have a special relationship under the Act. The Institutes of Technology are referred to in the legislation as “recognised institutions” of the Council. This means that some functions, notably delegation of authority to make awards currently apply only to them. There is moreover a requirement on these institutions to have all of their programmes validated by the Council, with the exception of those for which they have delegated authority.

The Council of Directors of the Institutes of Technology and the Council of Registrars of the Institutes of Technology each made written submissions and their representatives met with the executive. A number of individual submissions were also received from institutes of technology.

The institutes are very pleased with HETAC’s role in the transformation in the sector over the past five years. They note that HETAC is a very different organisation from the NCEA and commend the changes undergone. They believe that these changes have helped to shift the focus from agencies and institutions to the needs of learners in the manner envisaged by the Act. There has been continuous dialogue and cooperation between the institutes and HETAC to bring about these changes. Without denying that there have been disagreements, some territorial disputes and misinterpretations, nevertheless the Council of Directors believes that these were smothered by the over-riding willingness of the Institutes, the Qualifications Authority and HETAC to cooperate in order to develop the National Framework of Qualifications, revise programmes to meet defined learning outcomes and to accept responsibility for enhancing quality assurance procedures and the standing of awards.

The single most important outcome of the transition phase for the institutes was the delegation of authority policy, process and outcome. The “optimal delegation” pursued by HETAC has turned out to be a very satisfactory formulation which has led to enhanced institutional autonomy while maintaining high levels of confidence in HETAC awards.

The registrars of the institutes state, “Overall, HETAC has fulfilled its role extremely well as set out under the Act, maintaining a strong momentum of change over the five years to 2005. Institutes of Technology have been challenged to keep pace with this change agenda and have found engagement with HETAC hugely beneficial and positive in this regard.” The registrars interact closely with HETAC. They based their submission on a survey carried out by one of their number that compared registrars’ perceptions of how HETAC performed its principle functions with those of senior staff

within HETAC. There was in general a high concordance between the two, which can be interpreted as indicating a good level of awareness on the part of HETAC staff of their relative strengths and weaknesses.

A critical view expressed by the institute registrars was that institutes could be trusted more by HETAC and that there needed to be more consultation on proposals for development and change. The directors expressed the view that some of the processes devised were cumbersome. The institutes made extensive comments in relation to the individual functions.

Providers other than recognised institutions

HETAC has made awards to an increasingly diverse range of providers over the past five years. There are now 25 providers with validated programmes in addition to the 13 institutes of technology. There are a further 15 potential providers currently in discussions with the Council. Three providers have transferred their accreditation relationship from HETAC to the National University of Ireland. The Act has it as a clear objective that as many learners as possible have their learning achievements recognised and that programme validation through the Councils (HETAC or FETAC) is an efficient means of achieving this recognition. This is why the Council has sought to facilitate as wide a range of providers as possible.

The overall sentiment of these providers is, as one of them put it, “very positive about HETAC”. Others noted specifically that HETAC was supportive of small colleges and distance education providers. One institution expressed the view that “the commitment to realising and enhancing quality through a determined partnership with constituent providers has been a hallmark of HETACs approach to date.” Another cited its academic chairperson, the distinguished former head of an Irish university, as saying, “[HETAC accreditation] was as rigorous a process as I have encountered in more than 40 years experience of third level systems, in Ireland, the United States and Australia. But it was also a process that was helpful, beneficial and professionally managed”.

A concern for some of the larger independent colleges is that the legislation is framed in such a way that only institutions established by an act of the Oireachtas or by the Government may be designated by the Minister for Education and Science as a recognised institution. This means that, however mature and sophisticated they become, these colleges cannot be delegated authority to make awards.

Learners

HETAC’s interaction with learners is somewhat indirect. For the most part learners interact with providers and HETAC does not feature very strongly in their consciousness. A national survey carried out for HETAC by MORI in 2005 found that 52% of learners across a variety of higher education institutions (HETAC and non-HETAC accredited) were aware of HETAC. Of those studying for a HETAC award, 79% said that little or no information about HETAC had been provided to them and the great majority would like more such information made available to them. Learners who were aware of HETAC generally believed that HETAC accreditation meant that the course had met particular standards. They are somewhat more unsure about the meaning of HETAC accreditation for the overall standards of the provider.

Interviews with groups of students and their representatives conducted by HETAC for this evaluation revealed that students are aware of the effects of the quality assurance policies pursued by HETAC. The vast majority agree that providers try to improve their programmes. However, opinion was divided as to whether as wide a range of mechanisms as possible were being used to secure student input at programme level. Students were aware of the qualifications framework but did not

consider that it had had an impact on them as learners. Learners in institutions with delegated authority were supportive of this development.

FETAC

The Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) has a set of functions that very closely parallels those of HETAC but makes awards at different levels of the Framework (except for an overlap at level 6) and so deals for the most part with different providers. (There are some providers who have programmes validated by both Councils.) The procedures for the performance of functions set for HETAC by the Qualifications Authority require that HETAC include FETAC specifically in its consultative processes and that HETAC co-operate with FETAC in performing its functions.

FETAC considers that HETAC has progressed well on the implementation of its functions. While the approach to functions has sometimes differed between the Councils this partly reflects the different traditions and requirements of the sectors.

FETAC has been satisfied with its inclusion in HETAC's consultation processes and with HETAC's participation in the consultations undertaken by FETAC. The cooperation between the councils in broader multilateral forums has also been highly satisfactory. Relationships between the executives have been supportive, particularly at top level, though there might be benefits from more extensive interaction at other levels.

Irish Universities Quality Board

The Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) was set up by the Irish universities in 2003 and is currently being established as a separate corporate entity. Its role is to support the universities in the development and implementation of appropriate policies and procedures directed at improving the quality of the education and services they offer and in particular to assist the universities in discharging their responsibilities to conduct reviews of the effectiveness of their quality assurance procedures.

The IUQB collaborates with HETAC through the Irish Higher Education Quality Network. Some of the issues facing the two agencies are similar. With major review cycles completed, HETAC and the IUQB share a growing emphasis on enhancing the capacity of the Irish higher education system to engage in quality improvement.

International peers

HETAC has been active internationally in the promotion of its awards and in the development of quality in higher education in Europe and worldwide. HETAC furnishes the secretariat of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and the Chief Executive of HETAC is currently Vice-President of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The President of INQAAHE has described HETAC as "punching above its weight" in international affairs. HETAC has made significant contributions to the Bologna Process, including the European Standards and Guidelines and the Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area.

HETAC has drawn on its international contacts in the identification of suitable panel members for its various review processes, thus assuring the international comparability of the outcomes. The

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delegation of authority was cited by INQAAHE as a model of good practice in the devolution of responsibility to institutions that is worthy of emulation. HETAC recognition of professional awards was also considered a valuable model. The extensive and current engagement of HETAC with international developments is valued by domestic stakeholders also and they look to HETAC to provide information and advice in this area and to represent the interests of Irish providers internationally.

5 HETAC FUNCTIONS AND EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

One of the overarching objects of the Act is to promote the quality of higher education and training. Many of HETAC's functions relate directly or indirectly to that particular objective. These include:

- establishing policies and criteria for making awards and validating programmes;
- delegating authority to make awards;
- determining standards of knowledge, skill and competence;
- monitoring and evaluating the quality of programmes;
- ensuring that providers have fair and consistent procedures for assessment of learners.

These functions correspond with elements of the European Standards and Guidelines and the evaluation of the effectiveness of HETAC's performance of these functions is subsumed under the relevant European standard in this self-evaluation report.

Other objects of the act relate to areas such as the recognition of learners, providing a system for comparing awards, facilitating access, transfer and progression for learners, promoting diversity in education and training, co-operating between providers and industry, promoting international recognition of awards, and contributing to the realisation of national policy objectives. The functions of the council relating to these objects include:

- recognising awards;
- making awards on completion of programmes;
- making awards directly to learners outside of programmes.

These functions are considered separately in Section 9.

The European Standards and Guidelines were adopted by the Ministers in May 2005 as part of the Bologna Process. There are three sets of standards

- Standards for internal quality assurance with higher education institutions (Part 1);
- Standards for external quality assurance of higher education (Part 2);
- Standards for external quality assurance agencies (Part 3).

Standards in parts 2 and 3 encompass the standards in the previous part(s).

6 USE OF EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCEDURES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION (STANDARD 3.1)

The first standard in Part 3 of Standards and Guidelines for external quality assurance agencies deals with the use of external quality assurance procedures for higher education, taking into account the presence of processes described in Part 2 of the European Standards and Guidelines. This section describes and evaluates the main external quality assurance processes used by HETAC. The following section evaluates these processes against the standards in Part 2.

HETAC has developed a series of procedures and processes for external quality assurance. These operate at the institutional level and the programme level. Since this is the first review not all the processes and procedures have been implemented at this stage (for example, some of those relating to periodic review of institutions) and so their effectiveness cannot yet be assessed. A common feature of the major external processes is the appointment of panels of experts to advise the Council on whether the individual institutions and programmes meet the relevant criteria.

The Act envisages programme validation as the main mechanism of quality assuring standards. While this may have reflected international practice in the mid-90s when the Act was in gestation, current international best practice in higher education places an increasing emphasis on institutional quality assurance. The delegation of authority to institutes of technology has allowed HETAC to focus more resources on institutional quality assurance. Similarly, the review process leading to the re-accreditation of programmes is largely managed by the providers. HETAC currently lists 1643 programmes in 38 institutions as accredited. Of these 1339 (81%) will fall under delegated authority if the current applications for all 13 institutes of technology are successful, as is expected.

Accreditation/validation¹ of programmes (Section 25)

Programme accreditation was a major function of the NCEA. Until 2003, the Council continued to accredit programmes that would have been validated by the NCEA, under the transitional provisions of Section 21(4). Following the establishment of standards for the awards of the Council by the Qualifications Authority with the determination of the Framework in 2003, the Council commenced accrediting programmes under Section 25.

HETAC's basic programme accreditation policy, criteria and processes are set out in *Taught and Research Programme Accreditation Policy, Criteria and Processes* (August 2005) augmented by *Supplementary Guidelines for the Accreditation of Taught Programmes and Research Degree Programmes* (August 2005) and *Validation process, policy and criteria for the accreditation of providers to maintain a register for a specified research degree in a specified discipline area* (April 2003).

The Council established two committees, the Programme Accreditation Committee (PAC) and the Research Degree Programme Committee (RDPC), and delegated to these committees the responsibility for accrediting programmes. The membership of these committees reflects Council stakeholders as well as the Director of Academic Affairs. These committees were established to advise on the development of policy and to exercise delegated validation powers making decisions on individual applications for accreditation.

¹ In the legislation, and in NCEA practice, the term "validation" was used. Since 2004, HETAC has followed the general European practice using the term "accreditation" for its policies and processes relating to this function.

The committees have accredited a large number of programme applications - approximately 170 taught programmes and approximately 700 individual research degree programmes. The PAC oversaw the major exercise in spring 2004 where all programmes validated under the old regime (over one thousand) were revalidated against standards of the new framework award types. The research committee is also responsible for accrediting providers to maintain research register in named fields of study and has to date accredited six providers in one or more fields.

The operation of these two committees has proved satisfactory in the initial period of the Council. The Council itself has been free to deal with broad strategic issues while decisions on accreditation have been made by these specialist committees. With the conclusion of the transition period, it is likely that the Council will consider the amalgamation of the PAC and the RDPC into a single Academic Committee.

Taught programmes

Programme accreditation is carried out based on recommendations by panels of experts. These panels review documentation submitted by providers, visit the institution and make a written report. Panels vary in size, from a minimum of four, and sometimes a single panel may consider more than one programme in a single discipline area. The panels are independent of the institution and consist of a chairperson, experts in the academic discipline(s) concerned drawn from other HETAC providers, universities and higher education institutions in Ireland and in other countries, and industry and the public service. They are supported by a member of the executive.

The panel evaluation is typically completed between four to eight weeks after receipt of the application. Formal decision making rests on the bi-monthly meetings of PAC thereafter. Urgent cases have been facilitated in special circumstances.

Providers have expressed general satisfaction with the programme accreditation process while there were some complaints of delay. The broad similarity of the process with those previously operated by the NCEA meant that providers were familiar with what to expect and there was a cadre of experienced reviewers who provided the nucleus for panels, especially in the role of chair.

Panel members in general report themselves satisfied or very satisfied with the process. The areas suggested as having room for improvement are in the training or briefing of panellists who are new to the process and the visibility of any follow-up action taken by the Council or the institution. Some remuneration might be considered, particularly for international reviewers and for chairpersons.

Research programmes

Research has played a role of growing importance in the academic life of many HETAC providers. There has been considerable debate over this role in recent years, for example in the OECD Review of Higher Education in Ireland (2004). In this climate, HETAC considers it very important that the research training leading to Council awards meets the most exacting standards. The numbers graduating grew ten-fold during the 1990s to about 100 degrees per annum in 2003 (including about 20 PhDs). Most of the activity is in the institutes of technology. The level of research activity in the extra-university sector is small (accounting for less than 5% of national doctoral output), but in overall terms research activity is vital (with the capacity to grow quickly), feasible, and typically of good quality.

The purpose of the policy for research degree programmes is the external quality assurance of research degree programmes and the promotion of practices that will lead to the growth of necessary research capacity.

All research degree programmes, which are offered to enable a learner to attain a named award of HETAC, must be registered by HETAC before being offered to learners. Prior to registration (i.e. accreditation) of a research degree programme, the provider must either (i) be approved to submit programmes for registration by HETAC or (ii) be accredited to maintain a register by HETAC.

Thus there are two routes to the registration of a research degree programme in a given field of learning: (i) providers which are accredited in the field of learning maintain their own register (of students) for specified research degrees in that field of learning and HETAC automatically registers the relevant programmes once appropriate notification is received and (ii) providers which are approved in a field can submit individual research degree programmes for registration by HETAC on a case-by-case basis. Therefore, a provider seeking to provide a research degree programme in a particular field of learning must either obtain accreditation to maintain a register of learners in that field of learning or obtain approval from HETAC to submit programmes for registration on a case-by-case basis. Approval is easier to attain but involves much closer monitoring.

Obtaining either approval to submit programmes to HETAC for registration or accreditation to maintain a register requires that a provider submit a self-evaluation and be subject to evaluation by an independent expert panel. The panel appraises the quality processes, the track record and the research capacity. Evaluation outcomes are published in detail, except in cases where a first-time application is declined where publication would serve no useful purpose.

Providers accredited to maintain a research register in a particular discipline at a particular level may apply for delegated authority to award research degrees in that discipline at that level.

Generally, institutes have been selective about discipline areas put forward for accreditation. Six institutes of technology have applied for accreditation to maintain a register in one or more disciplines. In the case of three of those institutes some discipline areas put forward for accreditation were either not accredited or accredited at master's level where doctoral accreditation was sought demonstrating a difference between provider perception of quality and panel perception.

Four applications were made for approval to submit programmes to HETAC for registration and two of these were successful.

Members of the panels evaluating applications for accreditation to maintain a research register expressed the view that the policies and procedures of HETAC and of the institutions were effective in ensuring the quality of the awards received by learners. Some also suggested that it may become difficult to find panel members, especially from outside the sector, willing to act entirely *pro bono publico*.

While the processes relating to research degrees are recognised to have great rigour, there is concern expressed by some providers that they are unduly onerous and complex. They have suggested that now that benchmarks are set and the underlying quality of research training in HETAC institutions has been demonstrated, it may be opportune that the processes be revisited to ensure that they are proportionate to the risk. Expert assessors have endorsed the effectiveness of the current process. Overall, the accreditation of providers to maintain their own register is a successful process tied to delegated authority with a reputation for rigour and fairness and is working well.

The case-by-case process being designed for providers with relatively low levels of research activity in a particular field is administratively burdensome. The register is maintained by HETAC. The process

has been the cause of some tension between HETAC and its providers. Changes have recently been introduced to address those concerns.

HETAC is currently working in partnership with providers on two initiatives to enhance the quality of research degree programmes. These are in the field of practice-based research in art and performance and in the enhancement of research training. This partnership approach will be the model for future developments in this area.

Delegation of authority (Sections 29 and 30)

Delegation of authority to recognised institutions to make awards and validate programmes was provided for in the Act. The Act made provision for a review that had already been undertaken within four institutes when the Act was commenced. The general expectation was that delegation of authority might have to wait until the National Framework of Qualifications had been established and the new agencies and quality assurance arrangements were in operation. In 2001, the Council adopted as a policy goal the optimal delegation of authority within the transition period under review. Criteria and procedures were established for delegation and review of delegation. These were revised in 2004 following the initial round of delegation reviews and in particular clarified the criteria for the delegation of awarding powers for research degrees.

The basic procedure is that the institute applies by way of a self-evaluation report, which addresses the criteria to the satisfaction of the Council and the Qualifications Authority, followed by a panel visit and report advising the Council on whether the criteria have been met, leading to a decision of the Council subject to agreement with the Qualifications Authority.

At present, eleven of thirteen institutes of technology have attained some level of delegated authority. Three have delegation for awards from levels 6 to 8 inclusive of the National Framework of Qualifications, four have delegation from levels 6 to 9 inclusive (in respect of taught programmes) and four have delegation from levels 6 to 10 (including some awards at levels 9 and awards at level 10 attained by 'discipline specific' research programmes). The other two institutes have made formal applications and their evaluations are scheduled for February/March, with a planned completion date before June 2006.

The Council links delegation of authority for research awards to its policy on accreditation to maintain research registers. All institutes that currently have delegation for awards that result from research programmes have complied with this policy. Delegation is effectively made by award-type in the national framework for taught programmes. However, for research degree programmes, delegation is by discipline area. This approach has ensured that confidence is maintained in the standards and is currently considered effective.

There is broad satisfaction with the operation of delegation of authority. The rigour of the review process, with its strong international input, combined with the publication of the resulting reports, has brought a high level of engagement with the process within the sector and a high level of confidence among stakeholders generally.

A number of institutes have successfully applied for extension of delegation beyond the initial grant. In one case, the review for extension under Section 29 was combined with a review under Section 30 of existing delegation.

Agreement of quality assurance (Section 28)

The Act requires providers of higher education and training programmes validated by HETAC, or to which HETAC has delegated the power to make awards, to establish quality assurance procedures and to agree those procedures with the Council.

In 2002, the Council published the document *Guidelines and Criteria for Quality Assurance Procedures in Higher Education and Training* (Guidelines and Criteria). These guidelines are intended to assist providers in establishing, or maintaining and improving, quality assurance procedures and simultaneously meet the requirements of the Council in respect of quality assurance. They are based on best international practice, including policies and procedures operated by national quality assurance agencies and higher education and training institutions in EU member states and other countries at the time. They incorporate recommendations and requirements set out in a wide range of national, international and institutional publications and drew on the experience of the Council/NCEA and institutional experience of operating and monitoring quality assurance systems. While pre-dating the publication of the European Standards and Guidelines and the INQAAHE Guidelines for Good Practice, they are consistent with both.

The Council deals with a large number of higher education providers. They differ in scale, scope and statutory basis. The Council therefore adopts a flexible approach to the interpretation of the criteria and guidelines.

The Quality Assurance Panels comprise individuals who have particular knowledge and experience of higher education quality assurance and training. To date individuals appointed by the Council have included practising quality assurance experts with relevant education and training expertise and experience. Members are selected, generally from outside the country, and each panel reflects a balance of expertise in areas such as: institutional governance and management; quality assurance processes; programme design and review; and issues relating to learners. Each panel has a standing chairperson, selected for his/her respected national status, knowledge of quality assurance and education and training and experience relevant to institutional management and evaluation in higher education and training.

Panels review the documentation submitted by the institutions. Quality assurance policy and procedures of providers are only agreed if the policy reflects the provider's mission and values and relates to its strategic management plans and operations. The Council therefore must be satisfied that the quality assurance policies cover relevant aspects of the provider's functions and operations which impact on the standard and quality of its higher education and training programmes, e.g., teaching, research, learner assessment, learner and academic support, accommodation, equipment and facilities.

To date 36 higher education institutions have had their quality assurance arrangements agreed and the remaining two current providers are expected to do so in the coming months. A further 18 potential new providers are in discussions about their quality assurance procedures.

Provider response to the process has generally been positive. The feedback from each panel has been welcomed and responded to in a positive light.

The process of agreeing quality assurance procedures with providers has been a key step in helping providers take ownership of their own quality assurance function as required under the Act. A culture shift has taken place from compliance with external requirements to institutional responsibility for maintaining standards and enhancing the learner experience. One source of satisfaction for many providers was discovering through the process of documentation and agreement the extent to which they had already been engaged in quality assurance at various levels.

The burden of documenting internal quality assurance practice has been considerable for some institutions, especially new and smaller providers. At the same time, the fact that the agreement process is a desk exercise means that the implementation of the quality assurance procedures so documented has not yet been verified. It was not the task of the quality review panel to verify that the procedures documented were in operation or to what effect. This is why the Council and its stakeholders are keen to proceed with the evaluation of the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures.

The findings from the evaluation of quality assurance procedures to be introduced from 2006 will be used to inform the agreement process for new providers. These will confirm whether the current arrangements are maintaining full confidence in the system.

Monitoring and evaluating quality of programmes

The operational quality assurance of programmes is primarily a responsibility of providers. This is so both in the Act and in the European Standards and Guidelines. Programmes are monitored in the first instance by providers. HETAC relies on providers for information regarding programmes. The mechanisms employed for monitoring include the annual returns of results for those programmes for which HETAC makes awards and of statistical summaries for awards made under delegated authority. External examiners' reports are submitted annually for all programmes. Periodic programmatic review reports are considered by the PAC leading to re-accreditation or renewed delegation of those programmes.

HETAC on behalf of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) conducts an annual survey of the placement of all graduates into employment or further studies. This study forms part of the First Destinations survey published by the HEA each year.

Monitoring policy is evolving in the light of delegation of authority. Institutes with delegation are subject to lighter touch in terms of monitoring. The introduction of reviews of quality assurance in 2006 may also trigger a more selective approach to monitoring of the remaining providers, where specific institutions or programmes are monitored more closely on foot of recommendations from review panels.

As the volume of data in relation to the new awards system grows, more extensive statistical analysis will bolster the monitoring function. It will be possible to detect trends across disciplines and institutions, for example in numbers of awards, classification of attainment in awards and progression of learners across levels.

Criteria and processes for reviewing the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures in higher education and training were adopted by the Council in 2005. These will commence later in 2006.

Determination of standards

HETAC has responsibility for determining the standards of awards. The Act maps out a set of arrangements for setting standards for awards and the competency of various actors in relation to these standards. Within the overall standards for the National Framework of Qualifications set by the Qualifications Authority through the award-type descriptors, in 2003 the Council decided the standards of its named awards. Initially the Council adopted the award-type descriptors as the interim generic standards for its awards, while working on standards within individual fields of learning. Related to the standards is the Council's policy on naming of awards. This seeks to reconcile the requirements of rationalisation and simplicity with the traditional understandings of various subject

communities and stakeholder groups. The solution has found broad acceptance, though some actors continue to express misgivings, and the Council has agreed that further work is required to promote understanding of awards titles beyond the academic community.

In November 2003, HETAC adopted the generic award-type descriptors of the National Framework of Qualifications as Interim Standards. Pilot standards for six broad fields of learning (see below) have now been developed and published by the Council for awards at level 6 to level 9 on the Framework. These standards represent an elaboration of the generic descriptors of the Framework. They will facilitate experts in particular fields of learning in creating the link between their programmes and the Framework. These standards are not programme specifications. It is through these, however, that the relationship between a programme, its component parts and the Framework will be evident. The standards are a reference point to which programme outcomes may be compared. They provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with a particular field of learning.

In drafting the standards, every effort has been made to ensure that they will provide for flexibility and variety in the design of programmes and therefore encourage innovation within an overall agreed framework. It is not expected that all programmes will include every learning outcome identified in a standard. Each programme provider should be able to demonstrate how the design and content of its own programmes has been informed by the standard.

The six pilot fields are Engineering, Science, Computing, Business, Art & Design (adopted in 2005) and Nursing (awaiting agreement with the statutory Nursing Council). The great majority of the Council's awards are made in these fields. The standards were developed through a consultative process, using panels of disciplinary experts.

The generic standards have been tested, particularly in the transition to Framework awards. The reaction to the transition process from providers has been favourable. The transition process introduced the academic staff to the Framework, particularly its emphasis on learning outcomes, and encouraged its immediate application to the individual programmes. The Council's approach of starting with generic standards has been recognised as a fruitful way of ensuring the practical implementation of the Framework in a timely fashion while also capitalising on the professionalism of the academic staff within the institutions. Inevitably, there have been some question marks over how consistently the generic standards have been interpreted. The translation of the generic standards into disciplinary standards has been welcomed by providers, although the application of these standards in programme accreditation and review is at an early stage. There is no immediate intention to develop standards for additional fields. The effect of the existing set of standards will be evaluated next year as part of HETAC's contribution to the review of the Framework.

7 HETAC AND PART 2 OF EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

Standard 3.1 requires that the agency make use of the standards and guidelines for external quality assurance contained in Part 2 of the European Standards and Guidelines. This section considers the extent to which the major external quality assurance functions of HETAC described in the previous section satisfy those standards and guidelines.

Use of internal quality assurance procedures (Standard 2.1)

Providers agree their internal quality assurance with HETAC. This agreement includes provision for specification of the way in which external quality assurance relates to the internal procedures. The reviews carried out for delegated authority have particular regard to the operation of internal quality assurance procedures. HETAC has disseminated the European Standards and Guidelines to its providers. The planned reviews of institutional quality assurance will assess the extent to which internal quality assurance is effective.

Development of external quality assurance processes (Standard 2.2)

The major processes described – taught and research programme accreditation, review for delegation of authority, ongoing monitoring and the planned reviews of the effectiveness of quality assurance – were developed through a process of research and consultation. Stakeholders, especially providers, have expressed general satisfaction with the development processes. In hindsight, it is clear that a lengthier process of consultation or pilot testing might have been desirable. However, the Council was at all times conscious of the limited transition period allowed for in the Act. The consultation processes have included inviting written submissions on drafts, meeting with senior officers from providers during development, establishing ad hoc advisory groups and organising consultative seminars.

Criteria for decisions (Standard 2.3)

The criteria for the decisions for all the major quality assurance processes of HETAC have been developed by consultation and published prior to the implementation of the process.

Processes fit for purpose (Standard 2.4)

HETAC has evolved a series of new processes in the past five years. Some of these were one-off and others are recurrent. The taught-programme accreditation process and the case-by-case research registration process, built substantially on the programme validation experience of the NCEA, have been developed to accommodate the learning outcomes approach of the national framework, the growing diversity of award types, fields of learning and providers. The processes have been fit for purpose. In some cases, they have been somewhat awkward for providers - the NCEA case-by-case registration of research programmes being one example where this has been recognised and addressed. The urgency of implementing the Act, in conformity with the statutory transition period of five years allowed from the commencement, has meant that there has not always been time for sufficient piloting testing of new processes. HETAC is committed to continual review and minimal regulation. It has put in place internal structures to assess the impact of its policies and criteria on stakeholders through establishing a regulatory impact assessment function.

Reporting (Standard 2.5)

The Council is committed to publishing reports. Reports of reviews for delegated authority and research accreditation outcomes are published by the Council as will reports on the review of quality assurance when these are commenced in 2006. HETAC policy is to publish programme accreditation reports but it has not done so to date in respect of taught programmes. Decisions on programme accreditation are published in the biennial report. Providers are required to publish their own quality assurance procedures and their self-evaluation reports for delegated authority. HETAC will soon be made subject to the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act (1997). This means that in addition to the published documents, many internal documents will be made available to members of the public on request. HETAC will be required under Section 16 of the FOI Act to prepare a list of such documents.

Follow-up procedures (Standard 2.6)

The legislation relating to external review provides for the Council to set conditions including follow-up procedures and requiring the implementation of recommendations.

Programme accreditations often include requirements for modification of curriculum or documentation of resourcing and these requirements are followed up by the executive. Modifications to programme schedules are notified to HETAC and recorded in HETAC's database. Panels reviewing for the purpose of holding a research register make recommendations and implementation of these must be documented to the satisfaction of the HETAC executive. Panels may also provide informal advice to institutions, the adoption of which is a matter for the institution and not a requirement. HETAC has not had a policy of informing the panel members of the results of any follow-up activities. This means that panel members may not know if their recommendations have been implemented. This has been noted by panel members in a survey conducted for this evaluation.

Early delegated authority decisions included detailed follow up recommendations. Implementation of these was monitored, in some cases by HETAC directly and in other cases by a subsequent external review panel. Other delegated authority decisions to 2005 have not required detailed follow-up on the recommendations. The most recent delegation of authority decision has included a specific condition that the institute report to the Council within six months on the implementation of the recommendations. The terms of reference for the panels extend only to the preparation of the report and so panel members are generally unaware of follow-up measures taken. Panel members surveyed expressed some interest in knowing what actions were taken on foot of their advice.

Now that the initial tranche of reviews has been completed, HETAC will give greater attention to the transparency and effectiveness of the mechanisms for follow-up of recommendations from both programmatic and institutional reviews. It is desirable that the publicly visible closing of the loop should not have to await a subsequent review.

Periodic reviews (Standard 2.7)

There is provision for review of all institutions at periodic intervals. The initial agreement of quality assurance procedures for providers will be followed within a period of not more than five years by a review. This cycle of reviews will commence in the academic year 2006/07.

Institutes of technology with delegated authority are subject to review of their exercise of that delegation not less than once in every five years. To avoid over-review of institutions, it is Council policy that the review of the effectiveness of their quality assurance will be combined with the review of delegation of authority. Since these institutes have all undergone a formal external evaluation for

delegation it is not proposed to subject them to further review until a number of years have elapsed, unless the delegation of authority was subject to such a condition or the institute seeks an extension of delegated authority. HETAC has already set a schedule for reviews.

Programmes are accredited for a fixed period, typically five years. Re-accreditation is subject to a review of the programme. Detailed procedures for such periodic programmatic reviews are part of the quality assurance procedures of the provider agreed by HETAC. These include a self-assessment by the unit concerned, a visit and report from an external panel appointed by the institution and an institutional response to the recommendations of the panel. The programmatic review reports and the institutional responses are reviewed by the HETAC executive and re-accreditation is granted by the Programme Accreditation Committee.

The challenge of finding an efficient mechanism for programme re-accreditation is encountered in many systems internationally. The NCEA was formerly responsible for organising programmatic reviews. Under HETAC, the organisation of such reviews is a function of the providers with the outcomes being reported to HETAC for approval. Since the majority of programmes in the future will be accredited under delegated authority, the approval of the outcomes of these programmatic reviews will be a matter for the institutes of technology concerned and come to HETAC's attention under the review of delegation function. The effectiveness of programmatic review in the other institutions will fall within the ambit of the periodic review of the effectiveness of institutional quality assurance procedures. There may be grounds for setting tighter timescales for new and less-experienced providers.

System-wide analyses (Standard 2.8)

The thrust of HETAC's evolution over the past five years has been to move from a focus on programme quality assurance to a focus on institutional quality assurance. The various quality assurance processes such as delegated authority, agreement of quality assurance and establishment of research registers are coming to completion of their initial cycles. System level analyses of these activities have not yet been conducted though the material collected for the present review will be valuable in such analyses, which are planned for the near future.

HETAC has extensive records of programmes and learners, incorporating those of the NCEA. This is an important database. *An Analysis of Degree, Diploma and Certificate Awards in Ireland, 1998 to 2002* commissioned by the Council was published in 2003. A review of award classifications was carried out in 2005. There is scope for further statistical analysis of these records that would contribute to system-wide understanding. An appraisal of the data collection and storage procedures, particularly in relation to institutes with delegated authority, should be informed by the types of system-wide analyses to be undertaken.

8 HETAC AND PART 3 OF EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

Official status (Standard 3.2)

HETAC was established by an act of the Oireachtas for the purpose, *inter alia*, of quality assuring higher education providers who make its awards. It is a body under the aegis of the Department of Education and Science. It is independent of Ministerial and institutional influence in its decisions.

Activities (Standard 3.3)

HETAC undertakes accreditation of taught and research programmes under section 25 and 26 of the Act. HETAC undertakes institutional-level quality assurance activities through agreement and review of quality assurance procedures (section 28) and the delegation of authority and review thereof (sections 29 and 30). These are core statutory functions of the agency.

Resources (Standard 3.4)

HETAC receives a recurrent State Grant through the Qualifications Authority and is also financed by way of fee income from higher education and training providers in respect of award fees and accreditation fees. The fees are decided by the Minister for Education and Science. In 2005, fee income amounted to some 30.9% of HETAC's income of €3.82m and the State Grant amounted to 68.1%. In each of the last four years, the Council's expenditure was within its agreed annual budget.

The organisation has a staff complement of 33 and that is considered adequate to enable it to organise and operate its external quality assurance processes in an active and efficient manner based on the current scale of activities. The changing emphasis across the different functions has required a considerable measure of redeployment and re-skilling since the transition from the NCEA. Growing areas of activity, particularly in policy development and support of capacity building for quality enhancement in the sector, require a changed mix of professional and administrative skills in HETAC.

The annual accounts of the Council are audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General and are laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas and published. The accounts for the years 2001 to 2004 have been approved to date.

HETAC makes extensive use of external experts as members of its panels. These are not reimbursed for their services.

Mission statement (Standard 3.5)

HETAC adopted an inaugural mission statement in 2002. This was reviewed as the transition period came to an end and a new statement of mission, vision and values was published in January 2006. The mission statement reads as follows:

HETAC is a public body, accountable to the Irish government and the Oireachtas, which exists to benefit learners and potential learners by:

- *Setting standards, accrediting programmes and awarding qualifications at all levels of higher education and training;*

- *Providing assurance to the public that programmes of higher education and training are above an acceptable threshold level of quality and that objective quality assurance processes are in place to meet the expectations of Irish society and the International Community;*
- *Delivering a quality improvement service to accredited educational providers so as to contribute to raising standards to increasingly higher levels.*

HETAC's Corporate Plan 2006-2010 sets out clearly the goals to be achieved in the period to 2010.

Independence (Standard 3.6)

Under the Act HETAC enjoys a very high degree of independence and autonomy. The membership of the Council is set out in the Act and reflects stakeholder, including learner, interests. The Council may co-opt two members who have particular expertise including international experience. The Council makes its decisions in an independent manner and is independent of influence from government, institutional or other sources. An appeal process to the Qualifications Authority is set out in the Act. The procedures agreed for such appeals relate to any failure by the Council to act in accordance with its own published procedures. No appeal has been made since the establishment of the Council.

External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies (Standard 3.7)

The process, criteria and procedures used by HETAC are predefined and publicly available on the HETAC website and in printed form in some cases. The main policy documents are:

- Taught and Research Programme Accreditation Policy, Criteria and Processes August 2005;
- HETAC Supplementary Guidelines for the Accreditation of Taught Programmes and Research Degree Programmes August 2005;
- Policy and Criteria for Making Joint Awards, Joint Accreditation and Accreditation of Jointly provided Programmes and Quality Assurance of Consortium Providers 2005;
- Higher Education and Training Awards Council Customer Charter 2004;
- Policy and Criteria For the Making of Higher Education and Training Awards 2004;
- Criteria and Procedures for the Delegation and Review of Delegation of Authority to Make Awards 2004;
- Interim Standards 2004;
- HETAC Supplementary Guidelines for the Delegation and Review of Delegation of Authority to Make Awards 2003;
- Guidelines and Criteria for Quality Assurance Procedures in Higher Education and Training 2002.

The evaluative processes generally involve (i) self-assessment by the subject of the quality assurance process; (ii) external assessment by a group of independent experts; (iii) publication of a report including decisions, recommendations and formal outcomes and (iv) a follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations or conditions. The four sub-processes will be analysed in more detail in the following paragraphs.

External assessment panels for delegation of authority evaluations always include a student member (from another institution), those relating to research degree programmes (accreditation to maintain a register) usually include a recent graduate (not currently connected with the subject institution) to represent the student perspective. Other HETAC evaluation panels do not include students as experts but engage with learners in other ways. Site visits are the norm but there are some exceptions where the focus is narrower. A good example of this kind of evaluation is the *agreement* of quality

assurance procedures, where only the documented processes are scrutinised. Evaluation of the effectiveness of quality assurance processes does involve a site visit and, in the case of Institutes of Technology, this evaluation is done jointly with the review of delegated authority.

HETAC publishes research accreditation outcomes and the outcomes of evaluations and reviews relating to delegated authority; the latter are published in hardcopy as well as on the HETAC website. It is HETAC policy that reports arising from other types of evaluation will be published in other areas but this has yet to be implemented. In cases where the subject is applying for accreditation of a new initiative and the recommendation is negative, it is not HETAC's practice to publish such outcomes.

HETAC has two ways of reviewing actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations or conditions. The first arises when HETAC, having considered the advice of the expert panel and the response of the subject, decides that a revised submission must be made and evaluated *de novo*. The second arises when HETAC decides to accredit the institution subject to conditions. In the latter case, the executive is normally tasked with ensuring that the subject institution meets the conditions. Follow-up is also addressed by the subject in its self-assessment for the following review, which generally takes place within five years. Notwithstanding the foregoing follow-up is an area in which HETAC needs to improve. Feedback from people who have served on expert panels indicates that they want to see a more transparent follow-up process where panel members are kept informed of outcomes.

HETAC manages its requirements evaluation processes in a professional manner. A number of mutually supporting strategies are used to maximise consistency. These include (i) the publication of explicit criteria; (ii) a senior member of the executive accompanies the evaluation panel, provides a briefing and supports the preparation of the report; (iii) in selecting the panel the executive tries to achieve balance and maintain a prescribed level of competence; and (iv) in the case of delegated authority evaluation, research accreditation evaluation and agreement of quality assurance, the same person is used to chair a number of evaluations.

HETAC has an appeals procedure for its processes. In some cases this is set out explicitly in the policy documents; in other cases it is built into the operational process (agreement of quality assurance processes). HETAC's customer charter includes a general appeals and complaints process.

Opportunities for improvement:

- Extend the policy of including learners on expert panels;
- Extend the policy of publishing evaluation outcomes;
- Improve the transparency of the follow-up procedures;
- Panel selection criteria.

Accountability procedures (Standard 3.8)

HETAC has arrangements in place for its own accountability. It is a member agency of ENQA and as such is subject to review against the ENQA Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. It is also subject to a statutory review of the performance of its functions by the Qualifications Authority.

HETAC enforces a no-conflict-of-interest mechanism in the work of its external experts; it is explicit for taught and research degree programme accreditation and for delegation of authority.

HETAC does not subcontract quality assurance procedures.

HETAC SELF EVALUATION REPORT

In keeping with the decisions of Ministers under the Bologna Process, HETAC has adopted and implemented a policy on joint awards. In the context of joint accreditation, the accreditation processes used by awarding bodies (excluding bodies acting under authority delegated by HETAC) established by, or recognised by, public bodies statutorily established for that purpose within the European Union and accredited by a recognised higher education quality assurance agency, may be accepted by HETAC as fulfilling its own requirements. Agreements for such awards are currently in place with three universities in the United Kingdom and others are under discussion.

HETAC implemented internal feedback mechanisms on a pilot basis. In 2005, an interview-based process sought to determine *de facto* operational structures and responsibilities prior to a reorganisation.

HETAC regularly meets with higher education providers to discuss issues of mutual interest. These meetings provide a channel for feedback on the perception of HETAC policies and policy modifications have resulted.

Until recently, HETAC did not have a formal external feedback mechanism for expert panel members, though it does collect anecdotal intelligence. Recently HETAC (for the purpose of this evaluation) surveyed external experts and the experience has convinced it to make follow-up questionnaires mandatory.

HETAC has an effective and well-established policy development process that involves consultation with stakeholders. Consultation takes several different forms including formal written feedback on policy drafts, discussion papers, working groups, focus groups, moderated seminars, etc.

The HETAC Corporate Plan 2004-2006 set out the following vision and action points:

Vision for 2006

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.

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.

Actions

Key processes will be identified and documented.

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

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

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

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

HETAC SELF EVALUATION REPORT

During 2005, HETAC conducted a strategic review of its operations and functional areas as part of the process of preparing the Strategic Plan 2006-2010.

Opportunities for improvement:

- Introduce a post-evaluation feedback questionnaire to be completed by expert panel members;
- Extend the formal no-conflict-of-interest mechanism to all areas;
- Implement an internal feedback mechanism;
- Publish a policy for the assurance of the quality of HETAC on the website.

9 OTHER FUNCTIONS OF HETAC

Making awards

HETAC published *Policy and Criteria for the making of higher education and training awards* in 2004. Prior to this, awards were made following the policies and criteria of the NCEA using the transitional powers under Section 21(4). These policies and criteria relied extensively on the national framework of qualifications and included the interim standards of knowledge skill and competence.

HETAC made 10,793 awards in 2004 and a further 13,903 awards were made under delegated authority. With the growth in delegation, the number of HETAC awards fell to 6,964 in 2005 and is projected to fall to about 4,400 in 2006. It is hoped that the number of awards will increase after 2006 as new providers are agreed and learner numbers increase.

As well as awards based on programmes HETAC also makes awards directly to learners based on the learner achieving the standard of knowledge, skill and competence set for an award. HETAC adopted a policy for direct awards and made the first such award in 2005. There are a number of applications for such awards currently under consideration.

Recognising awards

HETAC has the function of recognising awards. It does this both by means of reviewing the awards of external bodies and by recognising the awards presented by individual learners. HETAC has policies for both of these activities.

To date HETAC has recognised an award of one professional accounting body as being at level 9 on the Framework. This decision followed a review of the standards of the award and the quality assurance arrangements of the body in question. It is expected that this activity will increase significantly as professional bodies' awareness of the Framework increases and the Qualifications Authority establishes policies for the inclusion of their awards in the Framework that may require reference to HETAC.

Recognition of the awards of individual learners is primarily carried out by way of assistance to the National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC), based at the Qualifications Authority. The number of applications has risen from 225 in 2004 to 516 in 2005. The NARIC has expressed its satisfaction with the quality and efficiency of the recognition work carried out to date. There is a need to deepen the expertise within HETAC. It is also important to acknowledge the growth in demand for recognition services with the high levels of worker migration into Ireland and plan to scale up the service to meet future demand.

The recognition of learning is part of HETAC's responsibilities under the policies for access, transfer and progression determined by the Qualifications Authority. HETAC operates a system of credit for its awards that is based on the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). HETAC also promotes recognition through its support of the implementation of the Europass Diploma Supplement. All HETAC providers have been required to issue the supplement from 2005 onwards. HETAC contributed to the *Principles and operational guidelines for the implementation of a national approach to credit in Irish higher education and training*, adopted in 2004. The HETAC credit and awards system is compatible with these guidelines. HETAC intends to further explore, with providers and other awarding bodies, how HETAC's experience of operating a national system can be built upon to enhance access, transfer and progression for learners.

10 SUMMARY OF OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

HETAC has transformed itself from the old NCEA along the lines envisaged by the Act and has similarly facilitated the transformation of the sector. The overall effect has been to increase the centrality of the learner and the learner's achievements. HETAC is operating in substantial conformity with the European Standards and Guidelines.

The following are notable features of HETAC's achievements since establishment.

- The functions of the NCEA have been taken over smoothly without significant disruption to learners or institutions;
- Policies and procedures for all the major functions under the Act have been established and published;
- All the major functions have been implemented;
- A strong contribution to the development of the National Framework of Qualifications and to its rapid and widespread implementation;
- A major input to the development of quality assurance policy and practice at European and global levels that has enhanced the perception of Irish higher education internationally;
- Optimal delegation of authority to institutes of technology has confirmed the standing of the institutes while maintaining confidence in the standards and integrity of awards;
- Growth in the number and diversity of accredited providers, awards and fields of learning.

The following recommendations address areas for improvement:

- Consultation processes should be managed to ensure that a reasonable timeframe is allocated for interested parties to provide feedback;
- Policies and processes should be subject to regulatory impact analysis to ensure that they are not unduly prescriptive or complex;
- External assessment processes could be improved through:
 - applying more consistent guidelines to the selection of panels;
 - making provision for the briefing or training of panel members, particularly panel chairs;
 - reviewing the issue of remuneration of panel chairs and international experts;
 - ensuring that panels are comprehensively debriefed on completion of their work;
 - taking a more systematic and transparent approach to following up the implementation by providers of recommendations or conditions made by expert panels.
- The results of all reviews should be published in some form; this would include the publication by providers of reviews delegated to them, such as programmatic reviews;
- The learner and programme record system should be reviewed, in light of delegated authority and the agreed national approach to credit;
- Further system-wide analyses should be undertaken;
- The promotion of good practice by soft mechanisms such as dissemination of information through publications and training activities should be increased;
- A long term strategy for the promotion of HETAC and its awards and services should be implemented;
- A system of internal quality assurance should be adopted within HETAC;

HETAC SELF EVALUATION REPORT

- The awards recognition function should be promoted more actively, and plans should be made to deal with any resulting scale-up required; cooperation with institutions and the Qualifications Authority would help in this.

11 SOURCES

Written submissions

Council of Directors of Institutes of Technology

Council of Registrars of Institutes of Technology

Engineers Ireland

Peter Fuller (Dundalk Institute of Technology)

Galway Mayo Institute of Technology

Hibernia College

INQAAHE President

Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown

Institute of Technology, Tralee

Cilian Ó Súilleabháin (Cork Institute of Technology)

Recognition Ireland – National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

Kurt Sohm (Fachhochschule Council, Austria)

Stakeholder surveys

Survey of heads of institutions

Survey of research panellists

Survey of programme accreditation panellists

Survey of delegated authority panellists

Stakeholder interview and meeting reports

A student perspective: Learner interviews report

Meeting with Council of Directors of Institutes of Technology

Interview with head of private college

Interview with head of religious college

Meeting with Chief Executive, FETAC

Meeting with Chief Executive, Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB)

Internal reports

Function review of programme accreditation

Function review of research accreditation

Function review of quality assurance agreement

Function review of delegated authority

APPENDIX: THE STRUCTURE OF HETAC

