



Procedure for assessment of applications for Registration as a HETAC Registered Provider

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Operating Procedure

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Related Documents:

Guidelines & Criteria for Quality Assurance Procedures in Higher Education & Training, 2002

Monitoring Policy, 2008

Policy on Registration of Providers, 2008

Participating in an evaluation panel as an expert assessor: a Guideline, 2008

Supersedes:

Procedure for assessment of applications for Registration as a HETAC Registered Provider, Version 7, May 2009

Procedure for assessment of applications for Registration as a HETAC Registered Provider, Version 6, December 2008

Operating Document, *Terms of Reference*, Version 1, 2003

Document Information:

Background

This document forms part of a suite of documents which sets out the policy, identifies criteria and describes the procedures whereby a provider of higher education and training may apply to become registered to offer programmes leading to HETAC awards. HETAC's *Policy on Registration of Providers* ("Policy") and *Procedure for applications for Registration as a HETAC Registered Provider* ("Procedure") are intended to be read together. The concept of registration as a HETAC Registered Provider is not defined in legislation and this Policy introduces and defines the concept. The Procedure describes the process by which an applicant institution can achieve *Registration*.

Procedure for assessment of applications for Registration as a HETAC Registered Provider

Registration as a HETAC Registered Provider is the successful outcome of a six stage process:

- 1 Institution makes enquiry
- 2 Institution submits application
- 3 Determination of basic eligibility (paragraph 3 below).
- 4 General Application Evaluation for Institutional Approval (paragraph 3 below).
- 5 Accreditation of a programme of education or training (paragraph 4 below).
- 6 Decision by Council

Usually these six stages will occur in the above sequence, however, this may be varied in any given instance at HETAC's discretion. In the case of specialised institutions offering a single programme or a cluster of closely related programmes, the Institutional Evaluation and Programme Accreditation (steps 4 and 5) can occur in parallel. HETAC may develop further guidelines and activities to support applicants through these stages.

Pre Application process – Stages 1 and 2

1 Enquiry Stage

HETAC staff correspond with and meet with a wide variety of potential providers. Such informal communications are intended to help providers clarify whether HETAC registration is an appropriate route for them to follow. HETAC is not resourced to help individual providers develop the capacity for registration if it is not already present. Neither would such help be compatible with the role that HETAC plays in subsequent decisions about registration. HETAC will help providers identify appropriate sources of support to develop their capacity for registration. HETAC is also committed to providing general advice through documentation and support activities such as seminars and workshops for potential providers.

2 Application Stage

Where discussions with HETAC representatives suggest that HETAC may be an appropriate awarding body for the potential provider, the provider is invited to submit a completed application form which should be accompanied by the appropriate fee.¹

The fee for the Institutional Registration process which is payable by the applicant on submission of the application form is not repayable to unsuccessful applicants nor to applicants who subsequently withdraw from the process. Further direct costs incurred by HETAC may be recharged to the applicant.

A section on the application form requires applicants to indicate into which category they fall in respect of Learner Protection, i.e. Exempt or Not Exempt, and where Not Exempt, whether they intend to seek a Bond or an Agreement with Alternative Providers.

Post Application process – Stages 3, 4, 5 and 6

3 Determination of Basic Eligibility

HETAC undertakes due diligence enquiries in respect of applicants. Details of the scope of these enquiries are given in Annexe 1, and the application form provided in Annexe 2 is designed to capture much of the detail required.

¹ The Minister for Education and Science has determined the fee for registration at €3500, with effect from April 2nd, 2009 until further notice

3.1 Potential providers are requested to submit a screening application to enable HETAC to determine fully and formally whether they fulfil the basic eligibility requirements before proceeding to evaluation for full approval. A form is utilised for this purpose (Annexe 2). HETAC staff undertake desk reviews and consultation with relevant organisations to verify the contents of the application.

3.2 An administrative site visit is conducted by a member or members of HETAC staff to audit claims made about status, documentation and facilities.

3.3 An eligibility report is prepared, summarising the joint findings of the desk enquiries and site visit, and recommending whether an applicant:

- may proceed to a full evaluation
- or
- is not eligible to proceed to a full evaluation at this point in time.

An applicant may also be required to submit additional information, or to take certain actions and be reassessed prior to a final report being prepared. The Executive decides on progression to the next step and the report is forwarded to HETAC Academic Committee for note. Decisions not to progress are subject to confirmation by the Academic Committee and Council

4 Evaluation of full application for Institutional Approval

4.1 The purpose of the process

The procedure is designed to address the overall objective of evaluation as defined in HETAC policy.

4.2 What is required from the applicant?

Institutions are required to demonstrate that they provide or intend to provide higher education and training in a manner consistent with the principles for institutional registration as defined in HETAC policy.

The applicant should document how the institution satisfies the seven principles for registration. This should be accompanied by supporting evidence. Evidence should be presented in Irish or English.

This full application should include:

- A self-evaluation document (normally 15-20 pages) indicating how it addresses the principles and referring to supporting evidence.
- The institution's quality assurance policies and procedures.

4.3 Evidencing the principles for registration

4.3.1 A system of governance that protects the integrity of academic processes and standards

Academic decision making reflects the interests of learners and the maintenance of standards. Overall corporate decision makers within the institution, be they owners, shareholders or trustees, do not exercise exclusive authority or undue influence over academic decision making. Academic decision making is independent of commercial considerations. Academic decision makers are appropriately qualified and experienced.

Evidence for this principle would include clear documentation of a governance structure for the institution, with relevant organisational charts. Institutions are not required to have a particular organisational form in order to be registered with HETAC. However, it should have a body with full responsibility for academic development, quality assurance and learner assessment. The independence of this body from any commercial functions of the institution should be made clear, for example by descriptions of roles and responsibilities of individuals and groups. The means whereby the interests of

learners are represented in academic decision making should be demonstrated. A provider is responsible for any activities conducted in its name and this responsibility extends to activities conducted by consortia involving the provider. Accordingly, a provider's Academic Council (or equivalent top level committee) should establish the overarching strategy for collaborative provision; approve potential collaborator providers and should be involved in the establishment of any collaborative arrangements and the associated consortium arrangements. Documents in this regard including service level agreements, or service teaching arrangements may be provided. The qualifications and relevant experience of the academic decision makers should be provided.

4.3.2 Robust quality assurance and quality enhancement

Institutions are responsible for putting in place systems to assure the quality of the education and training they provide and for developing an organisational culture that promotes the continued enhancement of that education and training.

Evidence for this would include a handbook of quality assurance policies and procedures for the institution. This should address the points in Part 1 of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, namely:

- Policy and procedures for quality assurance
- Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards
- Assessment of students
- Quality assurance of teaching staff
- Learning resources and support
- Information systems
- Public information

Additional guidance is provided in HETAC's *Guidelines and Criteria for Quality Assurance Procedures in Higher Education and Training*, 2002 and in the statements produced by the Irish Higher Education Quality Network. Essential requirements regarding collaborations in Ireland and overseas, as well as the direct provision of education and/or training overseas, is contained in the *HETAC Policy for collaborative programmes, transnational programmes and joint awards*.

The applicant should produce records of how these policies and procedures have been operated and reviewed.

4.3.3 Commitment to fair and consistent assessment that is fit for purpose

The institution is responsible for establishing procedures for assessing learners' attainment of the standards of knowledge, skill and competence required for awards. HETAC from time to time produces policies and guidelines that support institutions in performing this function.

Evidence relating to this could include the institution's assessment policy, appeals procedures, reports of external examiners, and research on the effectiveness of the institution's assessment procedures.

4.3.4 An institutional environment that promotes learning

The institution has an open intellectual community that values critical reflection and fosters personal and professional development for learners and staff. Staff are appropriately qualified and experienced. The institution has processes in place to ensure that the content of programmes reflects advances in the relevant disciplines and that the pedagogic style incorporates good practice.

Evidence for this principle could be drawn from institutional mission statements and strategic plans, prospectus and marketing literature, history of the institution, alumni records, and institutional policies on teaching and learning and staff recruitment and development, as well as records of how such policies have been implemented.

4.3.5 Support for access, transfer and progression for learners

The institution recognises that any given programme is but one element in an individual's journey of lifelong learning and puts in place policies and procedures to support that journey.

The core elements of the Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access Transfer and Progression of Learners (2003) determined by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) are to be implemented by all providers of programmes leading to awards in the National Framework of Qualifications. These include provisions relating to credit, transfer and progression routes, entry arrangements and the provision of information. Further principles and guidelines on aspects of these procedures have been developed by NQAI and by HETAC.

Evidence relating to access, transfer and progression might include enrolment policies and records, student progression records, graduate destination records, transfer and progression agreements with other institutions, and policies on the recognition of prior learning.

4.3.6 Peer relationships with the broader community of higher education and training

Higher education and training is a collegial, international endeavour. Awards made under the National Framework of Qualifications are intended to promote mutual recognition and confidence in the learning outcomes attained. Any other awards or accreditation offered through the institution are from reputable bodies.

Evidence for this principle could, for example, be found at institutional level in collaboration in joint programmes with other higher education institutions and in the details of the awards and accreditations offered by the institution. The participation of staff in higher education or professional networks at disciplinary level, collaboration in research activity, participation in conferences and seminars, publication in academic or professional journals, contributions to public policy and engagement with employers and the wider community are also relevant. Links should be forged at the corporate level as well as between individuals.

4.3.7 Maintenance of a resource base and administrative capacity sufficient to protect learners' investment of time and money

The institution is adequately resourced to undertake and complete the programmes proposed. Physical and electronic infrastructure is provided on a stable basis. Financial plans are based on realistic projections of student numbers and other variables. The administrative infrastructure of the institution is able to provide timely decision making to learners and a regular flow of information to HETAC and other stakeholders. Appropriate transfer or bonding arrangements are in place to protect learners in the event that the institution is no longer able to complete delivery of a programme after it has commenced.

Evidence would include financial records and plans, details of the physical and electronic infrastructure and policy on statutory protection of learners.

4.4 HETAC process for evaluating the submission

Evaluation by peers and stakeholders is central to external evaluation. HETAC will appoint a panel of experts to carry out the institutional evaluation on its behalf. HETAC will also appoint a chair and a secretary to the panel. Panel members will be chosen based on the criteria indicated in current HETAC guidelines.

4.4.1 Composition of panel

- Panels will normally consist of 3-5 members.
- The membership of each panel will include persons with senior management experience of higher education and training provision and experts in higher education quality assurance.
- Where possible the panel membership will include experts with experience of institutions of the same scale and similar mission to the applicant.
- Normally, at least one of the members will be from outside the State, bringing an international perspective to the review.
- Any inadvertent or unavoidable deviations from this composition or changes to the composition of a panel will not of themselves invalidate any of the panel's actions.

4.4.2 Actions of the Panel

- The panel will visit the applicant institution and meet with senior staff, learners and other stakeholders of the institution in separate groups.
- The panel will consider the institutional self-evaluation document and any supporting documentation as well as the eligibility report prepared in the preceding phase. In exceptional circumstances more than one site visit may be undertaken.
- The panel will prepare an institutional evaluation report following the site visit(s). A draft report will be sent to the institution to comment on factual inaccuracies before a final version is drafted.
- The institutional evaluation report, with its recommendations on whether the institution's quality assurance should be agreed and the institution approved to proceed to a programme accreditation stage, will be submitted to the HETAC Academic Committee for decision. In the case of specialised institutions offering a single programme or a cluster of closely related programmes, the institutional evaluation and the programme accreditation (steps 4 and 5) can occur in parallel and thus be submitted to the HETAC Academic Committee for decision contemporaneously. Where a negative decision is recommended the report will indicate clearly which criteria have not been satisfied and the Academic Committee's decision will be subject to confirmation by the Council.

5 Accreditation of a programme

Where a positive decision is made on Institutional Approval, a programme accreditation process is conducted according to the HETAC policy and procedure document *Taught and Research Programme Accreditation Policy, Criteria and Processes* 2005 or any process superseding or complementing this. The applicant may submit one or more programmes for accreditation. Programme accreditation fees are payable with the submission of the programme proposal(s).

6 Decision by Council

When an institution has received a positive recommendation from the Institutional Approval panel and from the Programme Accreditation panel, the final steps can be taken towards Registration. The Academic Committee of HETAC will consider the panel reports from both steps and make a recommendation on whether the institution should be registered. This recommendation on Registration incorporates a recommendation on statutory agreement of the provider's quality assurance procedures and the accreditation of the initial programme(s). The final decision lies with the Council of HETAC.

Until Council has decided to grant Registration to an institution, no representation shall be made on the part of, or on behalf of, the institution regarding any aspect of the HETAC approval, accreditation or registration process. Applicants should carefully note that prior to Registration being granted the applicant shall not in any way represent or imply that HETAC recognises the applicant institution. This prohibition applies to advertising, press statements and responses to queries from current or prospective learners. HETAC may suspend or discontinue the application process if it becomes aware that such representations are being made. It should be noted that any such representation may constitute an offence under Section 47 of the Qualifications Act.

HETAC will publish its decisions and the reports upon which they are based. Intermediate decisions at Stages 3, 4 and 5 will not be published prior to the conclusion of the registration process.

Following Registration HETAC will monitor the provider in accordance with the *Policy on monitoring new providers*. This provides that reports be made to Council on how the provider is operating the programmes which have been accredited.

Due diligence for determination of basic eligibility

A key step in the process of registration as a HETAC provider is an examination of the status and governance of the applicant. Applicants will be required to provide information under the following headings:

History of Applicant

Origin and rationale of the Applicant;

Details of parent/subsidiary or associated entities or business partners;

Relationships with any existing or former providers of programmes of education or training, whether or not accredited by HETAC.

Principals

Profile/qualifications of principals of Applicant;

Directorships (present and former) held by principals; proprietary interests in any provider of programmes of education and training.

Corporate organisation and financial standing

If incorporated, location of company registration (Ireland – Company Registration Office, Registrar of Friendly Societies; or international equivalents etc.); Status of Applicant (e.g. partnership, limited company, charity).

Name/style/title and all business name/brand/logo details to be utilised; Internet domain name registration (compliance with relevant Irish and foreign law, best practice etc.).

Financial standing (evidence of tax legitimacy/compliance)

Up to date financial statements, audited accounts etc.

Structure (e.g. board and shareholder profiles of applicant and any subsidiaries, profiles/details of all participating or promoting entities and individuals, consortium partners, etc.).

Links with other HE providers and their status (status, national, international, field of discipline etc.);

Links with other HE accreditation agencies and their status (status, national, international, field of discipline etc.);

Links in other jurisdictions (e.g. professional bodies, associations, consortia);

Status of the institution in professional field;

Details of any complaints made to or disputes with regulatory or awarding bodies regarding the applicant and the outcome of same.

Documentary evidence **will** be sought from applicants on the above matters. It is a condition of application that the applicant consents to HETAC conducting enquiries directly with other agencies including (but not limited to) the Company Registration Office, Data Protection Commissioner, professional/accreditation bodies, An Garda Síochána (including GNIB), Revenue Commissioners, and other awarding bodies and quality assurance agencies. Applicant's consent is also sought for enquiries with comparable bodies in other jurisdictions where relevant.