

**Review of the Higher Education and Training Awards Council**

**Response of the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) to the report of the Independent Panel**

## ***1 Introduction***

1.0 HETAC welcomes the report and thanks the Panel for its work. HETAC is aware of the challenge faced by the Panel in conducting this review. It is the first such review under the Qualifications Act and the first national review of an agency since the publication of the European Standards and Guidelines. The Panel had to devise its own methodology within the context of the terms of reference. HETAC is very satisfied with the approach taken, with its strong emphasis on gathering evidence directly from stakeholders combined with the detailed examination of documentary sources and critical use of HETAC's own Self-Evaluation Report. The resultant findings are robust and have a transparent basis. HETAC is pleased to publish this response to the report.

HETAC welcomes the primary findings of the Panel: that HETAC has performed effectively its principal statutory functions and that, in the performance of these functions, HETAC complies with the European Standards and Guidelines. The Panel notes that this confirms the view expressed by HETAC in the Self-Evaluation Report.

## ***2 Achievements of HETAC***

2.0 In addition to the main findings of effective performance of functions and compliance with European Standards and Guidelines, the Panel selected various aspects of the performance of HETAC for affirmation and commendation. HETAC is grateful for these acknowledgements which may be summarised as follows:

- the key role played by HETAC, and the Chief Executive in particular, in fostering the development of quality assurance in higher education internationally in a way that redounds to the reputation of Irish higher education
- the strong measure of collaboration between HETAC and the other bodies established under the Qualifications Act and Irish higher education generally
- the effective performance of its award making function and its contribution to the implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications
- the effective recognition of awards, with particular reference to professional awards and the support for the European Diploma Supplement
- the setting of standards at all levels, including the potentially difficult levels 6 and level 10, through judicious interaction with stakeholders
- the approachability and helpfulness of Council staff in the support of new providers and disciplinary areas
- the effective start made in institution-level quality assurance through the agreement of quality assurance procedures
- the strong support given by HETAC to the national approach to credit
- HETAC has consulted appropriately and effectively in performing its functions
- HETAC's review processes result in recommendations for action by providers
- the use of external members in periodic reviews of programmes
- the contribution of the research and policy analysis unit to sector-wide collaboration
- the making public of its Self-Evaluation Report
- the approach to ensuring the independence of HETAC's decision making

The Panel also noted its broad concurrence with the notable features of HETAC achievements identified in the Self-Evaluation Report.

## ***3 Response to Recommendations***

3.0 The Panel made two major recommendations, and three additional recommendations, summarised in Section 33 of its report. Various other points of advice are made in the report. The panel also endorsed the recommendations contained in the Self-Evaluation Report. HETAC takes the views of the Panel very seriously. Quality assurance agencies must lead by example in acknowledging areas for improvement and responding to the advice proffered by independent experts.

### 3.1 Training of reviewers

*The Panel recommends that the Council ... gives urgent attention to the provision of initial and ongoing training to its reviewers, including the requirement that no-one should normally be a member of a review team unless they have undergone such training*

HETAC acknowledges that there is scope for improvement in the training of reviewers. This was identified in the Self-Evaluation Report and steps have already been taken to redress this deficit, labelled as urgent by the Panel. A strategic approach to this issue requires different responses for the various review activities according to the demands placed on the teams. HETAC will also be mindful of the need to balance the risk to review effectiveness associated with under-preparation and the risk of deterring appropriate experts from participating in reviews by imposing too high a burden of training. HETAC considers the recommendations with respect to reviewer training to apply equally to reviewers acting under delegated authority. HETAC will cooperate with the institutes to facilitate the training of these reviewers also.

HETAC will adopt a two stage process for improving training for its ongoing series of programme validation reviews: an interim process to be implemented immediately and a full-scale revision of training for chairs and ordinary panel members to be rolled-out over the coming academic year. Other review events, particularly institutional quality assurance reviews, will be preceded by training for reviewers.

The following actions are proposed:

- Interim training arrangements for programme accreditation panels will include advance documentation and onsite induction (from June 2006)
- HETAC will prepare a comprehensive policy on training based on the international best practice, having regard to the training modalities instanced by the Panel (for completion in October 2006)
- HETAC will explicitly address training requirements in devising and documenting review processes (ongoing for new processes and supplements prepared for all current processes by November 2006)
- HETAC will appoint an advisory committee on training (June 2006)
- Selected programme accreditation panels will be accompanied by a coach (from June 2006)
- A conference of reviewers will be convened periodically to help reviewers reflect on their experience and learn good practice (first conference September 2006)
- All programme accreditation panel chairs will undertake a formal training programme prior to chairing a review (from October 2006)
- Guidelines will be issued for training of reviewers operating under delegated authority (December 2006)
- Training programmes and materials will be prepared for programme accreditation panels (by January 2007)
- All programme accreditation panel members will undertake formal training prior to participating in a review (from February 2007)
- The planning for the pilot phase of institutional quality assurance review process will address training for all reviewers taking part in the pilots (from November 2006)
- Training programmes materials will be developed for the main phase of institutional quality reviews (March 2007)
- All panel members will complete post-panel surveys identifying issues in relation to their training (from June 2006)
- The role of the chair will be expanded to include feedback on the performance of the panel and the adequacy of their preparation (June 2006)

### 3.2 Selection and deployment of reviewers

*The Panel recommends that ... the Council reviews the qualifications, experience and expertise required of its reviewers, with the aim of enabling the Council to take a more strategic as opposed to what appears currently to be a rather pragmatic approach to their selection and deployment*

While current practice has been sufficient to maintain stakeholder confidence in HETAC's decisions in the past expectations of transparency and expertise are rising. The development of the reviewer pool both in Ireland and from overseas is now a priority. As in the matter of training the level of risk varies with the particular process under consideration. Institution level processes are more demanding and more critical than programme level processes. Very specialized programme panels require *ad hoc* experts, often from overseas or industry, and these complement the local pool of academic experts who may be more experienced in national requirements. The following actions are proposed:

- HETAC has commenced an analysis of the existing set of reviewers (for completion by August 2006)
- HETAC has begun upgrading the MIS system to support the selection and deployment of reviewers, including for example, electronic storage of CVs (for completion by October 2006)
- Explicit statements will be prepared of the qualities required for each reviewer role (July 2006 and ongoing as new processes and roles are developed)
- New reviewers will be recruited by a variety of mechanisms, to include public invitations for expressions of interest, stakeholder nominations and direct invitations to qualified individuals. All applicants review against the qualities identified (September 2006)
- The composition of panels will be subject to regular audit (from September 2006)
- Guidelines will be produced for the formal appraisal of the performance of reviewers (December 2006)

### 3.3 Sustainability of support to individual programmes

*The Panel recommends that the Council ... reviews the longer-term sustainability of the level and quality of support currently given by staff considering individual programmes submitted for validation*

Stakeholders have long valued the support given by HETAC staff in bringing their programmes to validation. As the academic infrastructure of the longer established providers has grown there has been a concomitant reduction in the demands these placed on HETAC staff for this type of support, culminating in the delegation of authority to the Institutes of Technology. HETAC wishes to see growth in institutional capacity and autonomy among all of its providers. In recent years, moreover, HETAC has seen the provision of such support as being part of its role, not simply in helping the provider, but in disseminating the new thinking embodied in the National Framework of Qualifications. Approaches to fostering academic growth that do not rely on direct engagement at programme level will be considered. For example, new providers may be encouraged to collaborate with more established institutions and some providers may be able to enter into consortia. Improved quality and accessibility of the information furnished to providers seeking accreditation might reduce the demand for direct support. The following actions are proposed:

- Issue guidelines on the level of support to providers (September 2006)
- Identify where the standards development process might be used to help a range of providers (ongoing)

### 3.4 Variability of programme validation processes

*The Panel recommends that the Council ... considers how its current approach to validation might be varied, especially where a new programme, or a programme at a level not previously offered by a college, is involved*

The validation of a programme for a new provider is already somewhat different to that of an established provider. Although the panel stage follows the same process, the resultant validation has conditions attached. HETAC appoints external examiners for the first three years and reviews their reports. The interactions of this process with institution quality review procedures have not been defined. Many of the new providers are small and the relationship between institutional and programme review may need revision. The following actions are proposed:

- The operational processes for programme accreditation will be reviewed to ensure that panels are focused on academic risk (October 2006)
- Policy on periodic review and re-accreditation of programmes will be reviewed, and its relationship to institutional review examined, particularly in the case of providers with a very small number of programmes (March 2007)

### 3.5 Publication of reports

*The Panel recommends that the Council ... considers publishing all its reports as a matter of principle, and publicising its intention in this regard*

HETAC is already committed to publication in principle though as the Self-Evaluation Report and the Panel noted this has not taken place in practice for programme validation reports. The following actions are proposed:

- All programme validation decisions from 2005 onwards are published on the HETAC website (June 2006)
- All institutions undergoing reviews and all participating reviewers are informed that future review reports will be published and a notification to this effect is placed on the HETAC website (June 2006)
- All reports, including programme validation reports, will be published (July 2006)
- Publication of reports, by providers, including programme validation and review, will be monitored (September 2006)

## **4 Response to additional advice**

4.0 In addition to its major recommendations, the Panel offered comments and advice on various functions. In some cases this was to encourage developments already in train and in others fresh ideas were offered. The following comments are referenced to sections of the Panel's report.

4.1 HETAC adopted a new policy on **promotion of awards** in March, 2006 (7.2). It has since completed a tendering process for specialist services to support the implementation of this policy.

4.2 HETAC will review **processes relating to the validation and quality assurance of overseas programmes** (7.3). There has been considerable development in international practice in this field and HETAC will take this into consideration before adopting new policies and processes. (March 2007)

4.3 The initial direct awards have been undertaken as pilot cases, without significant attention to the **resource implications of making direct awards** (8.2). These cases have served as "proof of concept". Before any large scale promotion of this function is undertaken an overall policy and business plan for the direct awarding function will be developed. (April 2007)

4.4 **Further work on standards for fields of learning** will be undertaken as the demand arises (9.1). Such demand comes from providers, regulators and professional bodies. At present HETAC is in discussion with interested parties regarding the possibility of setting standards for fields related to the Buildings Control Bill (2006).

4.5 The exhortation to **minimise bureaucracy and ambiguity in research degree procedures** is rightly balanced by the need to maintain confidence in the research training activity of HETAC providers (9.4). HETAC also wishes to avoid changing the processes while providers are in the midst of adopting and implementing them. It is proposed to review them in 2007 and make any desired changes following that review.

4.6 The **review of institutional quality assurance** is the major new process to be commenced in 2006 (11.3). The details of the process are being finalised and a draft schedule of reviews will be published in June 2006. A workshop for providers preparing for review will be held in September 2006.

4.7 HETAC will continue its efforts to **build up the national system for access, transfer and progression** (13.5). In order to develop statistical evidence on the effectiveness of procedures for access, transfer and progression, HETAC is undertaking changes to its learner record system. The Personal Public Services Number (PPSN) will be used as a unique identifier for all records from September 2006.

4.8 HETAC will provide **feedback to reviewers on the final disposition of all review processes** (20.2) from June 2006.

4.9 Institutions are required to document responses to reviews and provide **follow-up plans, the implementation of which are to be monitored by HETAC** (20.3). HETAC has already implemented such planning and monitoring in the case of delegated authority reviews (from February 2006).

4.10 The **support for enhancement and system-wide analysis** is becoming more systematic with the introduction of the development team within HETAC's organisational structure (22.1). The activities are being co-ordinated in an annual plan currently in preparation, to be made public in June 2006.

4.11 The requirement for **continuing human resource development to adapt the changing demands on the organisation** is recognised (26.1). HETAC will further extend its performance management and development system (PMDS) and this framework will inform human resource planning.

4.12 While the Panel acknowledged HETAC's commitment to full and open consultation, the **management of consultation processes** might be improved (16.2). HETAC intends to produce an annual schedule of intended policy developments and associated consultation processes (July 2006).

## ***5 Conclusion***

5.0 HETAC emerges from this review confirmed in the thrust of its work and strengthened by the clear recommendations of the panel. HETAC is grateful to the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland for acceding to HETAC's request for a review at this time, setting trenchant terms of reference and appointing a Panel of distinction and competence. HETAC is also grateful to the many stakeholders who assisted in the self-evaluation phase and the Panel visit. Implementing the actions outlined in this response will require continued co-operation from many of these stakeholders.

It is the intention of HETAC to publish a report on the implementation of these actions in June 2007.