

Internal Quality Assurance at Universities – The Irish Perspective

prepared by:
Dr Pdraig Walsh
Chief Executive
Irish Universities Quality Board
10 Lower Mount Street
Dublin 2
IRELAND

pwalsh@iuqb.ie

Working material provided for the conference: *Internal Quality Assurance at higher education institutions – requirements and good practices*, organised by the Centre of Accreditation and Quality Assurance in Swiss Universities (OAQ) held in Bern, Switzerland, 2 December 2005

Irish Higher Education System

Ireland has a population of 4 million people with over 55% of the school leaving cohort in higher education. Higher education in Ireland is a binary system, consisting of 7 universities and 14 Institutes of Technology. Universities are funded by the Higher Education Authority and have considerable autonomy over their own affairs. Institutes of Technology are funded directly by the Department of Education of Science and have less autonomy than universities (although a recent OECD review recommended that the Institutes of Technology should be given more autonomy and should also come under the remit of the Higher Education Authority).

Quality Assurance in Irish Higher Education

Quality Assurance in the universities is governed by the provisions of the Universities Act (1997). Quality Assurance in 13 of the Institutes of Technology is the responsibility the Higher Education Training and Awards Council (HETAC). Quality Assurance in the Dublin Institute of Technology is the responsibility of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI). Both HETAC and NQAI were established under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act (1999).

Internal Quality Assurance at Irish Universities

Under the Universities Act (1997), it is the responsibility of the governing authority of each university to establish quality assurance procedures aimed at improving the quality of education and related services in the university. The quality assurance procedures must include the evaluation, at least every 10 years, of each department and faculty and any service provided by the university. (Although a 10 year cycle is stipulated in the Universities Act, most universities operate a review cycle of 6 years or less). The departments to be evaluated include both academic and administrative departments. The evaluation must include the production of a self-assessment report for each department. A peer review group is selected, usually by the university quality committee (which usually reports to the academic council (senate) or governing authority (board) of the university) from among nominations made by the department under review. The review group must contain national and international peers (and may also contain staff members of the university and stakeholders such as employers) competent to make comparison about the quality of teaching and research and the provision of services at university level. The university is required to implement the recommendations in the review report arising from the evaluation,

subject to the resources being available to the university. The university is required to publish the outcome of any such evaluation.

In practice, a summary of the Peer Review Group report and any actions taken by the university on foot of any recommendations contained therein are sent to the governing authority and this report is then published on the university website. Since 2002, the reports to the governing authorities on quality evaluation of academic and administrative departments in the 7 Irish universities have been published on the university (quality office) websites. The links to these reports can be accessed from the IUQB website.

Although the individual universities have the authority to develop their own procedures independently, in 2003, the inter university quality steering committee (IUQSC) of the rector's conference (IUA) produced an agreed *Framework for Quality in Irish Universities*¹.

External Quality Assurance at Irish Universities

Under the terms of the Universities Act (1997), each governing authority is required, at least every 15 years, to conduct a review of the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures in the university and to publish a report on the outcome of such a review. In addition, the Higher Education Authority has the right to review the quality assurance procedures in the university sector and to publish the report emanating from any such review.

Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) www.iuqb.ie

The Irish Universities Quality Board was established by the seven Irish universities in 2003 to increase the level of inter-university co-operation in developing their quality assurance procedures and processes, in line with best international systems. Upon its establishment, the governing authorities of the seven Irish universities devolved to IUQB the responsibility for organising the periodic reviews of the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures in the individual universities, as required by the Universities Act (1997).

IUQB is currently being established as a company limited by guarantee. The Board consists of 17 members; 7 nominated by the rectors conference (Irish Universities Association (IUA) and 10 from outside the Irish university sector including nominees of the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC), the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) and nominees of the European University Association (EUA) and from the North American university system.

IUQB is funded by the universities and the HEA. In addition to organising external quality assurance reviews, IUQB is involved in establishing and publishing national guidelines of good practice for Irish universities in the key areas of Teaching and Learning, Research and Strategic Planning/Management. In 2005, the first of these booklets was published, on *Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Universities*⁴.

Reviews of internal Quality Assurance in Irish Universities

In 2003, IUQB and the HEA jointly commissioned the European Universities Association (EUA) to conduct a review of quality assurance in the seven Irish

universities. The EUA has a strong international reputation in quality assurance having conducted institutional reviews of 135 universities in 33 countries during the previous 10 years. The review was structured to accord with the respective responsibilities of the universities and the HEA concerning quality assurance under the Universities Act (1997). The combined review arrangements were designed to ensure that the university system and its stakeholders gained maximum benefit from comprehensive evaluations by teams of experienced international quality assurance experts and that the procedures and process in place in Irish universities could be reviewed against best practice internationally.

The EUA were required to conduct, and report to the HEA on, an overall review of quality assurance procedures by the universities and in the case of each university, review and report on the effectiveness of its quality assurance procedures and the implementation of findings arising out of the application of those procedures, in the context of its overall institutional decision making and strategic planning.

In 2004, each university was the subject of a preliminary site visit (two days duration) by a EUA review team composed of independent experts in quality assurance from Europe and North America. A further site visit to each university (three days duration) took place some four or five months later, after which time individual reports were prepared by the EUA review team. In addition, the EUA review team prepared a crosscutting sectoral report for the HEA.

Arising from the review, the *Review of the Effectiveness of the Quality Assurance Procedures in Irish Universities: University Reports*³ (containing individual reports on the 7 universities) and a crosscutting *Review of Quality Assurance in Irish Universities – Sectoral Report*² were published in 2005.

Findings of the Review

The EUA Sectoral report² noted that a common framework for quality assurance had been agreed collectively by all the Irish universities through the IUQB. This framework is based on the internationally accepted and recognised principles of an initial self-assessment, a peer review and report, followed by actions to ensure quality improvement. This common framework, shared by all 7 universities has in turn helped ensure that developments are coherent and consistent across the Irish university sector. The EUA teams were unanimously impressed by the well organised systems in place, by the seriousness of the approach in each university to the quality assurance process, and by the amount of work undertaken by departments, faculties, service units and the university leadership and administration to ensure the success of these procedures. The agreed IUQB focus on quality improvement was particularly commended.

This systematic organisation and promotion of quality assurance at the initiative of the universities themselves was, in the opinion of the EUA teams, unparalleled in any other country in Europe, or indeed in the United States or Canada. The system would appear to strike the right tone and combination of public interest, accountability and university autonomy. It encourages a greater focus on quality and improvement than some systems worldwide, while at the same time being less intrusive than some other systems in Europe.

The EUA report noted, however, that while the Irish universities are pioneers in developing and implementing a systematic quality review and quality improvement system by themselves, they are not yet leaders in using the outcomes of the system to stimulate strategic change inside the universities. The report stressed that this

should be a priority during the next phase of developing the quality assurance system.

Future Developments

In May 2005 in Bergen, the Ministers responsible for higher education in the 45 Bologna signatory countries adopted the Standards for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. These consist of standards for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions (and therefore the responsibility of the Irish universities), standards for external quality assurance of higher education (the responsibility of IUQB and the HEA, in agreement with the universities) and standards for external quality assurance agencies (the responsibility of IUQB and HEA). IUQB has recently proposed updating the *Framework for Quality in Irish universities* as a joint publication of IUQB and IUA, as a statement of the Irish universities' consonance with the European Standards and Guidelines.

Nomenclature

EUA	European University Association
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HETAC	Higher Education Training and Awards Council
IUA	Irish Universities Association (<i>formerly</i> Conference of Heads of Irish Universities)
IUQB	Irish Universities Quality Board
IUQSC	Inter University Quality Steering Committee
NQAI	National Qualification Authority of Ireland

Bibliography

1. *A Framework for Quality in Irish Universities – meeting the challenge of change* (2003) Conference of Heads of Irish Universities, Dublin

http://www.iuqb.ie/Framework_Document.pdf



2. *Review of Quality Assurance in Irish Universities – Sectoral Report* (2005) Irish Universities Quality Board/Higher Education Authority, Dublin

http://www.iuqb.ie/Report_Sectoral.pdf



3. *Review of the Effectiveness of the Quality Assurance Procedure in Irish Universities – University Reports* (2005) Irish Universities Quality Board/Higher Education Authority, Dublin

http://www.iuqb.ie/Report_Universities.pdf



4. *Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Universities - National Guidelines* (2005), Irish Universities Quality Board, Dublin

http://www.iuqb.ie/IUQB_PhD_Guidelines.pdf

