Review

of the performance by the

Higher Education Training and Awards Council

of its functions by the

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

FINAL REPORT

May 2006

Review of the performance by the Higher Education Training and Awards Council of its functions by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

1   The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI, hereafter referred to as the 'Authority') appointed a Panel Chaired by Professor William J Smyth, President Emeritus of the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, to review the performance of the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC, hereafter referred to as the 'Council') with particular reference to its principal statutory functions as contained in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. The Panel was also asked to consider the extent to which, in performing these functions, the Council complied with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. The Panel's full Terms of Reference, Protocol and Membership are contained in Appendices 1 and 2).

Review process

2   Panel members attended a briefing in the offices of the NQAI on 7 March 2006. (The Chairman of the Panel and one Panel member joined by video conference link). The Chief Executive and representatives of the NQAI and HETAC provided briefings on their respective organisations, as did the President of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, Peter Williams. Following this, the Panel drew up a programme of on-site meetings involving almost 80 people including: the Chairman and members of the HETAC Board, the HETAC Chief Executive and a number of his staff; representatives of a range of higher education institutions served by HETAC; representatives of key stakeholders, including the NQAI; a selection of reviewers (including student reviewers) used by HETAC; and learners in institutions which had been given delegated authority by HETAC to grant awards, or whose programmes had been approved by HETAC. These meetings were held in the Dublin offices of HETAC between 27 and 29 March 2006. (A full list of all those whom the panel met is contained in Appendix 3). The Panel was asked to report its findings in the first instance to the Council.

Evidence

3   A key document considered by the Panel was the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) prepared by HETAC. This was made available to all Panel members in advance of their initial briefing meeting. In addition, HETAC provided substantial documentation in support of its SER and additional documentation in response to requests by the Panel during its on-site review. (A full list of the documents consulted by the Panel, including the SER, is attached as Appendix 4). The on-site visit provided oral evidence.

Conclusions

4   In the light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the Panel:

- is satisfied that the Higher Education and Training Awards Council has performed effectively its principal statutory functions since its establishment and has developed policies and procedures for each function which are being implemented and are being operated as appropriate;

- is satisfied that in the performance of these functions, the Council complies with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.*

Recommendations

5   The Panel concurs broadly with the Council's summary of notable features and areas for improvement as contained in its SER. In the development of a plan to implement the recommendations of this Report, as required under the Protocol for this Review, the Council will wish, nevertheless, to note the Panel's views concerning the Council's performance of some aspects of its statutory functions and some aspects of its compliance with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. Particular areas for consideration are summarised below.

6   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

- 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

7   In addition, 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

- 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

- considers publishing all its reports as a matter of principle, and publicising its intention in this regard

Acknowledgements

The Review Panel wishes to place on record its gratitude to the officers and staff of the Council and the Authority for the professional, practical and personal support given to Panel members in preparing them for the review and during their on-site visit, and to the Chair and members of HETAC's Board who met the Panel. In particular, the Panel is most appreciative of the information and insights provided during the initial briefing; the work done by Council staff to ensure the availability of people to meet the Panel during its on-site visit; the documentary evidence provided by HETAC staff; and the logistical support provided by both HETAC and NQAI staff. The Panel would also like to thank all those who met the Panel during the on-site visit; their input was invaluable.

Finally, on behalf of the Review Panel and myself as Chairman I would like to record appreciation for the professional and constructive support provided by the Secretary to the Review Process, Mr David Parry.

Professor W J Smyth
Review Panel Chairman
May 2006

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3	A key document considered by the Panel was the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) prepared by HETAC. This was made available to all Panel members in advance of their initial briefing meeting. In addition, HETAC provided substantial documentation in support of its SER and additional documentation in response to requests by the Panel during its on-site review. (A full list of the documents consulted by the Panel, including the SER, is attached as Appendix 4). The on-site visit provided oral evidence.

Findings

4   In the light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the Panel:

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Professor W J Smyth
Review Panel Chairman
May 2006

**Review of the performance by the Higher Education Training and Awards
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PART ONE

Introduction

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        as the 'Authority') appointed a Panel Chaired by Professor William J Smyth,
        President Emeritus of the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, to
        review the performance of the Higher Education and Training Awards
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        reference to its principal statutory functions as contained in the
        Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. The Panel was also asked
        to consider the extent to which, in performing these functions, the Council
        complied with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the
        European Higher Education Area*.   The Panel's full Terms of Reference,
        Protocol and Membership are contained in Appendices 1 and 2.

Contexts

2.1   The higher education sector in Ireland includes a range of institutions -
        Universities (of which there are seven); Institutes of Technology (13); the
        Dublin Institute of Technology; Colleges of Higher Education (8); and a
        range of private and public higher education institutions. A more detailed
        description of the higher education sector in Ireland is contained in
        Appendix 5.

2.2   The Council, which was established in 2001 under the provisions of the
        Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 as the successor body to
        the National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA), is the qualifications
        awarding body for Institutes of Technology and other non-university higher
        education colleges and institutions, excluding the Dublin Institute of
        Technology. Under the provision of the Act, the Council may also delegate
        the authority to make awards to an Institute of Technology.

2.3   Given the Panel's role in evaluating compliance with European
        requirements for quality assurance, it is worth noting the coincidental
        evolution of European bodies with responsibility for quality assurance in
        higher education at national level and the enactment of significant higher
        education legislation in Ireland in the late 1990s.

HETAC's statutory functions

3.1   The Council's main functions under the Qualifications (Education and
        Training) Act 1999 may be summarised as including:

        • making and promoting awards
        • recognising other awards
        • determining standards in higher education and training institutions
        • validating programmes; and
        • assuring the quality of programmes leading to a HETAC award.

3.2   Relevant sections of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 are contained in Appendix 6.

3.3   The extent to which, and the ways in which, the Council has performed the above functions are considered separately (See Part Two below).

HETAC and the European guidelines for quality assurance

4.1   In the Berlin communiqué of 19 September 2003, the Ministers of the Bologna Process signatory states invited the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance and to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies. The response to this mandate was the publication by ENQA in February 2005 of its *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. The *Standards and Guidelines* recommended that European quality assurance agencies would be expected to submit themselves to a cyclical review within five years. The Council is one of the first agencies to undergo such a review.

4.2   The *Standards and Guidelines* document contains a list of European standards for quality assurance in higher education and accompanying guidelines. They focus on three areas, namely:

*   European standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance
*   European standards for the external quality assurance of higher education
*   European standards for external quality assurance agencies

4.3   The standards and guidelines themselves are contained in Appendix 7.

4.4   The extent to which, and the ways in which, the Council complies with these standards and guidelines are considered separately (See Part Three below). These paragraphs should, however, be read in conjunction with Part Two dealing with the Council's performance of its statutory functions as these cover the majority of the criteria contained in the *Standards and Guidelines*.

4.5   It is, nevertheless, worth noting at this point the key role played by the Chief Executive of HETAC in ENQA (of which he is currently the Vice President), a role widely and positively acknowledged by many of those to whom the Panel spoke during its on-site visit. The Panel commends the role played by the Council, and its Chief Executive in particular, in ENQA and the benefits that this has brought not only to the Council but also more generally to higher education in Ireland.

4.6   The Council has also been an active participant in the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), and now serves as its Secretariat, thereby placing the Chief Executive on the INQAAHE Board.

HETAC, FETAC and the NQAI

5.1   HETAC does not operate in isolation.

5.2   The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 also established the NQAI and the Further Education and Training and Awards Council (FETAC). The NQAI was responsible for creating the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) which was launched in October 2003. The Framework is a structure of ten levels, accommodating awards in schools, the workplace, the community, training centres, colleges and universities, from primary to doctoral levels of learning and has defined an initial set of 15 major award types for the ten levels in the Framework. A summary of the awards in the Framework is contained in Appendix 8.   FETAC was established to make or recognise further education and training awards within the NFQ.   The Council makes awards in Levels 6 to 10 of the Qualifications Framework; FETAC in Levels 1 to 6.

5.3   The Chief Executive Officers of FETAC and HETAC are members of the other Council and both Council Chairs are members of the NQAI; there is frequent contact between the Chief Executives of each organisation; and close co-operation between staff of FETAC and HETAC on day-to-day matters. The Panel formed the view that the three organisations work well together at both a strategic and operational level, based on mutual professional and personal respect, and on a clear and shared view of their respective functions. The Panel commends the positive working relationships between the three agencies established under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 and acknowledges the benefits that this has brought at both a strategic and operational level.

5.4   The Council has also been involved actively in the Irish Higher Education Quality Network and has worked constructively with the Irish Universities Quality Board.   This is another area where the Council's leading role in European quality assurance developments is acknowledged to the benefit of Irish higher education more generally.

PART TWO

Statutory functions

<u>Introduction</u>

6.1   A list of the Council's current policies and procedures is given in Appendix 9. In considering the Council's performance of its statutory functions and related policies and procedures, the Panel noted those Council policies most relevant to each function.   They are indicated at the end of each sub-section below.

<u>Making and promoting awards</u>

7.1   The number of individual awards made by the Council declined from 18,682 in 2001 to approximately 6,964 in 2005.   It is projected to fall to about 4,400 in 2006.   This is largely the result of delegating awarding powers to most of the Institutes of Technology.   The Panel was advised that all Institutes were likely to have delegated authority by June 2006.   A key function of the Council, namely to delegate to a recognised institution the authority to make awards (Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999, section 29) is, almost by definition, likely to result in a decline in the number of awards made by the Council itself.   The Council expects the number of individual awards to increase after 2006 as new providers, predominantly from the private sector, are agreed and learner numbers increase.

7.2   The Council is actively considering ways in which it should promote its awards.   Institutional representatives differed concerning the value of promoting the Council's awards, especially if this was to be done by general advertising. Whilst acknowledging the importance of the Council 's current role as the public guarantor of standards, those Institutes of Technology with delegated authority indicated to the Panel that they were keen to promote their own distinctive brands and their own arrangements for assuring the standards of awards. Private providers, on the other hand, perhaps not surprisingly, welcomed the promotion of the Council's awards. Both views might be accommodated by a targeted promotion of the Council's awards aimed at, for example, School Guidance Counsellors and employers. A number of professional bodies acknowledged the importance of the HETAC 'brand' to employers.

7.3   One matter which the Council will wish to keep under review, in the light of the implementation of its quality assurance arrangements, concerns procedures it will adopt to evaluate programmes leading to HETAC awards, or institutions with delegated authority offering awards, outside Ireland.

7.4   A frequently expressed view concerned the importance and value of the establishment of the NFQ. For many of those to whom the Panel spoke the NFQ provides a coherent and easily understood awards framework and is perceived as more important than the Council's role in the promotion of its awards.   The Council's positive contribution to debate about the establishment of the Framework was acknowledged.

7.5   In the view of the Panel, the Council has effectively performed, and is continuing to perform its function of making and promoting awards. Policies and procedures of particular relevance to this function are:
- 1, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12 [See Appendix 9]

Recognising other awards

8.1   The Council recognises awards in at least two ways.

8.2   The first is by recognising the awards of external bodies, in particular professional bodies; the second is by recognising the work of individual learners. Thus far, the work of one individual learner has been recognised following detailed scrutiny, including a viva, by HETAC. Although the Council continues to make this route available, its resource implications are potentially significant.

8.3   Education and training required as a pre-requisite for registration by some statutory bodies is now being recognised by the Council. Work is still required, however, to incorporate fully and appropriately the experiential and work-based elements of some of this education and training, for example clinical site evaluation in respect of nursing education. The role played by the Council in enabling the award of one private provider to be recognised by the Department for Education and Science was warmly acknowledged. At least one significant professional body remains dissatisfied with the title which the Council has decided will be used for one of the degree programmes in its area of expertise. The Panel commends the work of the Council in establishing positive relationships with a range of professional and statutory bodies and incorporating their qualifications within the National Framework of Qualifications.

8.4   The Council has also played an important role in award recognition in a European context. It operates a system of credit for its awards that is based on the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System in line with the NFQ. It also promotes recognition through its support of the implementation of the European Diploma Supplement. All providers of HETAC awards have been required to issue the supplement from 2005 onwards. In these and other ways, the Council's existence facilitates the recognition of international credentials thereby allowing their holders to fit more readily into the workplace.

8.5   In the view of the Panel, the Council has effectively performed its function of recognising other awards. Policies and procedures of particular relevance to this function are:
- 12 [See Appendix 9]

Determining standards in higher educations and training institutions

9.1   The Council's responsibility for determining the standard of its awards is set within the generic standards of the NFQ. In attempting to interpret these standards, the Council has, according to its SER (page 15), sought to reconcile the requirements of rationalisation and simplicity with the traditional understanding of various subject communities and stakeholder groups. With one exception, the Council appears to the Panel to have struck an appropriate and acceptable balance in this matter. It recognises,

nevertheless, that further work is required in this area, a view with which the Panel concurs.

9.2   A particular feature of the NFQ, to which those to whom the Panel spoke made frequent reference, is the fact that new awards are based on learning outcomes defined in terms of standards of knowledge, skill and competence. In November 2003, the Council adopted the generic award-type descriptors of the NFQ as interim standards. Pilot standards for six broad fields of learning, covering the great majority of the Council's awards, were subsequently developed and have been published by the Council for awards at Levels 6 to 9. The pilot fields are:

> Art & Design   Business   Computing
> Engineering   Nursing*   Science
> (* Awaiting final agreement with the An Board Altranais)

9.3   One area of overlap between HETAC and FETAC – sometimes referred to colloquially as 'co-habitation' – is at Level 6 of the National Framework of Qualifications where both HETAC and FETAC are empowered to make awards. The potential for ambiguity resulting from this overlap is acknowledged by both organisations but the Panel is satisfied that efforts are being made, also involving the NQAI, to clarify this issue for the benefit of both learners and providers.

9.4   A contentious area involves awards at Levels 9 and 10, specifically research masters and doctoral degrees. Representatives of a number of institutions argued that, notwithstanding an early review of the criteria and procedures to be used in relation to the delegation of authority for these awards, involving both HETAC and the NQAI, HETAC's current criteria for delegating the Research Register remain bureaucratic, confusing and unduly restrictive. Whilst the Panel would encourage the Council to minimise bureaucracy and ambiguity, given the resources required to create an appropriate doctoral supervisory environment, a cautious approach may be appropriate in this area at this stage, so long as this does not restrict the type of doctoral programmes that the Council would be prepared to consider.

9.5   In the view of the Panel, the Council has effectively performed its function of determining standards for awards. Policies and procedures of particular relevance to this function are:
* 1, 5, 15 & 16 [See Appendix 9]

Validating programmes

10.1   Until 2003, the Council continued to accredit programmes using the validation criteria of its predecessor, the National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA) under transitional provisions contained in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. With the establishment of generic standards for the awards of the Council following the creation of the NFQ, the Council embarked on an ambitious project involving the revalidation in a period of three months in early 2004 of more than one thousand programmes originally validated under NCEA arrangements against the standards of the new Framework award types.

10.2   The Panel probed with a range of participants the implications for the standard of the awards of such a large and speedy programme of re-validation and was reassured in part by the fact that the project did not involve any new programmes. This reassurance was reinforced by the views of a number of institutional representatives who told the Panel that, although the process had been demanding, it had performed a valuable, developmental function in generating debate on the matter of learning outcomes amongst academic staff, for some of whom the exercise required a new approach to assessment.

10.3   In addition, the Council has accredited approximately 170 taught programmes and approximately 700 individual research degree programmes (SER, page 11).

10.4   The Panel probed the Council's relationship with new providers, in particular those offering programmes not previously validated, or offering programmes in new discipline areas. Representatives from new providers attested to the helpfulness of Council staff in advising them of what was required, clarifying criteria when requested and commenting on draft submissions. Whilst the Panel would commend the approachability of Council staff and their willingness to assist demonstrated by this, it is important for such assistance to be given with a framework whose boundaries are clearly understood so as to avoid too 'cosy' a relationship developing with its attendant possibilities for misunderstanding when developmental support and summative judgement is delivered by the same organisation. The Panel was reassured by Council staff with whom it raised this matter that these boundaries are understood. The Council will, no doubt, wish to consider how sustainable the level and quality of support currently given by staff considering individual programmes submitted for validation is in the longer term. This will be particularly important given the predicted increase in this area of the Council's work.

10.5   The Panel noted what appeared to be a uniform approach to programme validation on the part of the Council. Whilst a degree of consistency in the procedures used is clearly appropriate, the approach to validation might be varied, especially where, for example, a new programme, or a programme at a level not previously offered by a college, is involved.

10.6   In the view of the Panel, the Council has effectively performed its function of validating programmes. Policies and procedures of particular relevance to this function are:
- 7, 11, 12, 16 & 17 [See Appendix 9]

Assuring the quality of programmes leading to a HETAC award

11.1   The Act requires providers of higher education and training programmes validated by the Council, or to which the Council 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 a document entitled, *Guidelines and Criteria for Quality Assurance Procedures in Higher Education and Training*. While pre-dating the publication of the European *Standards and Guidelines* they are, in the view of the Council, consistent with those guidelines.

11.2 To date, 36 higher education institutions have had their quality assurance arrangements agreed, and the Council advised that the remaining two current providers were expected to do so shortly. At the time of the review, a further 18 potential new providers are in discussion with the Council about their quality assurance procedures.

11.3 The Panel discussed with the Council staff and with providers what exactly 'agreeing' to the quality assurance arrangements of a particular provider had involved. It was advised that, thus far, the process has involved a desk-based scrutiny by review panels appointed by the Council of documentation submitted by institutions describing their current quality assurance arrangements. The Panel was advised that virtually all initial submissions had been returned with requests for amendment prior to agreement by the appointed Panel and consideration and approval by the relevant HETAC committee. The Council acknowledges in its SER that, since the scrutiny is a desk-based one, the implementation of the agreed policies has yet to be evaluated. In 2005 the HETAC Council adopted criteria and processes for reviewing the effectiveness of these arrangements and it is understood that the review cycle will commence later in 2006. In the view of the Panel this remains a significant task, the completion of which will ultimately define the success or otherwise of the Council's impact and its effectiveness in discharging the full range of its statutory obligations.

11.4 In the view of the Panel, the Council has made an effective start to the performance of its function of assuring the quality of programmes leading to a HETAC award. Much, nevertheless, remains to be done, in particular the planned review of arrangements referred to in the previous paragraph. Policies and procedures of particular relevance to this function are:
- 2, 3, 13, & 14 [See Appendix 9]

HETAC reviewers

12.1 Crucial to the credibility of the Council's procedures for review and approval is the calibre, conduct and preparedness of the reviewers used by the Council. Since its establishment the Council has used some 500 reviewers on four different types of review panels, namely:

- Programme validation panels
- Delegated authority evaluation/review groups
- Research accreditation and approval panels
- Standards expert groups

A feature of the current arrangements is the use of students as reviewers, and the use of industrialists, members of professional bodies and international academics as reviewers.

12.2 The Panel discussed with reviewers to whom it spoke what general training and preparation they had received prior to undertaking review activities, feedback on their performance as reviewers and ongoing training for them in their role as reviewers. What emerged from these discussions was that training is limited, by and large, to the provision by the Council, usually shortly before a specific review, of a written copy of the detailed criteria relevant to the type of review about to be undertaken. Review teams undertaking site visits usually meet on the evening prior to a visit when they

discuss the criteria relevant to the review and the documentation submitted by the institution. The Panel concluded that this limited approach to the training of reviewers could in turn limit, perhaps significantly, the effectiveness of the reviews undertaken by them.

12.3   This conclusion is not intended to reflect on the expertise or experience of those involved in review work for the Council, many of whom are eminent in their chosen field. Nevertheless, reviewers with little or no current involvement in higher education, and even reviewers from within Irish higher education institutions, including students and those who have themselves been subject to a HETAC review of their institution, would benefit from more systematic initial and ongoing training in their roles as reviewers. They could also be a valuable resource in the training and preparation of the significant proportion of reviewers with little or no current experience of higher education or of higher education in Ireland.

12.4   The Panel recommends as a matter of priority 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. An annual conference of reviewers could, for example, provide an opportunity for experienced reviewers to share their experiences as reviewers with each other and with new reviewers, and could provide important feedback to the Council on its different review processes. The use of technology including, for example, Internet training, web seminars and video conferencing, could be considered together with the production of a handbook for reviewers. The Panel acknowledges the severe time pressure under which the Council has had to operate since its establishment and the significance of its achievement. Nevertheless, as it moves into the next phase of its work, attention to the training of its reviewers must be a priority.

Learner protection, access, progression and transfer

13.1   The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act of 1999 (Section 43), places on the Council a duty to ensure that provision is made for the protection of learners enrolled at profit-making, private institutions. 'Protection' in this context requires a private institution seeking the Council's validation of a programme to undertake to guarantee, as a condition of validation, alternative provision in two named institutions in the event that the College no longer runs the course, or a fee refund.

13.2   The Council's publication, *Policy, Procedures and Criteria for the Validation of Taught Programmes*, published in 2004 confirms (paragraph 1.2.5) that the Council requires that '… appropriate arrangements are in place for the protection of learners as stipulated in Section 43 of the Act … '. Validation documentation provided by the Council demonstrated that this criterion is taken into account at all validation events. In the case of publicly funded institutions the reports of the validation panels involved acknowledge that this provision of the Act does not apply. In the case of private providers, two validation reports scrutinised by the Review Panel confirmed that the validation panel had been satisfied that the colleges involved had catered for this provision.

13.3   More generally the Review Panel discussed with a range of participants their experience of the Council's interest in and evaluation of the whole student experience. The criteria used by the Council require validation panels to evaluate the human and physical resources available to support a proposed programme and reports scrutinised by the Review Panel demonstrated that this aspect of the student experience had been considered by the validation panels involved.

13.4   The Panel noted the Council's strong support of the creation of a seamless, system of qualifications and its potential for facilitating student access, progression and transfer. In particular, the Council 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. There was also evidence indicating that review panels have considered the matter of access, progression and transfer.

13.5   The Council's SER confirmed that it intends to explore further with providers and other awarding bodies, how the Council's experience of operating a national system can be built upon to enhance access, transfer and progression for learners. The Panel would encourage the Council in this regard, including the importance of providing robust, statistical evidence of the effectiveness of its initiatives in this area of its work.

PART THREE

European standards and guidelines for quality assurance

Cyclical review of quality assurance agencies

14.1 The European Association for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (ENQA) provides a theoretical model for the cyclical review of quality assurance agencies (Appendix 7, pages 36 to 41). This model contains three main elements as follows:

- Terms of reference
- Self-evaluation
- Guidelines for the external panel review

14.2 It will be evident from Parts One and Two of this report that all three of these elements are reflected in the evaluation of the Council. It is, nevertheless, worth highlighting briefly the extent to which the arrangements made complied with ENQA's review model.

14.3 The Panel was provided with comprehensive terms of reference which clearly identified the goals of the review. The terms of reference also provided protocols for the conduct of the review. The Panel had available to it a self-evaluation report prepared by the Council and supplementary documents which together provided:

- details of the national higher education system
- a history of HETAC
- details of external quality assurance activities undertaken by HETAC
- details of the various review models undertaken by HETAC
- an analysis of HETAC's achievements and recommendations for improvement

14.4 Significant additional supporting documentation amplifying the self-evaluation report was provided both before and during the on-site visit.

14.5 The review itself was preceded by a face-to-face briefing for Panel members by the agency (NQAI) formally commissioning the review. The briefing also included a presentation by the current President of ENQA. Panel members were given detailed information of the general organisation of the review. The Panel itself drew up the programme for the three-day on-site visit and agreed arrangements for drafting the report containing its findings.

14.6 The Panel consisted of international quality assurance experts, a representative of national higher education institutions and representatives of student and other stakeholders' interests, from amongst whom a Chairman was appointed. An external Secretary, a higher education administrator with higher education quality agency and institutional experience, supported the Panel.

14.7 As noted earlier in this report, the ENQA publication, *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*,

contains a list of European standards for quality assurance in higher education and accompanying guidelines. The standards and guidelines focus on three areas, namely:

- European standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance
- European standards for the external quality assurance of higher education
- European standards for external quality assurance agencies

14.8   The Panel reviewed the Council's compliance with the last two elements above which focus on external standards, including those applicable to external quality assurance agencies. Many of the Panel's findings in respect of its evaluation of the Council's performance of its statutory functions are, of course, directly relevant to the European Standards and Guidelines. Indeed, the *Standards and Guidelines* document acknowledges (page 30) that an external review will usually flow from national regulations and involve an evaluation of the fulfilment of the national mandate as well as the extent to which the agency involved conforms to the European Standards and Guidelines. The remainder of Part Three of the report will, therefore, summarise the Panel's findings in this regard without, however, repeating what has already been said in Parts One and Two. The Council's own SER (pages 16 to 20) evaluates its compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines and the Panel's findings broadly confirm the Council's self-evaluation.

14.9   The Panel was conscious of the fact that, at the time of its review, no report on the compliance or otherwise of any other national agency with the Standards and Guidelines had been published.   In evaluating the Council's arrangements, Panel members were, therefore, guided by the *Standards and Guidelines* document; the briefing provided by the President of ENQA (see paragraph 14.5); and their own experience of the policies, procedures and practices of quality assurance agencies in at least four other countries.

European standards for the external quality assurance of higher education

The use of internal quality assurance processes [European Standard (ES) 2.1]

15.1   One of the Council's key functions is the power to delegate to recognised institutions the authority to grant awards. The Council advised the Panel that it had sought to exercise this power to the optimal extent. Indeed, by June 2006 all recognised institutions will have delegated power to make awards, the culmination of a three-year process. The decision to grant delegated authority, which is for named levels of award, followed the re-validation by the Council of all programmes in 2004 and a subsequent desk-based scrutiny of each institutions internal quality assurance processes. Continued delegation is subject to an on-site review within five years. Planned reviews of institutional quality assurance will assess the extent to which internal quality assurance is effective.

Development of external quality assurance processes [ES 2.2]

16.1   The overall objectives of the Council's quality assurance processes are to encourage access, progression, transfer and ensure learner protection. The Council's Strategic Plan for 2006-2010, available publicly, describes the following as the principal drivers of its work during that period:

- the development of the community of learners
- the development of provider organisations
- the encouragement of increased confidence in the Council's role amongst key stakeholders
- the review of the exercise of delegated authority
- an increased focus on quality assurance
- growth in the number and diversity of private providers [ES 2.2]

16.2   The processes used by the Council to achieve these objectives were developed through consultation and research. The Council acknowledges that it could have consulted more extensively or for longer than it did in some areas – a point made by a number of those to whom the Panel spoke – but felt itself to be under pressure to perform the functions laid down for it by national legislation within a limited time period. On balance, the Panel concluded that the Council had consulted appropriately in the circumstances and was committed, in principle, to effective and appropriate consultation.

Criteria for decisions [ES 2.3]

17.1   The Council has published a number of policies, procedures, guidelines and criteria which inform its approach to, and procedures for, review. These are listed in Appendix 9 and are available on the Council's website. The relevance of particular policies and procedures to the Council's statutory functions was considered in Part Two of this report.

Processes fit for purpose [ES 2.4]

18.1   The Council has undertaken a number of different types of review since its establishment. These have included:

- Taught programme accreditation
- Delegated authority evaluation/review
- Research registration and approval

18.2   Published criteria and procedures, building substantially on the validation experience of the NCEA and specific to each type of review, are available.

18.3   The Council has also published pilot standards for six broad fields of learning as noted elsewhere in this report.

Reporting [ES 2.5]

19.1 The Council is committed to publishing reports. It has published reports of reviews for delegated authority and for research accreditation and these were available for Panel members to scrutinise. Reports on the review of the operation of each institution's quality assurance policies will be published once the review programme has commenced. The Council's current policy is to publish programme accreditation reports but it has not done so thus far in respect of taught programmes. The reason for this distinction was not clear to the Panel and the Council may wish to consider publishing all reports as a matter of principle, and publicising its intention in this regard. The Council is also subject to the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act of 1997.

Follow-up procedures [ES 2.6]

20.1 As already noted (paragraph 10.5 above) the specific formats of the various reviews conducted by the Council are usually the culmination of a process of dialogue between HETAC staff and representatives of the institutions or programmes being reviewed. As a result, many of the more significant areas of concern are considered and resolved prior to review. Nevertheless, the Council's review processes do make provision for review panels to make recommendations for action and Panel members saw evidence of this in their scrutiny of review panel reports.

20.2 A frequently expressed view amongst those to whom the Panel spoke, however, was that follow-up by, and feedback from the Council could, on occasions, be more rigorous and more widely disseminated. In the view of the Panel, a distinction should be drawn between feedback to members of review panels and follow up with institutions themselves. In the case of the former, the work of panel members is complete once they have conducted their review; they need have no formal responsibility for follow up. In the case of the latter, follow up rests with the Council itself.

20.3 The Council acknowledges, nevertheless, the need to be more assiduous in follow up. Its SER notes (page 17) that, now that the initial tranche of reviews has been completed, the Council will give greater attention to the transparency and effectiveness of its mechanisms for follow up of recommendations from both programmatic and institutional reviews. The Panel would support this priority in terms both of accountability and enhancement.

Periodic reviews [ES 2.7]

21.1 There is provision for the review of each institution at periodic intervals. The initial agreement by the Council of the quality assurance procedures of institutions will be followed by a review of their effectiveness within a period of not more than five years. The Council has set a schedule for these reviews, the first of which will commence later this year (2006). In the case of Institutes of Technology with delegated authority, the review will be combined with a review of an Institute's exercise of delegated authority.

21.2 In the case of programmatic review, institutions with delegated authority will be required to report to the Council the outcomes of their own internal programme reviews. The Panel formed the view that many institutions

were either using the programme review model used by the Council itself when it conducted its review in 2004, or a model based on that approach. One common feature noted and commended by the Panel is the use of externals in these reviews. The Council is actively considering a shorter review period for less experienced providers.

System-wide analyses [ES 2.8]

22.1 The Council's emphasis since its establishment has, perhaps naturally, been on implementation. This should not, however, minimise the significance of the move from process to outcomes in programmatic reviews and from programmatic to institutional review which the Council has overseen.

22.2 The Council has established a Research and Policy Analysis unit and the Panel was able to talk to members of that unit. The unit was involved, inter alia, in providing background analysis relevant to the production of the SER. In addition, it has been involved in developing a higher education sector-wide code of practice for practice-based research in art and design which, as well as being of significance in its own right, could also provide a model for further sector-wide collaboration. The unit has also been active in providing information to enable the Council to respond to a variety of consultations, a role which was warmly acknowledged by one of the external stakeholders to whom the Panel spoke.

22.3 In 2003 the Council published an analysis of degrees, diplomas and certificates awarded in Ireland during the period 1998-2002 effectively establishing a benchmark against which the impact and effectiveness of its own activities can be evaluated. A review of award classifications was carried out in 2005 but, as the SER acknowledges (page 17), there is scope for further statistical analysis of the extensive records now held by the Council, a review which the Panel would encourage. Given their significance, one area of review which the Panel would also encourage the Council to consider concerns the qualifications, experience and expertise 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.

Conclusion

22.4 In the view of the Panel, the Council complies with the European standards for the external quality assurance of higher education whilst acknowledging the areas for development highlighted above.

European standards for external quality assurance agencies

Use of external quality assurance procedures [ES 3.1]

23.1 The extent to which the Council has taken account of the presence and effectiveness of external quality assurance processes is considered in paragraphs 14.1 to 22.1 above.

Official status [ES 3.2]

24.1 HETAC is formally recognised as an agency with responsibility, inter alia, for external quality assurance under the provisions of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act of 1999.

Activities [ES 3.3]

25.1 As this report amply demonstrates, the Council has undertaken, and will continue to undertake external quality assurance activities at both institutional and programme level on a regular basis.

Resources [ES 3.4]

26.1 The Council receives a recurrent state grant through the NQAI and is also financed by way of fee income from higher education and training providers in respect of awards and accreditation fees. In 2005, fee income accounted for some 31% of Council income, with the state grant accounting for 68% of income. The Council has 33 staff. It acknowledges that, whilst the changing emphasis across the different functions has already required a considerable measure of redeployment and re-skilling since the transition from the NCEA, a changed mix of professional and administrative skills will be required, particularly in policy development and support of capacity building for quality enhancement in the higher education sector. This insight is one which the Panel would strongly endorse.

Mission statement [ES 3.5]

27.1 The Council adopted an inaugural mission statement in 2002. This was reviewed as the transition period came to an end and a new Statement of Mission is contained in the Council's Strategic Plan for 2006-2010. This statement, reproduced in full in Appendix 10, emphasises the Council's role as a public body, accountable to the Irish government, which exists to benefit learners and potential learners in a variety of ways linked to its formal roles of setting standards, accrediting programmes and awarding qualifications.

Independence [ES 3.6]

28.1 The Council enjoys a high degree of independence under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act of 1999. This is reflected in the membership of its governing body, in its procedures for review and in its publication of the findings of its various reviews. The Council is also to be commended for making public its SER.

28.2 The Act makes provision for appeals to the NQAI against decisions of the Council, either to delegate authority to an institution or to validate a programme. Thus far there have been no such appeals. The Panel did, however, probe this matter in some detail with representatives of the NQAI.

28.3   The Council and the NQAI have considered this matter very carefully and, following consultation with institutions concerning the way in which appeals might be handled, are agreed that an appeal would only be considered on the grounds of what were described as 'reasonableness'. The Panel was advised that this would not include any attempt on the part of the NQAI to second guess a decision made by the Council; rather it would focus on consideration by the NQAI of the process used by the Council in arriving at a decision in terms of its congruence with its published procedures.

28.4   The Panel is satisfied that the opportunity for an appeal against a decision of the Council does not itself undermine its independence in arriving at decisions concerning institutional quality assurance arrangements or programme approval. Rather, it was the Panel's view that, were it to be thought that the process used by the Council in arriving at a decision was not 'reasonable', the likely consequence would not be to over-rule the Council's decision, but rather to ask the Council to review the evidence available to it, and the process used by it, in arriving at its decision. The careful consideration of this matter by the Council and the NQAI gave the Panel further reassurance, concerning both the current approach to considering an appeal and the practice established of monitoring this matter to avoid undermining the Council's independence. The Council and the Authority also reassured the Panel that this matter was the subject of ongoing review.

External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agency

29.1   The processes, criteria and procedures used by the Council in undertaking its various review activities are pre-defined and publicly available. As already noted, Appendix 9 contains the Council's current polices and procedures, all of which are available in hard copy and on the Council's website. The review processes normally involve a self-assessment by the institution or programme managers which are the subject of review; consideration of the self-assessment by an independent panel of experts; the publication of a report; and procedures for following up the findings of such reports. The findings of the panel in respect of each of these aspects of the work of the Council have been considered elsewhere in this report.

Accountability procedures

30.1   The Council is subject to review under the provisions of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act of 1999, and this review is evidence of that formal accountability. In addition, the Council took the initiative in asking for its compliance or otherwise with the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance to be considered by the Panel established to review the effectiveness of its performance of its statutory functions.

Conclusion

31.1   In the view of the Panel, the Council complies with the European standards for external quality assurance agencies whilst acknowledging the areas for development highlighted above.

Findings

32.1   In the light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the Panel:

- is satisfied that the Higher Education and Training Awards Council has performed effectively its principal statutory functions since its establishment and has developed policies and procedures for each function which are being implemented and will be operated as appropriate;

- is satisfied that in the performance of these functions, the Council complies with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.*

Recommendations

33.1   The Panel concurs broadly with the Council's summary of notable features and areas for improvement as contained in its SER. In the development of a plan to implement the recommendations of this Report, as required under the Protocol for this Review, the Council will wish, nevertheless, to note the Panel's views concerning the Council's performance of some aspects of its statutory functions and some aspects of its compliance with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.* Particular areas for consideration are summarised below.

33.2   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 [paragraph 12.4];

- 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 [22.3].

33.3   In addition, 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 [paragraph 10.4];

- 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 [paragraph 10.5];

- considers publishing all its reports as a matter of principle, and publicising its intention in this regard [paragraph 19.1].

Glossary of terms/acronyms

ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
FETAC	Further Education Training and Awards Council
HETAC	Higher Education Training and Awards Council
INQAAHE	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
NCEA	National Council for Educational Awards
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NQAI	National Qualification Authority of Ireland
SER	Self Evaluation Report