

Quality improvement in the Irish university sector through the implementation of recommendations arising from quality assurance reviews in individual Irish universities: a model for partnership between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions

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Background

The establishment of a European Consultative Forum for Quality Assurance in Higher Education is an important element in the embedding of the agreed *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)*¹. As indicated in the *Future perspectives and challenges* Chapter² in the ENQA Report to the Ministers in Bergen, the adoption of the standards presents significant challenges to higher education institutions and to quality assurance agencies. The establishment of the QA forum is recognition of the importance of the partnership of institutions, learners and agencies through the E4 group of EUA, EURASHE, ENQA and ESIB.

Quality assurance of higher education will always be a balance between autonomy and accountability, between self and external regulation and between internal and external processes. The critical linkage between internal and external quality assurance processes is best described in European Standard 2.1³ which indicates that *external* quality assurance procedures should take into account the *effectiveness* of the *internal* quality assurance within higher education institutions.

In the drafting of the report to the Ministers responsible for higher education in the EHEA, the ENQA document recognises that within the quality assurance community itself, “there are some quite fundamental differences of view of the appropriate relationship that should be established between higher education institutions and their external evaluators”⁴. These range from accreditation agencies that accredit programmes or institutions, with an emphasis on ‘consumer protection’, requiring a distance between evaluator and evaluated, to agencies who see the principal purpose of external quality assurance to be the provision of advice and guidance in pursuit of quality improvement, with a spectrum of relationships between these extremities. In general, the quality assurance system adopted for a higher education system reflects the national and institutional historical, political and cultural development.

Quality Assurance Legislation for Irish Universities

It is worth noting that the Irish university system^a is small by international standards, comprising 7 institutions in a country of 4 million people. It is also not as sharply differentiated as some other systems.

Ireland, in common with other common law jurisdictions, has a long tradition of university autonomy and self-regulation and it was no surprise that the quality assurance system adopted in 1997 with the enactment of the Universities Act⁵ reflected these traditions. The thrust of this legislation is that universities are responsible for establishing internal quality assurance procedures and that external quality assurance should consist of checking periodically that these internal quality assurance procedures are effective.

The *internal* quality assurance procedures adopted were focussed on the periodic review of academic (and administrative) departments. These reviews are required in law⁶ to follow the process of self-evaluation by the entity under review, followed by an evaluation by national and international experts, publication of a report and a requirement on the university to implement the recommendations in the report. The reviews are therefore *internal* only in the sense that they are initiated by the university.

The legislation requires each university “to establish procedures for quality assurance aimed at improving the quality of education and related services provided by the university”⁷. The procedures must therefore be geared at quality *improvement* or quality *enhancement*.

The legislation⁸ on external quality assurance of Irish universities requires a periodic monitoring of the effectiveness of these internal reviews, by auditing the implementation of the recommendations contained in the reports arising from the internal quality reviews of academic (and administrative) departments.

Irish Universities Quality Board

Background. The 1997 university legislation essentially leaves the periodic review of the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures in the hands of the autonomous governing authorities of the individual universities⁸. In 2002, the Irish universities, in recognition of the fact that this level of self-regulation was not sufficiently accountable in the contemporary environment, established the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB), with the remit to oversee the external quality assurance of Irish universities and to increase the level of inter-university co-operation in developing quality assurance processes.

IUQB is charged with the responsibility (devolved to it by the universities in 2002) for organising both the external reviews of the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance procedures of the universities and the promotion of inter-university cooperation in developing quality assurance processes.

^a There are 7 Irish universities. There are also 14 Institutes of Technology, whose awards cover the three cycles of the Bologna process. Separate quality assurance legislation applies to the Institutes of Technology. (<http://www.oireachtas.ie/documents/bills28/acts/1999/a2699.pdf>)

National Guidelines of Good Practice. The formal dialogue between IUQB and the universities is conducted through a series of 3-monthly meeting between the IUQB Executive and the Irish Universities Association Quality Committee (IUAQC), a 14-member committee of the Irish rector's conference whose members are the Vice-President for Academic Affairs and the Quality Officer from each of the seven universities. IUQB and IUAQC have analysed the recommendations for improvement contained within the published internal review reports⁹ of academic (and administrative) departments in the universities and identified common themes. Having identified a number of common themes, these were refined into a series of sectoral projects, which were approved by the IUQB Board. The aim of this series of sectoral projects is to establish and publish good practice booklets for Irish universities in the key areas of teaching and learning, research and strategic planning/management.

The projects to date have had the following objectives:

1. To establish current practice, nationally (and internationally)
2. To establish good practice
3. To prepare national codes of good practice

To date, two booklets have been published:

- *National Guidelines of Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Universities*¹⁰ (published in February 2005 and reprinted by demand in October 2006)
- *National Guidelines of Good Practice in the Organisation of Student Support Services in Irish Universities*¹¹ (published in April 2006)

As an example, the preparation of the guidelines for the organisation of PhD programmes consisted of the following steps: The executive of IUQB convened a steering group consisting of the quality officer and a senior academic responsible for PhD Programmes (a Dean of Graduate Studies, for example) from each of the seven universities. The steering group were responsible for preparing a summary of current practice in relation to the organisation of PhD practice in each of the universities. Following the collation of this information, all seven universities then held individual workshops to facilitate inputs to the project from its staff, PhD students and relevant officers and the resulting reports were collated and distributed.

As an input into the Experts conference (described below), an interim report¹² was prepared. This comprehensive report brought together much data and information never before correlated and provided a concise but detailed overview of current postgraduate research training in the Irish universities.

A national conference with international speakers entitled "Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD programmes" was held in Dublin in April 2004. There were presentations on practices in four countries (Sweden, France, the USA and the UK), breakout sessions and a plenary discussion.

Following the presentation of the draft guidelines, these were modified with the benefit of feedback from a number of sources:

- A focus group of postgraduate research students (representative of the sciences and humanities) from each of the seven universities
- A series of eminent researchers in the sciences and humanities working in Ireland and abroad, with extensive international experience, who were invited to provide input
- Interested persons from the universities and other organisations who obtained copies of the draft guidelines from the IUQB website

The resulting booklet¹⁰ consists of a series of sections. Each section starts with some paragraphs that outline the main relevant issues and refers to points raised during the university workshops, to practices in other countries at the Experts meeting and to relevant publications.

Each guideline item in the publication is in the form of a non-prescriptive statement that represents a ‘good practice’. In most cases, there are many ways in which a particular ‘good practice’ may be achieved and it is recognised that diversity in this respect may exist. However, each university is asked to accept that any policy, regulation or procedure that is ineffective in maintaining a ‘good practice’ is changed or replaced as soon as is practicable. Procedures in each university for identifying and rectifying such ‘deficiencies’ are essential.

The success of these booklets is ultimately determined by whether they improve quality. This is more likely in circumstances where the guidelines are non-prescriptive but are clearly evidence-based. The findings and guidelines have come from the universities themselves upon self-reflection and self-criticism supported by the input of international best practice.

How useful have the guidelines been? There has been considerable interest in them, as evidenced by the ongoing requests for copies of the publication from national and international sources. The demand has been such that a second print run of 5000 copies of the publication took place in October 2006. The guidelines are referenced on departmental and university websites in Ireland and are being used as briefing material by Irish universities for external peer review groups conducting the statutory cyclical reviews of academic departments. They have also been referenced by a number of international bodies interested in good practice in graduate education.

A specific example of the recognition of the utility of the IUQB PhD guidelines follows. In 2006, the Irish government announced the establishment of a Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) (worth €300m over a five year period). The promotion of inter institutional collaboration in graduate education is one of the pillars of the fund. In the call for proposals to SIF¹³, the Higher Education Authority indicated its wish to support proposals from groups of institutions aimed at improving the quality of education or structures for the delivery of post-graduate education and research, including priority areas identified within the IUQB guidelines for *Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes*.

The IUQB programme of sectoral quality improvement projects is ongoing. Current projects include the preparation of national guidelines of good practice in the areas of:

- Institutional research

- Quality improvement of teaching and learning
- Academic workloads
- Strategic planning in academic departments
- Mathematics teaching and learning
- Student evaluation and feedback mechanisms

External Reviews of Quality Assurance in Irish Universities

In 2004, the IUQB and the Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA) (which has the statutory reserve power¹⁴ to review the quality assurance procedures of Irish universities) jointly commissioned the European University Association (EUA) to conduct a review of quality assurance procedures in the Irish university sector and of the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures in the individual universities. The IUQB and HEA have separate but complementary mandates in relation to quality assurance. In jointly commissioning the review, both roles were combined with the objective of achieving the maximum benefit for the system in a timely and cost efficient way.

The outcome of the review was a series of reports¹⁵ on the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures at the individual universities but also a cross-cutting or transversal report¹⁶ on quality assurance procedures in the university sector.

IUQB is responsible for monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the recommendations contained within the university reports (as one of its core activities) and sectoral report (at the request of the HEA). IUQB and the universities have agreed that several of the recommendations in the sectoral report can best be implemented through one of the ongoing IUQB sectoral project or through the initiation of a new sectoral project, following the same process as previous projects. An example is the preparation of national guidelines of good practice in the evaluation of student feedback on programmes of study.

These ongoing processes of implementation of the recommendations for quality improvement have resulted not only in a partnership between the quality assurance agency and the individual universities but of cooperation between the universities, in fulfilment of the founding principles of IUQB when it was established by the Irish universities to promote inter-university co-operation in the development of quality assurance processes.

National Framework for internal Quality Assurance in Irish Universities

In 2002, The Irish universities, through the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities (the Irish rectors' conference, since renamed the Irish Universities Association) published a *Framework for Quality in Irish Universities*¹⁷, where again individual universities with autonomous responsibilities for their own *internal* quality assurance procedures combined to produce an agreed framework for the operation of (internal) quality assurance reviews.

This quality framework document is currently being updated with the input of IUQB and the universities. The framework is one of the main mechanisms by which the recommendations on operational quality assurance procedures in the EUA sectoral

report¹⁶ will be implemented. Again, a process of voluntary convergence of procedures should make it possible to publish a document which will meet the objective of the Berlin Communiqué¹⁸ of producing, for the Irish university sector, “an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance”¹⁹ before the next Ministerial conference in London in 2007. The framework will be jointly published by IUQB and the Irish Universities Association (IUA, the rectors’ conference), continuing the strong commitment to effective partnership between the universities and the quality assurance agency.

Conclusion

What lessons have been learned from the Irish experience to date? Effective quality assurance will always represent a balance between the interest of a good national university system and of the strengths of the individual universities. The strong history of autonomy of the individual Irish universities has facilitated the development of good quality assurance practices in individual universities which can contribute to the development of good practice at a national level. IUQB is happy to have been able to facilitate this co-operation.

For Ireland, the relatively small size of the university system and the country itself has made it possible to achieve an inclusive system of partnership between universities and the quality assurance agency. Whereas it is possible to *assure* quality externally, the *improvement* of quality is only truly achievable at institutional level. The Irish experience may serve as a useful example for other small nations wishing to compete in a globally competitive higher education market.

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