

Memorandum of Understanding between
the Higher Education Authority and Quality
and Qualifications Ireland 2015–2017



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

HEA | HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY
AN TÚDARÁS um ARD-OIDEACHAS

Introduction

It is in the interests of the higher education sector, as well as of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), that, as two national agencies, the organisations work together to ensure the coordination and complementarity of their activities. This will be achieved through close partnership-working with the sector because it is only through interaction with higher education institutions and learners that the interrelationship between the HEA and QQI acquires tangibility. This Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signals the organisations' joint commitment to working together, and in partnership with the higher education community, in order to optimise their efficiency, effectiveness and strategic impact. This partnership-working will be underpinned by a whole-of-education and whole-of-government approach to the development of policy and practice in higher education.

Both the HEA and QQI are committed to supporting the enhancement of the performance and quality of Irish higher education while upholding the principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy; and both are committed to the achievement of the key system objectives identified in the *Higher Education System Performance Framework 2014–2016*. Cooperation between the two organisations will support the collective advancement of the reform agenda for higher education in partnership with the sector. The MoU recognises the benefits of ensuring that the staff and board members of both organisations have a full understanding of the complex, multi-dimensional interrelationship between the roles of the HEA and QQI. This understanding will be fostered through the implementation of the MoU, which will embed inter-agency cooperation into the governance and day-to-day *modus operandi* of the organisations.

Influences on this MoU

It is important to acknowledge that this MoU has been devised within the broader policy-context of the higher education environment in Ireland. In brief, some of the influences on the formulation of the MoU have included:

- The legal and regulatory responsibilities of the HEA and QQI as set out in legislation (and in the Appendix to this document) and reflected in the organisations' strategic visions and plans.
- The responsibilities assigned to both organisations within the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* and the *Higher Education System Performance Framework 2014–2016*.
- The service-level agreement and management framework agreement which the HEA and QQI respectively have with the Department of Education and Skills (DES).
- The changing higher education landscape.
- The importance, from a national perspective, of maintaining the independence of QQI as a quality assurance agency in line with European and international norms and standards.
- The ownership by the education and training community of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and how it can be used to support the advancement of a number of the activities carried out by both organisations, in partnership with higher education institutions, to enhance the delivery of education and training.
- The high degree of commonality of the parties with which the HEA and QQI interact, including labour-market representatives and private higher education providers.
- The increasingly widespread acknowledgement of the value that can be derived from carrying out regulatory roles collaboratively.¹

Purpose and scope

This MoU between the HEA and QQI provides an agreed framework for cooperation and communication between the two organisations in the interests of the higher education sector as a whole. As indicated above, it has been developed in accordance with the relevant statutory provisions, national strategies, and government policies, and with due regard to the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies. It is not a legally binding agreement or contract, and it is not exhaustive in its identification of the two organisations' responsibilities. It does not preclude the identification and implementation by the organisations of additional objectives and actions—indeed, in the spirit of the MoU, it is anticipated that further areas of collaboration will be identified subsequent to its agreement.

QQI and the HEA will ensure that all relevant members of both organisations are familiar with the content of the MoU and that all dealings between the two organisations and with other named parties are conducted in a manner that is consistent with its objectives.

¹ See National Economic and Social Council, *Achieving Quality in Ireland's Human Services: A Synthesis Report*, Council Report No. 133 (NESC, 2012).

Roles

HEA role

The HEA has a central oversight role in respect of the strategic development of a coherent system of diverse higher education institutions with distinct missions which will be responsive to the needs of wider society, to achieving the objectives and advancing the national priorities identified in the *Higher Education System Performance Framework 2014–2016*, and to being accountable for so doing. In carrying out this overarching role, the HEA has responsibility for supporting quality outcomes across all activities of the higher education institutions—academic, administrative and governance—and for holding the institutions accountable for such outcomes.

It is the responsibility of the HEA to ensure the alignment of institutional strategies with national strategic objectives, and to ensure the delivery of agreed objectives (detailed in compacts with institutions) through effective performance-management at institutional and system-levels. These objectives span the enhancement of teaching and learning, the advancement of equity of access to higher education, the enhancement of institutions' responsiveness to the needs of wider society, research capacity-building, and the internationalisation of Irish higher education. Central to the HEA's strategic development of a coherent and effective higher education system is the structural reform, and the reform of the funding and governance of higher education institutions, with which the organisation is charged in the *National Strategy*.

QQI role

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is the statutory quality assurance body for higher and further education and training; it is also an awarding body and responsible for maintaining the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). In its external quality assurance role its responsibility is to review institutions and to make recommendations for their further development. In doing so, it engages peer reviewers with national and international experience who ultimately seek to establish the effectiveness of the institution's quality assurance procedures, in the interests of learners. The findings of this process are published and utilised by a variety of parties both nationally and internationally. Institutions follow-up on the recommendations arising from reviews and engage with QQI on an annual and periodic basis. At a system level QQI will synthesise the findings of external reviews; conduct themed reviews across a number of institutions where considered beneficial; and facilitate the exchange of good practice across higher education.

Intersection of roles of HEA and QQI

The role of the HEA, as the statutory funding, planning and policy-development body for the higher education sector is complementary to that of QQI, as the statutory authority for quality assurance and qualification recognition. Moreover there is a potentially synergistic relationship between the new responsibilities with which the HEA is charged in the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* in respect of the oversight of the sector and the functions assigned to QQI in the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012. The HEA and QQI have much in common: both organisations are concerned with enhancing the quality, coherence, and performance of the Irish higher education system while upholding the principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy that are enshrined in the state legislation on higher education. Likewise, both aim to minimise the bureaucratic burden placed on higher education institutions while ensuring their full accountability to the state; and both are committed to operating in a transparent manner in partnership with institutions and other stakeholders.

Commitments and associated actions

This MoU sets out four key commitments agreed by QQI and the HEA for the period 1st January 2015 to 31st December 2017: coherence of approach; alignment of activities; Ireland in an international context; and partnerships for enhancement. Against each commitment associated actions are listed which, it is envisaged, will contribute to the realisation of that commitment. In agreeing the commitments and associated actions for this MoU, the HEA and QQI have reflected upon the following:

- Areas of common interest between the organisations;
- How each organisation can / should use the outputs arising from the fulfilment of the independent legislative functions of the other;
- Potential areas of collaboration between the organisations;
- Potential added-value and benefits of interaction arising from collaboration between the organisations.

1. Commitment to coherence of approach

Within the context of this MoU, the HEA and QQI are seeking to identify themselves as independent organisations; as collaborating organisations with a common cause; and as organisations whose actions impact upon an external environment, both public and private, of which they must be cognisant. In addition, this document reflects the common cause of both organisations to strengthening the NFQ as a key national infrastructure for the enhancement of education and training in Ireland. This is particularly the case in its reflection of the elements of learning outcomes, standards, assessment, teaching and learning, research, and access, transfer and progression which are centrally important to the HEA, QQI, higher education institutions, and learners. Particularly valuable is the concept underpinning the NFQ of 'successful participation' on the part of learners—an overarching aim which, in the view of both organisations, effectively captures the motivation for the series of inter-connected commitments and associated actions which are set out below.

QQI's monitoring and review of higher education institutions and the HEA's strategic oversight of the sector need to be mutually complementary. This will maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of the organisations and minimise the bureaucratic burden experienced by higher education institutions in responding to their regulatory and legislative functions. Cooperation between the HEA and QQI in this regard has the potential to ensure that accountability and quality-improvement of the higher education system go hand-in-hand.

The roles of QQI and the HEA intersect very directly in relation to the crucial issue of the sustainability of higher education provision, and the maintenance and enhancement of quality in an equitable system which is responsive to the diverse learning needs of a wide range of students as well as to the emerging skills needs of employers. To this end, the HEA and QQI are committed to working together to foster a coherent whole-of-education and whole-of-government approach to the strategic development of policy and practice in higher education.

Associated actions:

- i) The HEA will satisfy itself within the process of strategic dialogue and other interactions, of the fulfilment by institutions of their quality assurance obligations, using the documented outcomes of legislative monitoring and quality review conducted by QQI in the form of annual dialogue or periodic review reports, and the Annual Institutional Quality Reports produced directly by institutions.
- ii) Where available, QQI will utilise the data produced by the HEA to satisfy itself, within the process of annual dialogue and periodic review, of its institutional data requirements.
- iii) The organisations will fully acquaint themselves with the reporting obligations of higher education institutions to both organisations and commit to reducing, with a view to eliminating where possible, requests for the same or similar information.
- iv) The organisations will inform themselves of the reporting and meeting schedules associated with annual and strategic dialogue events.
- v) QQI and the HEA will share corporate plans with each other on an annual basis.
- vi) A copy of any system level communication by either organisation will be forwarded to the Chief Executive of the other organisation and to the appointed liaison person for dissemination (see below).
- vii) A nominee from each organisation will be identified to ensure that communication and information is exchanged on a timely basis between the organisations.
- viii) The Chief Executive of each organisation will be invited to meet with the Board of the other on an annual basis.
- ix) The full senior management teams of the organisations will meet on an annual basis to update each other on developments.
- x) The organisations will actively seek to identify where information and communication should be extended to other parties in the interests of national coherence and consistency.

2. Commitment to alignment of activities

In order to foster this coherence of approach to the strategic development of higher education in Ireland, the HEA and QQI are committed to aligning their activities at operational level where appropriate. This will ensure the mutual complementarity of the organisations' policy-development, and data-collection and data-analysis functions. It will also support the development of a coordinated approach to improving access to, and transfer and progression through, higher education.

The HEA and QQI intend to acknowledge and utilise the outputs arising from their separate but complementary roles in order to reduce the bureaucratic burden experienced by higher education institutions in responding to the regulatory and legislative functions of the two organisations. To support the achievement of this objective, the HEA and QQI will seek to align the organisations' approaches to collecting and utilising data, in collaboration with higher education institutions and other parties, and to formally and continually communicate relevant information between the organisations.

Cooperation between the two organisations in respect of the development by the HEA of a data strategy for higher education and of the institutional profiles, and by QQI of a database of programmes and awards, will provide an opportunity to consider how the organisations' data-collection and analysis functions can best be coordinated and developed to minimise duplication of effort and to enhance the evidence-base for the strategic oversight of the sector. Furthermore, emerging new data-sources, such as the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) and the national survey of employers, have potential to feed into quality assurance and enhancement processes undertaken within the sector.

Both the HEA and QQI will mutually support each other in the fulfilment of the organisations' distinct but connected responsibilities in the areas of access and progression. Fostering a coherent approach to enhancing access, transfer and progression in higher education is a shared concern of the HEA and QQI. The HEA reviews and supports the implementation of the access plans of higher education institutions, as well as setting out in the national access plans the system-level targets against which progress in ensuring equity of access to higher education is measured. QQI has statutory responsibility for determining policies and criteria for access, transfer and progression in relation to learners and for monitoring the implementation of procedures for access, transfer and progression by providers. Cooperation between the two organisations in this area is therefore imperative to ensure equity of access to higher education and to enhance progression pathways.

In fostering the alignment of activities across these areas, the organisations will ensure that there is a shared understanding of the language and definitions used.

Associated actions:

- i) The organisations will consult with one another on the development of policy and of mechanisms and infrastructure to support policy-implementation.
- ii) The HEA will keep QQI informed of the development and on-going implementation of funding streams aimed at aligning education and training with labour-market requirements.
- iii) The organisations will consult and agree text on references to the other in published form which are actionable or which entail interpretations of policy positions.
- iv) The HEA will include QQI in the list of organisations with which data is shared under the terms and conditions for data-collection from higher education institutions.
- v) The organisations will work together to enhance equity of access to higher education and to promote the attainment of equality of opportunity across the sector.

3. Commitment to Ireland in an international context

The HEA and QQI, in common with the sector, share responsibility for maintaining and enhancing Ireland's reputation within an international context in respect of the quality of higher education provision. Ensuring 'that Ireland's higher education institutions will be globally competitive and internationally oriented' and that Ireland will be a centre of international education is identified as a key system objective in the *Higher Education System Performance Framework 2014–2016*. Supporting the enhancement of teaching and learning, building research-capacity across all disciplines, and nurturing the integration of research, teaching and learning to foster quality-enhancement across the sector are key aims in this regard.

Both organisations are committed to supporting the quality of research activity conducted by higher education institutions. In relation to doctoral education, the development of a national framework by the HEA and QQI, in collaboration with higher education institutions, and its subsequent implementation, will help sustain the quality and strategic relevance of provision across all types of doctoral programme (including structured programmes, work-based programmes, and practice-led doctorates). More broadly, enhancing the visibility of the quality of research in higher education and its assurance, and demonstrating its value and impact, as well as showcasing the high-quality learning environment of Irish higher education institutions, are challenges that the HEA will seek to address in partnership with QQI and higher education institutions.

Both the HEA and QQI have a role to play in supporting the implementation of the *International Education Strategy* at national level through quality assurance measures and enhancement initiatives. In this regard, both organisations have an on-going role in supporting Irish engagement in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and with related European qualifications frameworks. The HEA is the national agency for the European Commission's Erasmus+ programme, and the national coordinator for the Brazilian 'Science without Borders' programme and other initiatives. QQI is charged with establishing a statutory code of practice for the provision of education and training to international learners and an associated International Education Mark (IEM) to signify the compliance of providers with this code. More broadly it will be imperative that the internationalisation of higher education, as a key system-level objective for the sector, is advanced as a key component of a holistic strategy for quality-enhancement.

Associated actions:

- i) The HEA and QQI will consult with higher education institutions on the assessment of research quality and activity.
- ii) The organisations will work in partnership with the sector to develop a national framework for doctoral education which, as envisaged by the *National Strategy for Higher Education*, will be 'applied consistently across all higher education institutions that provide such education as an essential underpinning of the Irish PhD brand'.
- iii) The organisations will promote the integration of research, teaching and learning through their quality enhancement activities, for example through holistic unit reviews and disciplinary reviews.
- iv) QQI will consult with the HEA and higher education institutions regarding the development and implementation of the International Education Mark (IEM).
- v) The organisations will work in partnership to support the implementation of Ireland's *International Education Strategy* at a national level through quality assurance and enhancement activities, and will explore opportunities to jointly promote these initiatives and related activities internationally.
- vi) The organisations will seek to work in partnership with other state agencies involved in the promotion and regulation of international education.

4. Commitment to partnerships for enhancement

The HEA and QQI are committed to working in partnership with higher education institutions and other parties, and to aligning the enhancement activities of the organisations with identified national requirements. Structured engagement by the organisations with key stakeholders has the potential to demonstrate the coordination of the work of the HEA and QQI, as well as providing an opportunity for sectoral input into the policy approaches adopted. The establishment by the organisations of a forum for engagement with the DES, the Irish Universities Association (IUA), Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI), and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) is proposed and would facilitate this dialogue as well as serve as a platform to support engagement with other stakeholders. More broadly, both organisations will work in partnership to support the changing higher education landscape. In addition, the organisations will communicate and collaborate with higher education institutions on a routine basis, and will engage collaboratively with other stakeholders (including funders, state agencies, government departments, labour-market actors, and international bodies) when considered appropriate and helpful.

The enhancement of the quality of teaching and of the student-learning experience in higher education in partnership with higher education institutions is a central concern of both the HEA and QQI. Both organisations will continue to support and engage with the activities of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, which is advancing work in this area through a range of initiatives, including the establishment of a framework for academic professional development and the development of the digital capacity of the sector.

Associated actions:

- i) The organisations will collaborate with higher education institutions and other parties in the identification of quality enhancement objectives.
- ii) The DES, IOTI, the IUA, and the USI will be invited to join a forum with the HEA and QQI. The purpose of the proposed forum, which will be established in Q1 2015, is to seek to advance the collaborative objectives indicated in this MoU. It is particularly intended that it would consider collaborative activities that support the overarching objective of successful learner participation. It will be chaired on an alternating basis by the HEA and QQI.
- iii) The organisations will consider any implications for quality enhancement objectives of the collaboration undertaken as part of the proposed forum.
- iv) The organisations will work collaboratively with higher education institutions, including through the forum proposed above, to establish how to effectively interpret and utilise outputs, including data, produced at an institutional and sectoral level in order to inform quality and quality enhancement activities.
- v) In order to assist in streamlining quality enhancement activities at a national level, the HEA will consult with QQI in relation to the priorities to be pursued with the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning.
- vi) QQI will be a partner with the HEA and SOLAS in the survey of employers.

Sign-off and review

This MoU is jointly signed by the Chief Executive Officer of the HEA and the Chief Executive Officer of QQI, and it takes effect from the date on which it is agreed and signed by the two parties.

This MoU is intended to stand for the period 1st January 2015–31st December 2017. In the intervening period its currency will be kept under review. In the first year, QQI and the HEA will prioritise engagement between the executives of the two organisations in order to increase the level of understanding of each other's functions on an operational level. This will be a resource- and time-intensive process which the two organisations consider an essential first step in seeking to realise the objectives set out in this MoU. Any amendments required to ensure that it remains fit-for-purpose, and that it reflects the emerging priorities of the organisations, will be published by mutual written agreement.

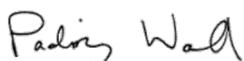
Signed on behalf of the Higher Education Authority:



Tom Boland, Chief Executive

Date: 1st January 2015

Signed on behalf of Quality and Qualifications Ireland:



Padraig Walsh, Chief Executive

Date: 1st January 2015

Appendix

roles and responsibilities

Higher Education Authority

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) was established with the enactment of the Higher Education Authority Act, 1971. It is the statutory funding authority for the universities, institutes of technology, and for a number of other designated institutions; and the statutory planning and policy-development body for higher education and research in Ireland. As per the Higher Education Authority Act, 1971, the statutory responsibilities of the HEA include:

- furthering the development of higher education;
- assisting in the coordination of State investment in higher education and preparing proposals for such investment;
- promoting an appreciation of the value of higher education and research;
- promoting the attainment of equality of opportunity in higher education;
- promoting the democratisation of the structure of higher education;
- maintaining a continuous review of the demand and need for higher education;
- allocating funding provided by the Oireachtas to universities and other designated higher education institutions.

In addition, as per the Universities Act, 1997—and in furtherance of the HEA's general functions—the organisation's role encompasses reviewing universities' strategic development plans, and equality policies.² The Institutes of Technology Act, 2006 expanded the remit of the HEA to include the institutes of technology and Dublin Institute of Technology, and also added to the list of functions of the HEA 'promoting the attainment and maintenance of excellence in learning, teaching and research in higher education'.

In addition to its legislative functions, the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* charges the HEA with an enhanced role in:

- the strategic development of the Irish higher education sector (inclusive of its structural reconfiguration);
- the strategic oversight of the sector, including the agreement of compacts with higher education institutions through strategic dialogue and the introduction of a performance-related element into core funding;
- evaluating performance at institutional and system levels; and
- providing accountability to the Minister for Education and Skills in respect of the achievement of the key system-level objectives detailed in the *Higher Education System Performance Framework 2014–2016*.

² The responsibility, conferred on the HEA in the Universities Act, 1997, to review the quality assurance procedures of universities was transferred to QQI in the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was established with the enactment of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012. It is the statutory authority for quality assurance and qualification recognition with a broad remit across education and training in Ireland. As per the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act the statutory responsibilities of the QQI include:

- the promotion, maintenance, further development and implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ);
- advising the Minister in relation to national policy on quality assurance and enhancement in education and training;
- reviewing and monitoring the effectiveness of providers' quality assurance procedures;
- validating programmes of education and training, and reviewing and monitoring the validated programmes;
- establishing the standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners before an award can be made by the Authority or by a provider to which authority to make an award has been delegated;
- making awards, delegating authority to make an award, and reviewing and monitoring the operation of the authority so delegated;
- determining policies and criteria for access, transfer and progression in relation to learners, and monitoring the implementation of procedures for access, transfer and progression in relation to learners by providers;
- establishing a code of practice for the provision of programmes of education and training to international learners;
- authorising the use of the international education mark by a provider that complies with the code of practice;
- establishing, maintaining and developing a database providing information on awards recognised within the NFQ, programmes of education and training which lead to awards recognised within the NFQ, and any other programmes the Authority thinks appropriate;
- establishing and maintaining the register of awards;
- cooperating with international bodies on qualifications and quality assurance policies and their implementation and in particular
 - liaising with awarding bodies outside the State for the purposes of facilitating the recognition in the State of awards of those bodies, and
 - facilitating the recognition outside the State of awards made in the State;
- ensuring arrangements for the protection of learners are in place where learners have begun but not completed a programme of education and training where a provider ceases to provide the programme before completion; and
- assisting enrolled learners in finding alternative programmes of education and training where providers cease to provide a programme before completion.



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