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Programme Oriented and Institutional Oriented Approaches to Quality Assurance: New Developments and Mixed Approaches

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Programme oriented and institutional oriented approaches to quality assurance: new developments and mixed approaches

Validation of programmes of higher education in Ireland -

The role of the Higher Education and Training Awards Council

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Abstract

> *I think we may safely trust a good deal more than we do.*
> Henry Thoreau.

This paper considers the programme validation arrangements in place in one half of the Irish higher education sector. It outlines how responsibility for programme validation can be safely delegated to Institutions within a robust overarching framework for quality assurance. It compares programme validation in Institutions with self awarding status with Institutions that have their programmes validated by a national Awarding agency. The paper concludes that when programme validation in Ireland and (potentially) across Europe is examined more closely, processes that appear to be very different on the surface can be quite similar in reality. From a philosophical perspective it appears that the degree to which providers can be trusted to manage their own quality assurance is a key consideration, however difficult it may be to measure trust.

1. Context

Ireland has a binary sector of higher education with seven universities, fourteen institutes of technology and over fifty other providers of higher education. These other providers include independent, private, for-profit colleges and as well public sector providers such as the Garda (Police) College and Military College. In recent years they include an increasing number of work-based learning providers and specialist colleges offering programmes in niche areas. The Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) is the awarding body for Institutes of Technology and these other providers of higher education[1]. All HETAC providers may have programmes validated from two year Higher Certificate level up to and including doctorate level. Recent developments on the National Framework of Qualifications mean that providers can also offer minor,

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[1] The Irish universities are autonomous, self-governing institutions. The Dublin Institute of Technology operate their own quality assurance arrangements. Both of these are beyond the scope of this paper.

supplemental and special purpose awards. The principle that providers of higher education have primary responsibility for their quality assurance underpins all of HETAC's activities.

HETAC providers are of one of two types (see Figure 1):

(i)   "*Recognised Institutions*" are defined in the Qualifications Act and currently only constitute the publicly funded Institutes of Technology. HETAC may delegate authority to make awards and validate programmes to Recognised Institutions only. There is a basis for this delegation within Irish law and delegation is subject to an Institution meeting and continuing to meet a set of stringent criteria. These include criteria for operations and management, quality assurance arrangements, adherence to the National Framework of Qualifications, *etc*. For example Recognised Institutions must agree their quality assurance procedures with HETAC. These procedures are aligned with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance and must include a programme validation and a periodic review procedure. As part of an institutional review process, undertaken once every five years, the effectiveness of these quality assurance procedures, adherence to the criteria established for Delegated Authority and adherence to the National Framework of Qualifications are reviewed. In essence this means that HETAC sets the overarching criteria for programme validation and delegates responsibility to each Recognised Institution to operate within these criteria, subject to a five year review.

(ii)   All other HETAC providers work within a similar philosophical environment to Recognised Institutions in that they
    a. have to agree their quality assurance procedures with HETAC
    b. are responsible for conducting their own periodic reviews
    c. are reviewed once every five years through institutional review.
    The key difference is that HETAC remains directly responsible for the validation of programmes and the making of awards.

Self-awarding status is a critical distinction that is made between institutions in higher education systems worldwide. This therefore provides an interesting case study of two approaches to programme validation within the same quality assurance agency. In the first approach HETAC delegates authority to an Recognised Institution for programme validation and in the second it does not. On the surface it appears that they are two distinct approaches - however it will be seen from a comparison of the two that programme validation process is almost identical in both cases except for a number of finer points of the process.

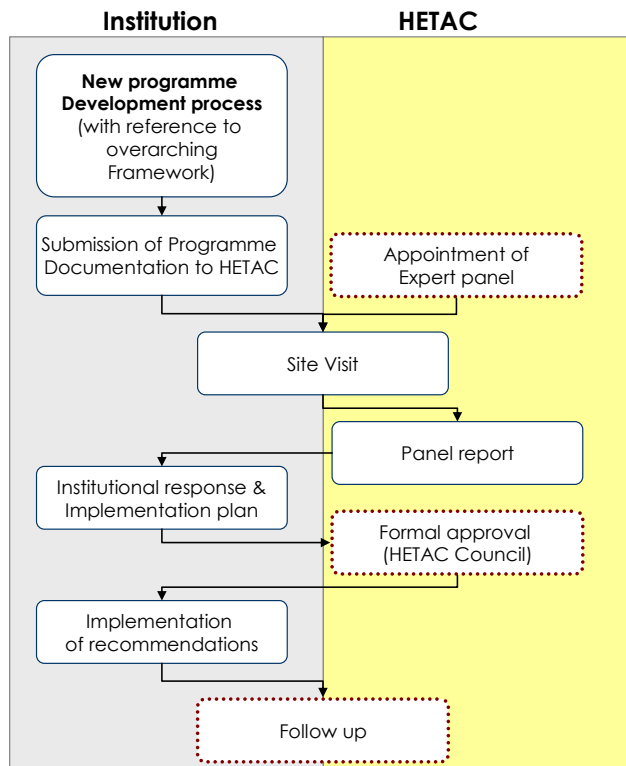**Figure 1 Programme Validation in the HETAC sector in Ireland**
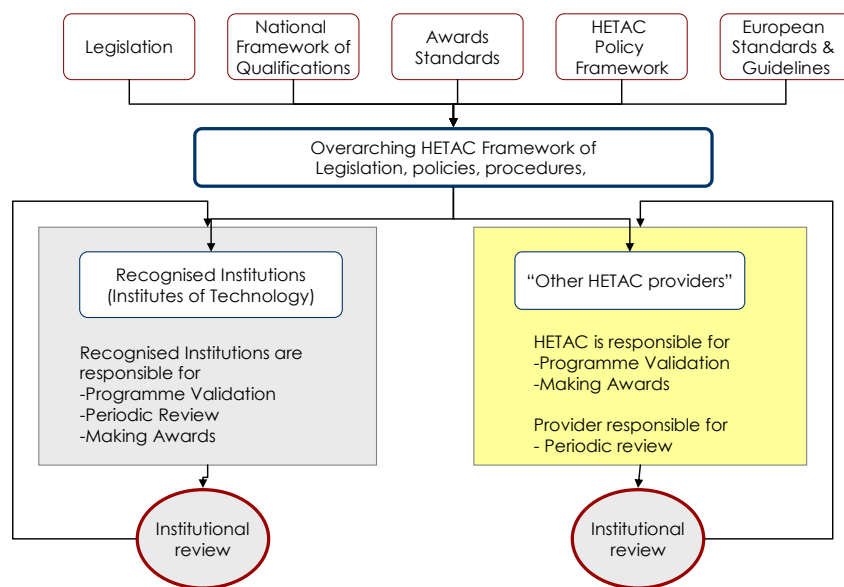
2.   Programme Validation process when awards are made directly by HETAC

In essence, within this framework, a provider of higher education either has its programmes validated directly by HETAC, or validates its own programmes in accordance with criteria established by HETAC. The main components of the programme validation procedure are outlined in Figure 2. A similar process and principles are in place for periodic review (programmatic review), but programmatic review is not managed by HETAC.

When a provider wishes to create a new programme, it follows an approved development process. On the completion of the initial phase of this process a draft programme document is submitted to HETAC for consideration. HETAC arranges for the evaluation of new programme to be undertaken by an expert panel. The evaluation normally takes the form of a review of programme documentation and a site visit to the provider's premises with associated meetings with the relevant staff members. Expert panels are selected to ensure that there is a range of expertise available in areas such as: quality assurance, programme validation/review and issues relating to teaching methodologies, assessment and learner support mechanisms and ability to make national and international comparisons. Expert panels normally include members who represent industry and or broader stakeholders, either nationally or from within the region where the provider is located.

Figure 2 HETAC programme validation process

Institution	HETAC
New programme Development process (with reference to overarching Framework)	
Submission of Programme Documentation to HETAC	Appointment of Expert panel
	Site Visit
	Panel report
Institutional response & Implementation plan	Formal approval (HETAC Council)
Implementation of recommendations	
	Follow up

HETAC exercises two key principles of **competence** and **independence** in its selection of panel members. In terms of competence, there must be confidence that the review is being conducted by competent persons who have appropriate levels of experience and knowledge and who can offer an informed, expert opinion on the activities and/or processes being evaluated. While each organisation is distinct and each review panel is unique and, as such requires difference competences, panels should have an appropriate mix and balance of expertise.

In terms of independence, a panel must arrive at its decision in an independent manner, free of influence from the organisation or unit being evaluated and of other interests. Stakeholders must have confidence that review has been conducted by independent experts. It is important that panel members engage in the review process without any conflict of interest, or perception of conflict of interest. It is in providers' and the public's interest that any review or evaluation is conducted in a transparent manner by independent external peers as an endorsement of their practice.

Recognised Institutions with self awarding status operate a very similar programme validation procedure. The key points where it differs from the HETAC programme validation process are as follows:-

- The selection and appointment of the expert panel is undertaken by the Recognised Institution, and the same HETAC principles of competence and independence apply. This ensures that experts are **external** to the Institution. There has been a long tradition within HETAC of interpreting these principles as being synonymous with the appointment of persons who are completely external to an organisation. Indeed 'external' is the starting point when considering potential members of panels.
- The formal approval of the programme and follow up on recommendations is undertaken by the Institution's internal governance structures.

The HETAC Institutional Review process, undertaken once every five years, reviews how the Recognised Institution has adhered to these principles in their programme validation process.

3. Overarching Framework

Programme validation within the HETAC framework is underpinned and enabled by some key components:-

3.1. National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)

The NFQ was introduced in 2003 by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, as a system of ten levels, based on standards of knowledge, skill and competence and incorporating awards made for all kinds of learning, wherever it is gained. Qualifications in higher education and training are included in the framework from Level 6 (Higher Certificate) to Level 10 (Doctorate). The level indicators that were published by the Qualifications Authority form the first reference point for the design of qualifications leading to NFQ levels.

3.2. Awards Standards

HETAC has elaborated upon the generic award-type descriptors at Levels 6 to 9 of the National Framework of Qualifications by developing awards standards in for broad fields of learning (including Business, Computing, Art and Design, Engineering and Science). These standards facilitate specialists in particular fields of learning to create the link between their programmes and the NFQ. The awards standards are a reference point and a point of comparison against which individual programmes may be justified. They are intended to provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with a particular field of learning. In the programme validation process providers must take cognisance of the standards for specific fields of learning where they generally relate to the programme being developed. HETAC however recognises that there is a significant growth in multi-disciplinary/inter-disciplinary programmes and that there are emerging fields of learning and within each field there are a vast spectrum of programmes possible, which range from highly practical to very theoretical.

3.3. Criteria and Procedures for Quality Assurance

Prior to the development of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, HETAC had a comprehensive framework of policies and criteria in place for quality assurance. This legacy stretches back to 1988 through its predecessor the NCEA. These guidelines and criteria are intended to assist providers in establishing, maintaining and improving, quality assurance procedures which will meet the requirements of the Council. These quality assurance procedures explicitly include procedures for programme validation, periodic review, learner assessment, *etc.*. Providers have to agree their quality assurance procedures with HETAC, in advance of validation of their first programme (in the case of new providers). All providers have to demonstrate, as part of Institutional review, the effectiveness of their quality assurance arrangements.

3.4. Institutional Review

A core element of contemporary quality assurance practice is external review of the institution as a whole. All providers offering HETAC awards are subject to external quality assurance review of their institutions. HETAC carries out such reviews on a five year schedule. The objectives of institutional review are to enhance public confidence in the quality of education and training provided by the institution and the standards of the awards made; to contribute to coherent strategic planning and governance in the institution; to assess the effectiveness of the quality assurance arrangements operated by the institution; to confirm the extent that the institution has implemented the national framework of qualifications and procedures for access, transfer and progression; to evaluate the operation and management of delegated authority where it has been granted and to provide recommendations for the enhancement of the education and training provided by the institution. In line with the HETAC philosophy, the ideal scenario is that institutional review focuses not on processes or outcomes but on the capacity of the provider to review itself.

4. Reflections

Research on this topic, where it exists, has demonstrated that ownership of quality assurance is a key consideration in higher education. There is general consensus that the impact of externally driven quality assessments is modest when compared to internally driven quality assessment. The principle that providers of higher education have primary responsibility for their quality assurance is fundamental to the approaches to programme validation and institutional review processes just described.

The tensions that arise therefore are between trusting providers to manage their own quality assurance and holding them accountable; between institutional autonomy and external control; and between a principle-based and rule based approach. The key distinction made between self-awarding recognised Institutions and other HETAC providers is in the validation of a new programme (and the making of awards associated with those programmes). They are equal in most other regards in this framework (both undertake their own periodic reviews of programmes for example). The question it poses is why is the initial programme validation procedure so important?

The making of awards associated with a programme is intrinsically linked to the validation of the programme in the first instance and it is difficult to separate these two issues. There may be a distinction drawn between programme validation in publicly funded higher education institutions, who are subject to other public sector controls such as openness, transparency and value for public money, and independent providers who do not operate within this framework. There may be a recognition of the notion of the maturity of HEIs and the learning curve associated with quality assurance of programme standards. Ultimately it is underpinned by the degree to which providers can be trusted to take ownership of their quality assurance, however difficult it is to measure this.