EUA
European University Association
Institutional Evaluation Programme

REVIEW OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN IRISH UNIVERSITIES

Sectoral Report

HEA
Higher Education Authority
An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas

IUQB
IRISH UNIVERSITIES
QUALITY BOARD

The Review of Quality Assurance in Irish Universities was jointly commissioned by the Higher Education Authority and the Irish Universities Quality Board

REVIEW OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN IRISH UNIVERSITIES: BACKGROUND

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Irish Universities are required under section 35 of the Universities Act (1997) to establish and implement procedures for quality assurance and arrange for a review of the effectiveness of these procedures "from time to time and in any case at least every 15 years". In 2003, the Irish universities established the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) and delegated to this body the function of arranging the reviews of the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures in the individual universities. Furthermore, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) may, under Section 49 of the Universities Act, review quality assurance procedures in the universities.

The first formal review of Quality Assurance procedures and their effectiveness in the seven Irish universities commenced in January 2004 and was completed in February 2005. In order to facilitate a more timely and effective review process, the HEA and the IUQB jointly commissioned the review, which was undertaken by the European University Association (EUA). The EUA has a strong international reputation in quality assurance having conducted institutional reviews of 135 universities in 33 countries during the past ten years. The process agreed by the HEA and IUQB for the Quality Review of Irish Universities is presented in Section 3 of this document.

The review process commenced with the preparation by each university of a detailed self-evaluation report. This report was prepared in consultation with staff and students of the university, and in accordance with EUA guidelines, focussed on the following four questions:

- What is the university trying to do?
- How is the university trying to do it?
- How does the university know it works?
- How does the university change in order to improve?

Each university was then the subject of a preliminary site visit (two days duration) by a EUA review team composed of independent experts in quality assurance from Europe and North America. The purpose of this preliminary site visit was to allow the review team to gain an understanding of the environment and to measure the robustness of the self-evaluation reports against the reality on the ground. A further site visit to each institution (three days duration) took place some four or five months later, after which time individual university reports were prepared by the EUA review team. These reports were sent to the IUQB who forwarded the final reports to the individual universities. In addition, the EUA review team prepared a crosscutting sectoral report for the HEA. This report is contained in Section 2 of this document.

To complement the EUA overall review of quality procedures established by the universities the HEA in consultation with the IUQB and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), put in place a High Level Reference Panel comprising eminent individuals from outside the university sector. The role of this panel was to provide an external perspective on the social, cultural and economic context within which the Irish universities operate, and the procedures established by them in respect of quality assurance and quality improvement. The panel considered the outcomes of the EUA review and prepared for the HEA a "reflections" document which identified particular issues of relevance to future reviews. [1]

In April 2005, the *Review of Quality Assurance Procedures in Irish Universities* was launched by the Minister for Science and Education, Ms Mary Hanafin, T.D. Following the launch, the individual universities reports were published on the university websites and the crosscutting sectoral report was published on the HEA website.

Acknowledgement

The HEA and the IUQB wishes to acknowledge the co-operation received from all those involved in the *Review of Quality Assurance in Irish Universities* and to thank the universities and their staff for their commitment to the task. In particular the HEA and the IUQB would like to acknowledge the excellent work of the EUA review teams and their Secretariat.

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1. Review of Quality Assurance Procedures in Irish Universities: Procedures Document prepared by the High Level Reference Panel, Chaired by Mr. John Dunne; HEA (2005).

Section 2

**REVIEW OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN IRISH UNIVERSITIES:
SECTORAL REPORT**

(February 2005)

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The Universities Act 1997 and Quality

1. The Review of Quality Assurance in Irish Universities by the European University Association (EUA) was jointly commissioned by the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA). The review was structured to accord with the respective responsibilities of the universities and the HEA concerning quality assurance under the Irish Universities Act 1997. The review is designed to ensure that the university system and its stakeholders gain maximum benefit from comprehensive reviews by teams of experienced international quality assurance experts, and that the procedures and processes in place in Irish universities can be reviewed against best practice internationally.

2. Irish universities are required under the 1997 Universities Act to establish and implement procedures for quality assurance, and arrange for a review of the effectiveness of these procedures "from time to time and in any case at least every 15 years". The HEA also has a statutory role to review and report on quality assurance procedures developed by the universities. For this purpose, the HEA and all seven Irish universities represented by the IUQB have engaged the EUA to undertake this review, involving experts from Europe, the USA and Canada. It should be noted that this review has been requested long in advance of the 15 years timeframe set by legislation.

3. As stated in IUQB's "Framework for Quality in Irish Universities", quality assurance is a process through which a higher education institution guarantees to itself and to its stakeholders that its teaching, learning and others services consistently reach a high standard of excellence. Quality assurance likewise refers to a set of procedures adopted by higher education institutions, national education systems and international agencies through which quality is maintained and enhanced. The quality assurance system put in place by the Irish universities is therefore designed to serve a useful and necessary public purpose.

4. The special focus of the EUA reviews was the quality assurance system in place at each university. The 1997 Act requires each university "to establish procedures for quality assurance aimed at improving the quality of education and related services provided by the university. These procedures shall include –

   A. the evaluation, at regular intervals and in any case not less than once in every ten years or such longer period as may be determined by the university in agreement with An tÚdarás [the HEA], of each department and, where appropriate, faculty of the university and any service provided by the university, by employees of the university in the first instance and by persons, other than employees, who are competent to make national and international comparisons on the quality of teaching and research and the provision of other services at university level, and
   B. assessment by those, including students, availing of the teaching, research and other services provided by the university, and shall provide for the publication in such form and manner as the governing authority thinks fit of findings arising out of the application of those procedures."

5. The EUA review should therefore establish whether each university has respected its legal obligations, and, more importantly, whether the quality assurance procedures it has put in place are effective in promoting and improving quality across the institution. The review focuses on the universities' capacity to change, including their strategic planning and internal quality monitoring. It also examines if the necessary conditions exist to encourage the development of a real quality culture, allowing each institution to become progressively more successful in accomplishing its mission and more responsive to the changing environment at local, national, European and international levels.

Context

National

6. The review of Quality Assurance (QA) in Irish universities takes place at an important moment for Irish higher education. A number of important elements for the sector have converged recently. The context in which the EUA review has taken place therefore presents a series of opportunities at the same time as a number of potential challenges.

7. The pace of economic and social change in Ireland has been extremely rapid since 1995. Ireland now ranks among the top EU and OECD States in terms of GDP, employment, economic growth, quality of life, etc. These changes have been driven largely by foreign direct investment by multinational enterprises. Ireland is now facing the challenge to maintain this growth, in the face of increasing competition both within the enlarged EU and globally. The role of higher education is obviously central in helping society adjust to such rapid change, and at the same time ensuring that Ireland is well placed to continue this growth with a greater reliance on its own innovation, research and development capacities, allowing it to develop as a player in its own right in the knowledge economy.

8. These economic changes coincide with various long term demographic changes, with rapidly increasing immigration, and with some fundamental social and cultural shifts. Four million people now live in Ireland. While this figure is now higher than at any time since the mid-1800s, this is considerably fewer than for example in Switzerland or Hungary, two European countries of similar size. Recent projections by the Central Statistics Office have forecast that the population of Ireland will increase by 15% by 2016.

9. There are seven universities in the Republic of Ireland. There are also 14 Institutes of Technology, which offer Bachelor and Master programmes in a growing range of subject areas. There are a number of other public and private higher education institutions in specialised areas. In addition, there is an expanding further education sector.

10. The implementation period following the 1997 Universities Act has allowed the universities to test the various innovative elements of this legislation. These elements include full incorporation/autonomy for the constituent Colleges of the National University of Ireland, the formal establishment of NUI Maynooth, new structures of university governance and management, and the formal introduction of strategic planning and quality assurance for all universities.

11. The Irish Government has, as part of its programme for government, an explicit strategic objective of placing Ireland's higher education system in the top rank of the OECD in terms of both quality and levels of participation, and is committed to supporting efforts to protect and improve the quality of academic teaching and learning at undergraduate level. Furthermore, it has acknowledged that the challenges of maintaining quality, responsiveness and competitiveness in higher education are a major priority against the background of unprecedented levels of expansion, change and diversification in the sector in Ireland.

12. However, Ireland did not escape the collapse of the dot.com bubble and the general economic slowdown following 11 September 2001. One result of this was a delayed cut of effectively 10% in the universities' operating budgets in 2003/04, as well as the freezing for one year of the flagship governmental programme for research in third level institutions (PRTLI). These resulted in some severe financial problems for the universities, with many financial cuts taking place in activities which normally should have been encouraged with more, not less, money. However, the national economic climate improved substantially during 2004 and the downturn is now considered to be over.

13. At the end of 2003, the Irish Minister of Education and Science commissioned the OECD to undertake a major policy review of Irish higher education, to assist Irish higher education in taking the necessary

steps to respond to the new needs of the country. The OECD presented its far-reaching report and recommendations in September 2004. It found that more investment in higher education is needed if Ireland's national goals are to be realized, and that system-wide structural and other issues need to be addressed in order for such investment to be effective. The OECD report makes a number of recommendations intended to rationalise and modernise university management and governance. The importance of strategic planning and management is underpinned by the OECD recommendation to align funding to strategic plans and their outcomes.

European

14. Ireland and the Irish universities are also part of the European-wide Bologna Process, leading to a more coherent and cohesive European Higher Education Area by the year 2010. A series of voluntary commitments have been made by higher education Ministers across Europe to encourage, among other issues, greater academic and professional mobility for students and graduates; improved recognition of degrees; national and European frameworks of qualifications; improved effectiveness and transparency of quality assurance procedures; and greater efficiency and flexibility of teaching and learning through common degree structures, a European credit accumulation and transfer system, a European diploma supplement, and the modularisation of teaching and learning. The Bologna Process is now six years old and the effects of these fundamental reforms are beginning to be seen across Europe, including in Irish universities which have only recently become fully aware of the extent to which this process will also affect them.

15. Ireland is also part of a nascent EU-driven European Research Area, designed to strengthen and support research, development and innovation across Europe. Although universities are by no means the only actors in this process, the rapidly developing research policies and funding opportunities are also affecting higher education. Linked to this is the commitment by EU governments to the Lisbon Strategy, designed to make Europe the most dynamic and competitive knowledge based economy in the world by 2010. Part of this strategy includes the objective for each country to invest 3% of its GDP in research and development activities. The figure for Ireland in 2001 was 1.17%, according to EC/eurostat.

Global

16. The last ten years have seen a worldwide movement to examine the accountability of higher education institutions, particularly universities, and to look for value for money in investing public and private funds in these institutions. The Irish higher education system has been endeavouring to respond to these challenges, which are expressed both explicitly and implicitly through the 1997 Universities Act.

17. Irish universities also have long standing links with universities in both the United States and Canada. Many leading Irish academics have trained and worked in these countries. Considerable exchange and cooperation takes place on a regular basis, including large number of North American undergraduate students who come to Irish universities as part of their Junior Year Abroad scheme. There are also significant research links in some fields. Relations between Irish and North American universities are in general based on collaboration, not competition, since funding opportunities are usually open to one or other side of the Atlantic only, not both.

Review of Quality Assurance process

18. Given the context of the environment in which the universities are now operating, and the speed and scope of change over the last ten years, it is not surprising that the roles of some of the other bodies in Irish higher education have also evolved. The State's main agency in working with the universities, the HEA, has likewise been entrusted with an enlarged range of responsibilities over this period. The HEA has since the 1997 Universities Act, among other duties, a statutory function to assist universities achieve their quality assurance objectives, to review and report on the quality assurance procedures developed by the universities and to be consulted by the universities in their review of the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures.

19. The Irish universities have also given increased responsibilities to their collective body, the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities (CHIU), in representing their interests at national and international levels. Regarding quality assurance, the universities likewise came together in 2003 with the active support of the HEA to create the Irish Universities Quality Board, following several years of prior cooperation in this area. The IUQB was established by the universities to increase the level of inter-university cooperation in developing quality assurance procedures and processes, in line with best international practice and to facilitate the conduct of reviews of the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures and their outcomes.

20. Given that the quality of higher education is not an isolated concept but is intimately bound to the environment in which the universities are operating, the EUA review has examined the quality assurance procedures in full awareness of the purpose for which these exist and of the obligations of the universities, the IUQB and the HEA in this area. The EUA review has therefore endeavoured to support the Irish universities in the continuing development of their quality assurance procedures and their capacity to change in order to meet the best standards and practices in the world.

21. The EUA has a strong international reputation in quality assurance having conducted institutional reviews of some 135 universities in 33 countries during the past ten years. The tenth anniversary of the EUA programme was celebrated during 2004. EUA has an extensive pool of experienced reviewers from a wide variety of higher education systems and backgrounds. EUA is also closely involved in ongoing quality assurance discussions and policy developments at both European and international levels.

22. The Quality Review of Universities in Ireland followed the EUA institutional review methodology and guidelines. These were specially fine-tuned to meet the specific requirements of the Irish quality review. A copy of the guidelines can be found in Annex 1.

23. The review of the seven Irish universities took place in a coordinated manner during the calendar year 2004. The Steering Committee of the EUA Institutional Review Programme appointed four teams of experienced reviewers to cover the seven Irish universities – three of the teams each reviewed two universities, while the fourth team reviewed only one. The list of team members can be found in Annex 2.

24. In order to ensure full understanding of the aims and methodology of the review process, as well as to encourage initial exchange and reflection between the Irish universities and the EUA teams, an introductory workshop was organised by the EUA and the IUQB/HEA on 20 January 2004 in Dublin. This workshop, which was attended by the key figures from each university, the IUQB, HEA and the EUA teams, as well as by some members of the HEA's high level reference panel, provided a solid basis for the successful start of the internal assessment and external review processes. The programme of this workshop can be found in Annex 3.

25. During the period January – March 2004, each university underwent a self-evaluation process, culminating in the writing of a self-evaluation report. These reports were submitted to the EUA teams in advance of the external visits. As is standard procedure in improvement-oriented evaluations and

reviews, these self-evaluation reports were treated by EUA as confidential. They were however widely circulated within the each university. These self-evaluation reports were of a high standard and accompanied by useful annexes and other publications.

26. The EUA teams made a preliminary visit to each university during the months of April to June 2004. The purpose of the preliminary visits is for the EUA teams to gain an understanding of the university and the national environment, and to confront the self-evaluation report with the reality as perceived by external reviewers. The preliminary visits last for two days and serve as an essential first step in the external review of the university. The dates of these visits can be seen in Annex 4.

27. At the end of the preliminary visits the EUA teams requested further documentation from five of the seven universities to help complete the teams' understanding of the situation there. This extra documentation was received by the teams in advance of their main visits.

28. Each EUA team then made a main visit to the university, during the period September – November 2004. The dates can also be found in Annex 4. The purpose of the main visits, which last three days, is to reach an external diagnostic judgement of the university's quality assurance procedures and processes. The main visit finishes with an oral report by the EUA team chair to the President / Provost and then to the university.

29. The EUA methodology, which is mirrored by the methodology also developed by the IUQB, is based on four basic strategic questions:

    1. What is the institution trying to do? This question refers to the mission, aims and objectives of the university and their appropriateness, and how the university positions itself locally, nationally and internationally.
    2. How is the institution trying to do it? This addresses the processes, procedures and practices in place and requires an analysis of their effectiveness.
    3. How does the institution know it works? This question looks at the feedback systems in place, in particular for quality monitoring and quality management.
    4. How does the institution change in order to improve? This examines the issues of strategic planning and quality improvement, as well as the capacity and willingness to change.

30. The EUA teams prepared a written report on each university. These were sent to each university in a final draft format during the period November 2004 to January 2005, for the correction of possible factual errors. No change in content or recommendations is possible at this stage. Once the university accepts the report, it is formatted by EUA and sent formally by EUA to the IUQB, who forwards it immediately to the university concerned with a copy to the HEA.

31. The EUA reports focus on the effectiveness of each university's quality assurance procedures and practices, and the implementation of findings arising out of their application, in the context of the university's overall institutional decision making and strategic planning. As requested in the terms of reference, these key elements are placed within an institutional analysis that examines decision-making processes and allows the review teams to comment on institutional obstacles and success factors for effective internal quality management.

32. Following on from the individual institutional reviews, the EUA teams also considered three "meta" questions in preparing the current sectoral report on cross-cutting issues:

    • Does the Irish university system function effectively?
    • Is the Irish quality assurance process helpful in improving the Irish university system?
    • Does the Irish QA system meet international benchmarks?

33. As specified in the terms of reference, the EUA team chairs and secretariat met twice during the review process with a high level reference panel established by the HEA comprising eminent Irish individuals from outside the university sector. The role of this panel was to provide an external perspective on the social, cultural and economic context within which the Irish universities operate and on the procedures established by them in respect of quality assurance and quality improvement. The first meeting with the high-level reference panel took place in May 2004, during the period of the preliminary visits to each university, at which the EUA team chairs informed the panel of the process and discussed areas of mutual interest. The second meeting took place in December 2004, after the main visit to each university had been completed, when an initial oral overview of findings was presented to the panel and questions were answered. The meetings with the panel served to place the entire review process in a wider context and to reinforce its credibility and objectivity.

34. This sectoral report was drafted on the basis of the results of the reviews of the seven individual universities. It brings together the salient issues identified by the EUA teams concerning quality assurance across the Irish university sector, and presents a series of recommendations which the EUA teams believe will be useful in the ongoing implementation of quality assurance and quality improvement measures in Irish higher education. The structure and content of the report were discussed and agreed between the EUA team chairs and secretaries, with input also from a number of other team members and the EUA secretariat.

University Mission

35. An overriding question during the review process, at both the self-evaluation and the external review stages, is the extent to which the institution's mission and goals have been met. The university's mission and vision are therefore important in that they set the direction for the quality review. Without these, it is difficult to examine whether the university has been able to achieve what it attempts to do. The EUA teams therefore closely considered the mission statements of the universities as a starting point for the review process.

36. The Irish higher education system allows for a diversification of mission between the seven universities and for the evolution of each individual university's mission and strategy. The system also allows for different types of cooperation with external partners, including other higher education institutions, and does not impose any structural limitations on research profiles or activities. These are significant advantages compared to some other higher education systems in Europe. On the other hand, each university's student population is broadly similar, characterised by very young undergraduates (84% of full-time entrants to universities in 2003 were aged 19 or under) and relatively low numbers of post-graduates, especially doctoral students, for a system in which all universities describe themselves as research-led.

37. In the opinion of the EUA review teams, only a minority of the universities have used their mission statements to position themselves in the Irish higher education landscape, highlighting the specific roles they wish to play. The others have been less proactive in these statements. The overall impression was that the mission statements of most of the Irish universities are somewhat traditional and general. This is indeed the case with such statements in many traditional universities in Europe. But are these still valid for the new context in which Irish universities must operate in the 21st century, and for the rapid internationalisation and globalisation processes, to which Ireland is now inextricably linked? Given the important restructuring processes now underway in a number of the universities, and the approaching next phases of strategic planning, this may be a useful moment for each university to consider carefully what it is trying to do, and for that to be reflected in its official mission and vision. These will then feed naturally into the strategic planning phase.

38. The EUA teams would like to emphasise the importance of planning in achieving sustainable long term development through higher education. This is necessary at both national and institutional levels. However, such planning is difficult in current conditions in Ireland. The budgetary situation for universities has been unstable in recent years, which has not helped those trying to make realistic operational or strategic plans for the medium- or long-term, and has been used as a reason to explain why the implementation of current plans has not been fully achievable. Whatever the recent financial situation, the underlying tradition of annual funding cycles certainly works against proper planning, especially when these funds are not confirmed until half way through the academic year.

Quality Assurance

Process: strengths

39. A common framework for quality assurance has been agreed collectively by all the Irish universities through the IUQB. This framework is based on the internationally accepted and recognised principles of an initial self-assessment, a peer review and report, followed by actions to ensure quality improvement. This common framework shared by all seven universities has in turn helped ensure that developments are coherent and consistent across the Irish university sector.

40. A quality promotion committee at each university, which in most cases is a sub-committee of Governing Authority or Academic Council, is charged with ensuring overall university policy in this field. The daily work is coordinated by a dedicated quality promotion unit in each university, usually led by a senior academic with one or two assistants, reporting directly either to the Registrar or, in some cases, to the President. Between them, these bodies have, in all universities, produced guidelines for the internal and external quality review processes (based on the IUQB framework); trained academic and administrative staff in quality assurance theory and practices; chosen and organised peer review teams including both internal and external experts for the review of departments and other units in each university; and guided and encouraged these departments and units in their own self-assessment processes. The work of the quality promotion unit in each university was highly appreciated both internally and by the EUA teams. The fact that academics with good experience of how a university functions are leading this process in most Irish universities is, in the view of the EUA teams, an important strength.

41. The EUA teams were unanimously impressed by the well organised systems in place, by the seriousness of the approach in each university to the quality assurance process, and by the amount of work undertaken by departments, faculties, service units and the university leadership and administration to ensure the success of these procedures. The agreed IUQB focus on quality improvement is particularly to be commended.

42. Based on a detailed examination at each university, the EUA teams can confirm that the Irish universities have established such quality assurance procedures and that these are functioning as part of the daily work of each university. The system is staffed and supported, is already yielding results and has promise for the future. The EUA teams are thus confident in confirming that the Irish universities have complied with their statutory obligations and indeed have taken considerable additional steps towards developing strong internal quality cultures, essential for the ongoing development of higher education in Ireland.

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

44. It is important to note that all this activity has taken place without the existence of a governmental agency or of any direct links to the distribution of core governmental funding. These are, in the opinion of the EUA teams, extremely important and positive points, which have resulted in a general acceptance among academic and administrative staff of the usefulness and indeed necessity of quality assurance activities, and in a positive focus on improvement rather than the negative connotations associated with perceived "inspections" of quality. The role of the IUQB has been central in fostering this approach.

45. Most importantly, the concept of quality is being built into discussions at many levels across each university campus. No major change can occur in open public systems without these discussions taking place. The Irish universities are currently benefiting from such discussions and debate on quality assurance which, coupled with concrete assessment and evaluation activities, are leading to increasing levels of quality awareness and culture across the universities.

46. However, the complexity of an institutional quality management system needs to be recognised. Time is needed to put such a system in place and to ensure its outputs can systematically be integrated into the operational and strategic management of the university. The first cycle of evaluations in the Irish universities has not yet been completed, and indeed in many institutions is little more than halfway through. The EUA teams consider that the experience gained by the universities so far, individually and collectively, has been invaluable and should be considered sufficient for the universities, through IUQB, to move on from the initial phase of testing and introducing the QA system, to a second phase of consolidation of the system and its alignment with other strategic processes such as planning, management and staff development. Given that it will take several cycles for a pioneering effort such as this to yield full results, the EUA teams offer a number of suggestions for the ongoing development of the quality assurance system during this next phase of consolidation and alignment.

Process: weaknesses

47. Following the letter of the law (Universities Act 1997, Art. 35 (2) (a)), the universities have chosen academic departments to be the basic unit of evaluation. The positive aspect of this is that large numbers of staff have been directly involved in or touched by the QA process, and awareness has therefore been raised at the most basic levels of teaching and research across each university. Unless these levels are involved, quality assurance procedures will not have the desired effect on the work of individuals and small groups of academic and administrative staff.

48. However, a negative result of focusing the review process on departments, at least during the initial phase, has been to reinforce existing academic structures and boundaries, without necessarily questioning the reasons for these. A majority of the Irish universities have large numbers of departments and units, many of which are small, sometimes very small, and a large majority of which are discipline-based. Other factors show clearly that changes in these structures are necessary in order to create critical mass, to strengthen higher collective levels of responsibility and to support interdisciplinary processes. It may therefore be useful in certain cases in the future to evaluate groups of cognate departments or units, such as schools or faculties, allowing for a broader view of the discipline and its place within an institutional context. Apart from in those universities where the basic academic unit is already the school, very small numbers of such "grouped" evaluations have yet taken place. In the few cases where these had taken place, the EUA teams were told that the results were very beneficial.

49. Given the unit-based approach and the large number of individual units in most universities, the current system of evaluations does not systematically address interdisciplinary issues or programmes, since these often fall between academic units. Guidelines for self-assessment and peer reviewers should make explicit mention of the need to include all relevant interdisciplinary work also within the scope of the review.

50. Most universities have put in place a formal schedule for the evaluation of units for the next two to three years. Those which do not have such a formal schedule appear to have an informal understanding with the units in question. In either case, units appear to have come forward themselves for evaluation on a more or less voluntary basis. This has meant a non-aggressive approach has been possible within each university, avoiding conflict and building on good will and the readiness of units to participate. Peer pressure has also grown in recent years as increasing numbers of units have been reviewed, thus focusing attention on those units which have yet to participate. But the schedule resulting from this approach is not based on any university-level strategy linked, e.g. to an executive succession in a particular faculty or school, or to professional accreditation processes underway in parallel involving certain departments, or to a major external change bringing a particular opportunity or threat to which the university should respond. The EUA teams therefore suggest that the timing of evaluations in the next phase be approached in a more strategic way.

51. The Universities Act allows a maximum of ten years for the cycle of evaluating all departments, except in special circumstances. Given the number of academic departments, two universities have opted for a ten year cycle, while others have chosen a shorter cycle, between five and seven years. The EUA teams considered that a cycle of ten years was too long, and that, depending on the size and structure of the university, a seven year review cycle could also be rather long. By the time the next review of a department is due, the results of the first one will be out of date and difficult to build upon. Whatever the length of review cycle in the university, in no case did this appear to be linked to the length of any other cycle, e.g. strategic planning or the term of office of Deans. In the opinion of the EUA teams, it would be important to ensure that the QA cycle has some links to other such strategic cycles.

52. Notwithstanding the detailed requirements of the 1997 Universities Act, the universities may also wish to consider whether the second round of evaluations should necessarily cover all units again, or whether this new cycle should focus on weaknesses identified during the first round and other issues, such as interdisciplinary work, not always fully covered in the first cycle.

53. While this should not yet be considered a weakness of the QA process in place in any Irish university, the EUA teams would like to draw attention to a potential risk. In the medium term, it is possible that the dedicated quality promotion units in each university could gradually draw the responsibility for quality assurance away from the basic academic or service departments themselves. The quality promotion units have been doing excellent work and could become increasingly relied upon, by departments under review or by other parts of the university, to ensure the good functioning of the process. Focus must be retained on the usefulness of the QA outcomes and the quality improvement actions which result from these and which are embedded in the life of the university, rather than simply the smooth operation of the process by the quality promotion units.

54. The formal quality assurance procedures required by the 1997 Act are by no means the only procedures used by Irish universities to maintain and develop the quality of their work. Other procedures include the use of external examiners every year for all programmes and courses; the prior accreditation of programmes and courses before they are offered to students; the professional accreditation of certain programmes by the relevant professional bodies; regular programme reviews; the use of awards and prizes to encourage excellence and develop best practice; and the availability and use of staff development measures for pedagogical, research and administrative purposes. Many of these measures have existed since long before 1997. The EUA teams were therefore surprised to note that the implicit links which should exist between these QA mechanisms and the formal quality review process were not always evident at unit and at institutional levels. In some cases, the links did not appear to be seriously considered at all. Strengthening the links between the various QA mechanisms would certainly result in a clearer understanding of how they can complement each other, and hopefully create useful synergies resulting in greater coherence in quality management and responsiveness in quality improvement, at both unit and institutional levels.

Self-assessment procedures at department/unit level

55. The self-assessment process at unit level is a crucial element in the overall QA process, and can contribute substantially to the ownership of whatever quality improvement measures are subsequently identified as necessary. In fact, the unit under review can usually learn more through conducting an honest and thorough self assessment exercise than through the peer review. The self-assessment should not only result in a better knowledge of the current situation facing the unit, but also in greater cohesiveness between staff across the unit and greater willingness and capacity to address issues arising.

56. The EUA teams noted that the self-assessment processes at unit level in each university appeared to be conducted in a positive way. It should be stated that for many of the units reviewed so far, this was their first such experience, and the self-assessment process was an opportunity to undertake a systematic internal examination of the unit, its goals and functions, and for writing these observations down in a structured way. The EUA teams were informed that the process had helped to bring staff together around shared themes and to encourage greater understanding of what they were doing, at both pedagogical and management levels. Most units across the seven universities agreed that this self-assessment experience had in itself been most useful and revealing.

57. The EUA teams commented on the length of time available for this self-assessment phase - in many cases a whole year. This was felt by the EUA teams to be excessively long, and not necessarily resulting in better outputs than if the time had been strictly limited to, for example, three months.

58. The role of students in the self-assessment process at department level in each university appeared to be rather limited. While post-graduate students often had a formal representative on the self-evaluation committee, the role of undergraduates was reported to be minimal. This lack of student involvement was surprising to the EUA teams, all the more so since very few systematic student feedback mechanisms appeared to be in place to ensure that departments had regular and clear information from students regarding the quality of teaching and of the learning environment. The EUA teams were of the opinion that much greater levels of student involvement and student feedback would be highly beneficial to the self-evaluation efforts.

59. Since the self-assessments are department-focused and -led, each department has played the main role in describing and analysing its own work. In doing this, the EUA teams are of the opinion that some departments have not taken full account of the external environment in which they are operating and which will affect their future activities. As already stated, the context in Ireland and at European level is evolving very rapidly, and self-assessment and peer review reports need to place their work in this wider context.

60. Some departments likewise do not take full account of the institutional context when conducting their self-assessments. The resulting report, while hopefully being of use to the unit in question, does not necessarily help obtain an institutional overview of the situation. This contextual element needs to be better managed by each university in order to ensure that the self-assessment documents are also of use for wider institutional planning and management.

61. While the self-evaluation process is certainly the most useful and important phase of a quality review, the resulting self-evaluation report by each unit must also be a useful and operational document, analytical in nature and easy to read. [The self-evaluation reports written by each university and sent to EUA as part of this review are models of how such reports should be]. However, the EUA teams also saw reports from units within several of the universities which were more archival than analytical in nature, comprising over 100 pages excluding annexes. It is suggested that the length of self-assessment reports be strictly limited to a maximum of thirty pages, plus the necessary annexes.

62. In order for a departmental self-assessment to be complete, the EUA teams consider that this should normally also cover that department's links with the relevant university services which affect the quality of the department's work. Such services could include, e.g. the library, student services, human resources, staff development, etc. However, these links were not systematically covered in all self-assessment reports, and in some cases little serious regard seems to have been paid to the importance of these links for the quality of the department's own work. It is suggested that, following some examples which already exist, the more frequently used service departments draw up short lists of key questions which could be given to all other departments when preparing for self-assessment, in order to help guide them and to ensure key issues are addressed.

Peer review

63. After the self-evaluation phase, the unit undergoes an external assessment by a peer review team. These teams, which are put together based on suggestions by the unit under review and confirmed by academic council, comprise both internal and external peers. The internal members come from other units of the same university and often act as chair and rapporteur of the peer review team. The external members usually represent specific expertise in the area under review, and come from other Irish universities and universities further afield – generally from either the UK or the United States, while only occasionally from elsewhere in Europe.

64. Concern was voiced on a number of occasions regarding the composition of the peer review teams. Given that these quality assurance processes have only been running for the last five to eight years, and that in most cases the universities are still completing the first round of unit reviews, it is understandable that the composition of the peer review teams has tended to be somewhat conservative. However, for the second round, it is recommended to take a more open and flexible approach to the choice of team members. The EUA teams do not see the necessity of having so many places taken by internal peers, nor why teams should necessarily include peers from other Irish universities. Indeed, given the small size of the country and the important differences in structure and profile between several of the universities, it might be much better to have completely independent peers from outside the country. Since Ireland and its universities must now compete at European and global levels, it might be also useful for units under review to use the opportunity to benchmark themselves against a much wider variety of universities and higher education systems, and to select peer reviewers on that basis.

65. Likewise, concern was expressed at the practice apparently accepted in all universities of the unit under review nominating a shortlist of its own candidates as peer reviewers. The EUA teams urge the Irish universities to ensure that any direct link between the unit under review and the choice of peers for that review is cut. In order to secure independent and relevant advice, one option would be for the unit to propose an external expert who could then put forward a shortlist of potential peers. The Dean could also play this role to ensure strategic coherence in the choice of reviewers across cognate departments.

66. While accepting the need for subject experts, the EUA teams felt that many peers were also advocates of the disciplines covered by the particular department, and would therefore obviously wish to promote and expand those disciplines, without necessarily taking a wider institutional view of the situation or of the necessary academic and structural links between several different departments and disciplines.

67. Following the external review visit, the peer review group submits a written report. This report is most important to the unit under review in that it should provide external, independent and expert feedback on what the unit is trying to do and its strategy for doing this. The report should also contain recommendations for quality improvement. Some of these recommendations are generally easy to implement and can be done so by the unit in question, while others imply new investments or major organisational changes and therefore also need the support of the university executive. The EUA teams

learned that, in many cases, these reports contained unrealistic recommendations regarding the need for additional resources, and did not take full account of the wider situation at the university.

68. It is suggested that the terms of reference and guidelines for peer reviewers be updated. The teams should be asked to emphasise a wider view of quality – including internationalisation, interdisciplinarity and research, and to support strategic change. A clear distinction should be made between those recommendations which can be implemented without significant additional resources and those which do indeed require new investment. The peer review reports should also be clear and unambiguous, to ensure that responsibility for the implementation of their recommendations is assigned to the correct level.

Quality improvement

69. Quality improvement is the cornerstone of the whole quality assurance process, for without this there is little point in undertaking the self-assessment and peer review activities.

70. Following the peer review report, the unit under review produces a quality improvement plan. This plan is usually negotiated with the university, and should then be implemented by the unit, with the support of the university. The EUA teams learned that it can often take almost a year for these quality improvement plans to be finalised since they must be discussed and negotiated at various steps within each university's structure. This means that, together with the self-evaluation phase, the whole process can take up to two years, which is considerably too long. The context will have changed before the outcomes have been agreed.

71. While the quality assurance process is centrally organised and driven, it has until recently not appeared consistently to have enjoyed the necessary support of senior management and governance at all universities. Such support is vital to ensure the integration of its outcomes into the wider strategic activities of the institution. As a result, some units have prepared their quality improvement plans in a strategic vacuum, and these plans have become more aspirational than targeted. When targets do exist, they often refer to local unit objectives in isolation rather than linking them to the university's strategic plan. This situation limits the possibilities for quality improvement, and does not guarantee that the outcomes of the quality review process are used as inputs for strategic development.

72. In the opinion of the EUA teams, not all the university governing authorities and executives had a coherent view of the outcomes of the quality review process across the university. While reports are prepared regularly for these bodies, these reports do not so far appear to offer a strategic synthesis of results and the implications for improving quality. At the same time, governing authorities and executives do not all appear to offer the necessary support to ensure that the quality review outcomes are used at unit and institutional levels. In particular, the executives need to respond more visibly to the outcomes, even where additional resources may not be available. The quality improvement plans subsequently developed by many units therefore do not appear to be linked systematically to strategic management or to any other reform process underway across the universities.

73. This has led to a situation in several universities where many units consider they have fulfilled their part of the quality improvement plan, but that the university has not followed up regarding its own responsibilities or by being aware of improvements underway. This is obviously a dangerous situation which if left unaddressed could lead to demotivation and even cynicism among staff, especially during periods of budgetary difficulty.

74. In most cases, the EUA teams saw little substantial evidence so far of systematic follow-up or monitoring at university level to the quality improvement plans of the various units. Some universities are developing plans for this. Although the Irish QA system is still going through its first full cycle (only one university has

already started its second cycle), this follow-up will be essential in demonstrating the long-term effectiveness of the quality assurance process which the universities have put in place. It might be useful, for both internal and external purposes, for the universities to include information on this aspect of their work in their annual quality assurance reports.

75. Most universities have put in place a variety of small funds to support quality improvement initiatives arising from the self-evaluation and peer review processes. The HEA has also made funding available to each university for these initiatives. However, some of the quality improvement requirements go well beyond the scope of these funds and should therefore be referred to the overall management and resource allocation processes at university level. The EUA teams would encourage the universities to view their entire budgets as quality improvement funds, instead of relying on the existing small funds.

76. It was also felt, however, that the existence of small amounts of dedicated funding for quality improvement could possibly distract attention away from the real purposes of the review process and the responsibilities of the unit under review. In a limited number of cases, the main incentive for undertaking the review appeared to be the expectation that some extra resources would be forthcoming as a result. It should not be forgotten that much can be done to improve quality without important new expenditure, and indeed much quality improvement is taking place across each university with very little additional funding.

77. There is no system in place in the Irish universities for the performance appraisal of individual staff members, with the possibility of incentives or sanctions attached to this. Given that widespread and sustainable quality improvement in an organisation is unlikely without the opportunity regularly to review and discuss the quality of performance by individuals, the EUA teams were pleased to learn that such a system has recently been agreed with the labour unions and will soon be introduced across the universities. This potentially powerful tool should be closely articulated with the QA framework.

Strategic Planning, Governance and Management

78. All Irish universities have a strategic planning process and a strategic plan. In some universities, the strategic plans are well known and referred to regularly, while in others this appeared to be less so. Strategic planning is however a relatively recent feature of Irish higher education, and the EUA teams found there was, in some cases, difficulty at various levels below the university leadership in differentiating between strategic and operational matters. Indeed, in the opinion of the EUA teams, some of the strategic plans are rather all-embracing, and tend to veer towards the operational. They appeared also, in some cases, to be more oriented to the public than for use by the university governance and management.

79. The links between strategic plans and current university structures are in many cases not clear. Given that several of the universities have large numbers of small departments, the links between departments, faculties and the university are paramount for the implementation of a top-down strategy. However, even in those universities with smaller numbers of units, such links seemed relatively weak.

80. The governance structures of Irish universities are defined in the 1997 Universities Act. They include a governing authority and an academic council. The management is the responsibility of the university executive, led by the President or Provost.

81. The Universities Act prescribes in great detail the composition of the governing authorities in each university, and also outlines their basic functions. Established in their current form in 1997, these governance structures are still relatively young and in a number of cases the subject of intense debate within the institution. When examining the role of the governing authority in each university in relation to quality assurance, the EUA teams wanted to see whether these bodies had a strategic overview of

quality issues at the university, and how the outcomes of the formal and informal quality assurance processes were used in the strategic governance of the institution.

82. The EUA teams examined the impact of the quality review process on strategic planning and governance at the universities. While the quality review process is certainly a consequence of strategic planning, it appears to have little impact so far on the next phase of strategic planning. When the different elements of the university are too isolated from each other, the benefits from the QA system for strategic planning are less than expected. In the opinion of the EUA teams, the feedback from the quality review process to strategic governance and management could be improved dramatically in most universities. The governing authorities do not appear as yet to have the necessary strategic overview of these issues, nor do the outcomes of the various quality assurance activities appear to influence in any substantial way the strategic discussions of these bodies.

83. This may be due to a number of reasons, apart from the structural issues already mentioned:

   • Although governing authorities receive, in most cases, the full results of the formal quality reviews, these can be rather large and indigestible documents. In some universities, there are also large numbers of these documents. No governing authority appears, however, to have been provided so far with a regular synthetical analysis of quality issues arising from the formal review process which could be used as an input for a substantial strategic discussion;
   • External members of governing authorities mentioned repeatedly to the EUA teams that in general their discussions tended to veer towards operational issues as opposed to concentrating on strategic ones. It appears that insufficient use is made of the external perspectives and experience they can bring to the university. If this is so, it defeats one main purpose in having these people on such a body. In turn, all members of governing authorities should avoid becoming involved in operational affairs and restrict their contributions to strategic issues;
   • The size, composition and balance of governing authorities were also discussed. The OECD has made clear recommendations in this area, which the EUA teams also endorse. Several EUA teams witnessed at first hand the difficulties of maintaining a strategic discussion given the size and composition of some of these bodies.

84. The difficulties for the university leadership of formulating and implementing strategy in this environment should not be underestimated.

85. The EUA teams remarked that, due to the structures of the universities and the department-based approach of the QA process, a number of strategic issues were not covered by regular review procedures, unless the responsibility of a specific service department. The quality review methodology could easily be adapted, as needs arise, to focus on university-wide issues such as teaching methods, modularisation, PhD programmes, non-traditional students, etc. It may be useful for the university to evaluate such cross-cutting issues from time to time as part of its own strategic development. The lead taken by IUQB in examining such issues at sectoral level should likewise be encouraged further.

86. There is a clear need to strengthen the universities' capacity for analysis about their own situation. Compared to universities elsewhere, in particular in North America, little work is currently being undertaken in this field, the result of which is that the Irish universities generally have incomplete information about themselves and how they can benchmark their performance against chosen competitors. This institutional analytical capacity should link planning, QA, staff development and the management information systems. Only one university said it was satisfied with the management information system it had in operation, allowing the university to draw down data on various aspects of performance. A well designed and functioning university-wide MIS is also essential for academic and service units when undertaking their own quality reviews, in that it should be able to provide data which is up to date and easily obtainable. This will result in a more effective and efficient evaluation process.

87. While the Irish universities are pioneers in developing and implementing a systematic quality review and quality improvement system by themselves, in the opinion of the EUA teams they are not yet leaders in using the outcomes of the system to stimulate strategic change inside the universities. This should be a priority during the next phase of developing the QA system.

Teaching and Learning

88. The situation regarding teaching and learning differs considerably from one Irish university to another and indeed within universities also. Some situations were considered by the EUA teams to be rather traditional, with large auditorium-style lectures and many contact hours for students. Others appeared more modern and flexible, with an increased focus on learning rather than teaching, more project work, and greater links with the world of work and other external stakeholders. However, there is a general positive shift from larger classrooms to smaller groups and from long courses to shorter modules.

89. There is considerable evidence from the EUA review that the QA processes in place across the universities have already had a positive influence on teaching and learning activities. Awareness of quality issues is rising rapidly. The QA process is helping to keep the contents of courses up to date, and is supporting a practical approach to improving teaching and learning methodology.

90. However, there is little evidence so far to suggest that the QA processes have influenced the overall teaching portfolios of the universities, nor that they are explicitly linked to other more specific QA mechanisms for teaching and learning, nor that they have helped to broaden the current disciplinary boundaries which exist in most of the universities.

91. The EUA teams were unanimously surprised to find that students have almost no formal input into monitoring or evaluating the quality of teaching and learning in Irish universities. In many cases, no regular formal feedback on courses and modules is obtained from students at all. In cases where such feedback is obtained, often at the initiative of the lecturer, there did not appear to be any systematic way to monitor the use made of this feedback. Student input is essential in the ongoing improvement of quality in the teaching and learning fields, and, as a basic minimum, the Irish universities need to ensure coherent and regular student feedback on all courses and modules, and for this feedback to be an explicit input to the QA process.

92. There is a need to complete modularisation in those universities where this is not yet the case, and to make this as flexible as possible in those where it exists already. The effective and learner-oriented use of modules can play an important role in developing the quality of teaching and learning activities, from both pedagogical and administrative perspectives. The use of modules likewise makes it possible to have more interdisciplinary degree programmes, is helpful in encouraging international exchange, and is a key mechanism in helping universities respond to the needs of non-traditional, mature and part-time students.

93. Likewise, the purpose and functioning of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) are not yet sufficiently understood across all Irish universities. In some cases ECTS is not used correctly, e.g. in the relation between student workload and credit allocation. It is rarely used optimally for internationalisation or inter-institutional cooperation. The EUA teams found many cases of students' study periods abroad not being recognised as the equivalent of what they would have achieved at home in their Irish university, resulting in the lengthening of study programmes for those students who took the initiative of gaining international experience, and in the disencouragement of other students from attempting such mobility. It may be useful to include the monitoring of the implementation of such mechanisms as part of the quality review process, since they can also have important effects on the outcomes of teaching and learning.

94. Good staff development work is being undertaken in small Centres for Teaching and Learning in each university. Since staff development is crucial for the continuous improvement of quality, the good work which has started in these centres needs to be developed further, and to reach greater numbers of staff across each university. The recognition and encouragement of good teaching is vital, and this signal must come from the top levels of the university. Some of these Centres also play an important role in the preparation of university policy in these fields.

95. Taking into account that over 50% of current students in Ireland are female, the EUA teams would like to draw the attention of the universities to the gender composition of their staff, especially at senior academic levels. Only a small minority of universities mentioned this as an issue during the review process, although it appears to be emerging as a system-wide policy issue. It might therefore be important for universities actively to monitor this balance and other related gender issues in the lecture rooms, the laboratories and at senior management level.

96. The issue of access to university education was addressed more systematically by the universities during the review process. The EUA teams were informed of the special access programmes in each institution and of the successes of these in attracting students to university who would not have had opportunities to enter through conventional channels. The overall numbers of such students has increased rapidly in recent years but in relative terms however remains low. A number of other schemes to attract and retain "non-standard students" also exist, although the EUA teams were informed by the students themselves that some of these schemes had been negatively affected by recent budget cuts in fields such as social welfare and health. The current requirement for part-time students to pay tuition fees likewise appears to work against stated national objectives to increase participation in higher education. Only one university has met a national target of having at least 15% of mature students, and in comparison to other countries, Irish students are still largely from "standard" backgrounds.

Research Policy and Innovation

97. Unlike some other European countries, universities in Ireland face no structural limitations on the field or scope of their research. Indeed, recent generous external funding has encouraged a new focus on research and an increased awareness of its importance.

98. Despite this open situation, the EUA teams remarked that much of the research at Irish universities appears to be externally driven, and that institutional research strategies are relatively reactive. The function of vice-president for research in most universities appears to be more as a coordinator between external demands and internal capacity, rather than as an instigator and driver of the institution's own strategic research agenda. The outcomes of the QA procedures should also help formulate the university's own research policy and strategies.

99. Research activity at the universities appears to be based on strong individual research capacities and good networks at national and international levels. However, in the opinion of the EUA teams, most universities seem poorly structured to make the most of these capacities and networks, with researchers working in structures which do not help develop critical mass, or encourage the necessary links between different disciplines. Major exceptions to this general situation are some of the recently created research centres in a limited number of fields well funded by Science Foundation Ireland. PRTLI funding has also had a very positive effect in this area, although the 2003 funding pause certainly damaged initial moves to greater interdisciplinarity in a number of areas.

100. The overall numbers of research masters and PhD students as well as post-doctoral fellows are low in most universities. Furthermore, the current fragmented structures have exacerbated this situation,

leading to very small and isolated groups of PhD students and post-doctoral fellows in many fields. This is a major challenge for the Irish universities to address, and the EUA teams would like to commend the work undertaken so far by the IUQB sectoral project in this field. There is a need for all universities to make special efforts to ensure that post-graduate students have the opportunities to join structures and teams, as well as to meet each other and work together for their mutual benefit.

101. The EUA teams noted that research-based teaching is widespread in Irish universities. This is a very positive indicator. There is likewise good evidence to suggest that the quality review process now in place across the universities has helped raise awareness of the importance of linking teaching and research, and to strengthen the role of research in some academic departments. However, there is an urgent need at the majority of the universities for much better information systems regarding research outputs across cognate departments, schools, faculties and the university. At present, it is unclear whether the institutions are aware of the very many research initiatives which are underway or planned.

102. Many research projects and centres undergo a variety of quality review procedures linked to their external funding contracts. However, there is a need to ensure greater coherence, in both methodological and logistical terms, between these external reviews and the university's own review processes.

103. Not all research areas in Ireland receive generous amounts of external funding. In these cases, the formal quality review process remains one of the main QA mechanisms for these academics and their work. However, in some cases, the peer review reports would appear not to have given due consideration to research activity at the units under review, apart from requesting a list of publications. The quality assurance process can help the unit under review situate itself in the wider context of the university, and to benchmark itself nationally and internationally. There may therefore be a need for greater clarity in the guidelines for self-assessment and peer review, and for review teams to be explicitly briefed regarding research and research outputs.

104. Given the average size of the Irish universities, the breadth of disciplines covered, and the need to maintain research as the background for research-based teaching in all disciplines, there is, in the opinion of the EUA teams, plenty of scope for greater inter-institutional cooperation between universities and also with other organisations in order to create internationally competitive critical mass in many research fields. In general, the EUA teams viewed the links between Irish universities and the external world as being very traditional.

Internationalisation

105. While Irish universities are clearly open to international influences and trends, and enjoy constant international inputs of both staff and students, the EUA teams were surprised to note that there appeared to be little general interest in many parts of the universities for a broader international vision for institutional development. This may be the result of geography, or perhaps a combination of the facts that home students were plentiful and that domestic agendas were busy. Eitherway, most Irish universities have only recently developed international strategies and plans, and in some cases these are essentially focused on the recruitment of fee paying students, rather than the internationalization of teaching, learning and research at the university for the benefit of the Irish students.

106. Irish universities have recently been making real efforts to attract foreign students, notably fee paying students. They also continue to be a popular and over-subscribed destination for Erasmus mobility students from other EU states, as well as for Junior Year Abroad students from the USA. However, the EUA teams were disappointed to note that in most universities there was little push to send Irish students abroad, despite the fact that those students who had been abroad appeared to have

benefited considerably from the experience. In a number of universities, going abroad for a year or semester often meant that that period had to be repeated on return to Ireland, since the study undertaken abroad was not recognized. This is contrary to the principles of ECTS and the Bologna Process and a clear disincentive for Irish students to become more mobile. The universities need to examine closely their current practices in this field and amend where necessary such restrictive recognition procedures. Interestingly, students who went abroad as part of an obligatory work experience placement did not appear to face such problems.

107. As already stated, the EUA teams formed the opinion that the Irish universities and academic staff are quite international in their research work and networks. However, the same does not always to be the case regarding teaching activities. Evidence gathered during the EUA visits suggests that in many departments, the international aspects of courses and teaching appeared rather restricted. It is therefore suggested that more explicit reference to internationalization be made during both the self-assessment and peer review phases of the QA process.

108. One particular issue is the overall low exposure of Irish students to foreign languages. This is a challenge shared by other English-speaking countries, but nevertheless could constitute a long-term disadvantage to individual Irish students and have wider collective social and economic effects, given that the labour market is now international. In more immediate terms, the lack of foreign language competences of many young Irish students seriously hinders their opportunities to benefit from an international component to their study programmes.

Main Recommendations concerning Quality Assurance

Organisation and planning of QA process

109. The contribution of QA to university strategy and planning should be stressed to all involved in the process.

110. It should be clear from the start of the process that the results of each evaluation will be discussed between the senior management, including the President, and the unit evaluated.

111. The university President's overall responsibility for the QA process and role as one of its main beneficiaries should be underlined.

112. This overall responsibility of the President and senior management for the process should not lessen the fundamental ownership of each evaluation by the unit in question.

Self-assessment phase

113. The self-assessment reports produced by any unit under review should not exceed 30 pages, excluding additional annexes.

114. The self assessment phase should not last longer than three months.

115. All units need to ensure that students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, are involved systematically in the self-assessment and that their opinions and contributions are included in the reports.

116. All units need to take proper account of the evolving institutional and external environments when undertaking their self-assessment, looking at the opportunities and threats these may present and situating themselves within these contexts.

117. Units undergoing review need systematically to consider their links to the relevant university services and to make sure these links are covered by the review process.

118. Units undergoing review should make explicit links between the formal quality review process and any other QA mechanisms which they may also operate. The potential synergies between these are vital.

119. The Irish universities need to ensure coherent and regular student feedback on all courses and modules, and for this feedback to be an explicit input to the QA process.

Peer review phase

120. Universities should ensure that the guidelines and terms of reference supplied to peer review teams encourage a broad view of quality, including sufficient emphasis on research, interdisciplinarity and internationalisation. These guidelines should also ensure that any ensuing recommendations are clear, realistic, and distinguish between those needing new investment and those where improvements can be made without significant additional resources.

121. The composition of peer review teams needs to be more flexible, in order to respond to the need for strategic benchmarking with other universities worldwide and to respect the diversity of profiles and structures among the Irish universities.

122. The choice of peers should be independent of the unit under review.

Quality improvement

123. Following each review, the unit and the senior university management should hold a short seminar to discuss the evaluation, together with proposals for improvement and action.

124. A maximum of six months should be set for agreeing a quality improvement plan.

125. These quality improvement plans should be taken into account in the strategic management and other university-wide processes.

126. The university management must respond to these plans, even in cases where resources are scarce.

127. Information on the implementation of agreed quality improvement plans should be included in the university's annual quality assurance reports.

128. The universities should consider their entire budgets as quality improvement funds.

Strategic governance and management

129. The scheduling of evaluations should be approached in a more strategic way.

130. Universities should explore the possibilities for linking the quality review cycle to other strategic cycles.

131. Universities should consider reviewing groups of cognate units (faculties, etc) to achieve a better overview of how teaching, learning and research can develop across these units, and to break down current boundaries to inter-disciplinary work.

132. Universities should also consider reviewing university-wide issues, not linked to any one unit, but essential for the ongoing strategic development of the institution.

133. There is a need to ensure the regular analysis and overview of the QA process and outcomes across each university, and to link these explicitly to strategic management processes.

134. All universities need to strengthen their capacities for institutional analysis and monitoring, in order to provide better information for strategic governance and management. Better management information systems are also needed in most universities. The QA process must both contribute to and benefit from these.

135. Leadership should be aware of the real dangers of "paralysis by analysis". The burden of procedures must not obscure the purpose of establishing a quality culture, and a standardized approach must not obscure the primary focus on quality improvement. Procedures and approaches need to be kept simple and timely.

136. There is a need to maximise collaboration in research, infrastructure, human resources and strategic development across the Irish universities in order to develop the critical mass necessary to be competitive in certain areas. The Irish QA framework can contribute greatly to this collaboration.

137. Given the healthy university-led approach so far, the lack of any governmental agency and the relatively modest investments in QA, it is suggested that the universities estimate how much time and money have been used so far in setting up and operating the quality assurance and quality improvement process, and clarify the benefits obtained. Such an analysis could then help the universities, individually and collectively, to link back to the four basic methodological questions and see to what extent these investments have been effective and efficient in helping to clarify what they are trying to do, how they are trying to do it, how they know it works, and how they change in order to improve.

Conclusions

138. The Irish universities have established a quality assurance system which is functioning, well organised and now yielding results. In doing so, the universities have gone well beyond the legislative requirements contained in the 1997 Universities Act, and have put in place a system which holds much promise for the development of higher education in Ireland. Now that this system exists and has been operating successfully for several years, it is time to move to a new phase. This should build on the existing system, linking it more closely to strategic management, and feeding its outputs into the ongoing development of the universities, individually and collectively.

139. The EUA teams would like to thank the Irish universities, the IUQB and the HEA for their invitation to conduct this review of quality assurance. It has been a challenging and fascinating undertaking for everybody. We have admired the quality assurance system put in place in recent years, and consider that many universities and QA systems elsewhere in Europe and further afield could learn from the Irish experience. We have also put forward a series of suggestions which we believe will help the universities and other stakeholders to develop the system still further and use its potential to ensure the ongoing success of the Irish universities in meeting their missions.

**REVIEW OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN IRISH UNIVERSITIES:
HEA/IUQB AGREED PROCESS**

(March 2004)

Review of Quality Assurance in Irish Universities: HEA/IUQB Agreed Process

1. Introduction

An extensive, independent and objective review of quality assurance in Irish universities will be conducted by the European University Association with the assistance of experts from Europe, America and Canada.. The review is being jointly commissioned by the Irish Universities Quality Board [IUQB] and the Higher Education Authority [HEA]. The review is structured to accord with the respective responsibilities of the universities and the HEA concerning quality assurance under the Irish Universities Act 1997. The combined review arrangements are designed to ensure that the university system and its stakeholders gain maximum benefit from comprehensive evaluations by teams of experienced international quality assurance experts and that the procedures and processes in place in Irish universities can be reviewed against best practice internationally.

The review is taking place in the wider context of –

• the Government's "strategic objective of placing Ireland's higher education system in the top rank of the OECD in terms of both quality and levels of participation",
• the Government's commitment to "support efforts to protect and improve the quality of academic teaching and learning at undergraduate level " (Programme for Government),
• Government's acknowledgement that "the challenges of maintaining, quality, responsiveness and competitiveness in higher education are a major priority against the background of unprecedented levels of expansion, change and diversification in the sector in Ireland"

The implementation of appropriate quality assurance procedures must be an essential part of any strategy to achieve such top rank positioning. The intention is that this review will support the Irish universities in the continuing development of their quality assurance procedures to meet the best standards and practices in the world.

2. Legislative Background

The universities are obliged under the Universities Act, (1997) to establish and implement procedures for quality assurance, and to arrange for a review of the effectiveness of these procedures.

The HEA has a statutory function to assist universities achieve their quality assurance objectives; to review and report on the quality assurance procedures developed by the universities and to be consulted by the universities in their review of the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures. The IUQB was established by the universities to increase the level of inter-university co-operation in developing quality assurance procedures and processes, in line with best international practice and to facilitate the conduct of reviews of the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures and their outcomes.

The HEA and the IUQB have separate but complementary mandates in relation to quality assurance. In jointly commissioning this review, both roles will be combined with the objective of achieving the maximum benefit for the system in a more timely and cost efficient way.

3. Review Process

The HEA and the IUQB have engaged the European University Association (EUA) to undertake this review with the assistance of experts from Europe, America and Canada.

The EUA has a strong international reputation in quality assurance evaluation having conducted institutional reviews of universities in some 33 countries. The EUA adopts a dynamic methodological approach to evaluation. It focuses on the universities' capacity to change, including their strategic planning and internal quality monitoring, and examines if all the preconditions are assembled to make each and every institution more adaptable and responsive to the changing higher education environment at local, national, European and international level.

Under the joint commission the EUA will

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

The EUA review will examine the following areas for each of the seven universities:

- Design and planning of existing internal quality processes
- Effectiveness of internal quality processes
- Relevance of internal quality processes and degree to which their outcomes are used in decision-making and strategic planning
- Perceived gaps in the internal mechanisms processes and frameworks and recommendations for enhancing them.

These key elements will be placed within an institutional analysis that will examine decision-making processes and will allow the review teams to comment on institutional obstacles and success factors for an effective internal quality management.

To complement the EUA overall review of quality procedures established by the universities the HEA in consultation with the IUQB and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), is putting in place a high level reference panel comprising eminent individuals from outside the university sector. The role of this panel will be to provide an external perspective on the social, cultural and economic context within which the Irish universities operate, and the procedures established by them in respect of quality assurance and quality improvement. The panel shall consider the outcomes of the EUA review and shall prepare for the HEA a "reflections" document which may identify particular issues of relevance to future reviews.

With a view to reinforcing the credibility and objectivity of the review process the EUA review teams will meet with the high-level reference panel at the commencement of the process and again prior to its completion. Both the panel and the IUQB will be afforded the opportunity to comment on draft findings of the review.

4. Outcomes

The University Reports

The EUA will provide a draft report to each university for correction of factual errors. Universities will be allowed two weeks to notify the EUA of any corrections. Following this period the EUA will assume the university accepts the draft as the final report.

The final reports are then sent to the IUQB, which then forwards to each university its individual report. Copies will also be sent by the IUQB to the HEA for noting, and with the proviso that it is work in progress.

The IUQB will require a response to the report from each university within six weeks.

The IUQB then prepares its own formal response to the reports and submits all these documents, i.e. the EUA reports, the university responses, and the IUQB response, as a package to the Minister (section 41 of the Universities Act).

On completion of this process each university will publish its individual report on its website.

The Sectoral Report

The EUA will send the draft sectoral report to IUQB and HEA for correction of errors of fact. The HEA and IUQB will co-ordinate their response on this and report back to the EUA very quickly.

The EUA will then provide a final report to the HEA and the IUQB on its sector-wide review of quality procedures established by the universities. Following consideration of the EUA sectoral report and the 'reflections' document prepared by the high-level reference panel, the HEA will publish the outcomes of the review following consultation with the IUQB.

Following consideration of the EUA sectoral report the IUQB will publish its views on the outcome of the review, following consultation with the HEA.