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Introduction to the Technological Higher Education Quality Framework

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Foreword to the Technological Higher Education Quality Framework

The Technological Higher Education Quality Framework (THEQF) had its genesis in the early discussions on the reconfiguration of the higher education system, that arose from the publication of the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* in 2011. Initially, THEQF was conceived as a quality framework for Technological Universities (TUQF), a set of new institutions which the National Strategy envisaged would emerge from a process of amalgamation and re-designation amongst the existing institutes of technology. However, the debate on Technological Universities per se also prompted a discussion on the mission of the technological sector more generally, whether that sector is considered solely in terms of Technological Universities or as a combination of Technological Universities and Institutes of Technology. This broader discussion culminated in the establishment of the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) in 2016, a new, successor body to Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI), which has been founded to represent and promote the interests of all of Ireland's fourteen Institutes of Technology. The establishment of this new body is an exciting milestone in the ongoing development of the technological sector in Irish higher education. In line with it, the THEQF has been redesigned to present both to an internal and external audience the current, and emerging thinking and practice on quality assurance and enhancement in the Institutes of Technology, in a period of momentous change for the sector.

The technological sector has always led the way in making quality higher education opportunities available to all in Ireland. This quality framework reflects the solid foundations of education and research standards in our member institutions; and the work done by the sector to constantly enhance the experience of learners studying and researching on their programmes, which is realised through the institutes' ongoing engagement with industry and enterprise, with community and cultural bodies and with partner educational institutions, regionally, nationally and internationally. The framework is in part an advocacy document, which seeks to explain, promote and recognise the quality and enhancement activity of our members. In addition, it is also a guidance document to help our members and partners in the higher education sector to continue to reinforce standards, to provide principles to guide their enhancement, and to embed throughout the entire system an ever deepening culture of quality.

THEQF was developed by a Project Steering Committee, chaired by Professor Christian Thune, President Emeritus of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), and the former Chairman of the Accreditation Council for Higher Education in Denmark. The Steering Committee comprised nominated representatives from all of THEA's members, together with the THEA executive team, and was assisted by a number of working groups, which drew upon the expertise of quality assurance and enhancement practitioners in the areas of Teaching and Learning, Research and



Engagement from across the sector. In addition, inputs were also sought and gratefully received from the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the employers' representative body, IBEC, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). Thanks are due to all of our colleagues from all the above organisations, too numerous to mention individually, who contributed to building this first iteration of THEQF.

In conclusion, we note that it is the intention of THEA to maintain the THEQF as a core sectoral publication into the future. To facilitate the periodic updating of the THEQF, therefore, as both the technological sector and the thinking on quality assurance and enhancement evolve, THEQF has been published in a modular format, which will allow for the updating and republishing of individual sections of the framework as and when required.

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The THEQF is a set of high-level, strategic guidance principles developed by and for the technological higher education (THE) sector. The principles are about internal quality assurance and enhancement (IQAE) systems in technological higher education institutions (THEIs).

The THEQF is developed and maintained by the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) and its member organisations, the 14 Institutes of Technology (IoTs), in consultation with partner higher education institutions (HEIs^{G1}) and national and international agencies in the Irish and European higher education sectors.

1.1 The Purpose of the THEQF

The THEQF is designed to be useful to those working with technological higher education institutions (THEIs) in a variety of roles. These could include:

- a. Management - in the ongoing development of IQAE and governance systems and in collaborations with partners and stakeholders
- b. Quality officers - in the review and maintenance of institutional quality systems, or in preparation for internal or external reviews
- c. Staff - in the development, delivery and support of programmes of education, training and research and the provision of student services
- d. Learners – particularly student representatives promoting student engagement, or undertaking advocacy work, in THEIs.

The THEQF is a useful touchstone for THEA in promoting and advocating for THEIs' programmes of education and research, and for building capacity in the sector. It also helps our partners (the universities and other HEIs), Irish and European agencies and representative bodies for higher education, to understand and advance their work with THEIs. In addition, it may also be of interest to the general public with an interest in technological higher education.

It is important to note that the THEQF *is not* a prescriptive or regulatory framework for institutions to comply with. It is a principles-based framework that supports and recognises the established culture of quality and enhancement within THEIs.

1.1a Structure of the THEQF

The framework consists of four parts, supported by an introductory section (this document) and appendices. This structure addresses quality assurance and enhancement in relation to the three key roles of higher education institutions, which were identified in the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*,¹ as follows:

Part I: Principles of Internal Quality Assurance and Enhancement

Part I of the THEQF sets out the high-level principles which underpin the establishment of an IQAE system. It also deals with definitions of THE and IQAE.

Part II: Internal Quality Assurance and Enhancement of Taught Provision

Part II sets out the specific framework of principles for IQAE in the learning, teaching and assessment environments for taught provision.

Part III: Internal Quality Assurance and Enhancement of Research

Part III sets out the specific framework for principles of IQAE in research activity.

Part IV: Internal Quality Assurance and Enhancement of Engagement

Part IV sets out the specific framework of principles for IQAE in engagement with stakeholders.

Appendices

The appendices consist of:

A. Glossary

Contains explanations and further reading for terms marked^{Gx}.

B. Bibliography

A list of references used and further reading for the THEQF.

C. THEQF Principles Map

A relationship map showing the primary interrelationships between the THEQF principles.

The modular format of the THEQF allows it to be read as a single comprehensive suite, or in the specific parts that different readers think relevant to their own needs. It also allows for ease of regular revision and updating by THEA.

¹ | *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, Department of Education and Skills, 2011.

2.1 The Technological Higher Education Association

THEA was formed in 2016 and inherited the functions of IoTI with an expanded representative remit and mission. THEA's role is to advocate for and promote education and research across the technological higher education sector in Ireland through:

- + Engaging externally with partners, state agencies and representative bodies
- + Working with members to foster a sectoral identity and build capacity in leadership and advocacy
- + Provision of services to members in support of their education and research activity.

THEA is the voice of Ireland's THEIs. We advocate for members in support of a HE system that values and supports higher education as a public good; that is sustainable through adequate funding; and that values knowledge-in-use and supports accessible and flexible learning pathways into, between and onwards from programmes of education and research – spanning apprenticeship to PhD – for any learner regardless of their background, life stage or circumstances.

THEA's fourteen member institutes are diverse in terms of geography, size and composition. Each is uniquely positioned as a centre of economic, cultural, political and social capital in their own context. As awarding bodies, the fourteen IoTs are fully integrated into the NFQ and Bologna framework and, as a sector, are at the forefront of developing national and European effective practice and policy for higher education.

THEA works with the sector to ensure that THEIs are the institutions of choice for anyone with educational ambitions in a changing Ireland, by continuing to produce graduates that are ready to take on roles, responsibilities and challenges in enterprise and society.

2.2 Background to the THEQF

In 2012, in response to the publication of the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, the fourteen IoTs began a project to develop a sector-wide quality framework for institutions aiming to seek designation as Technological Universities (TUs). This project resulted in the *Technological Universities Quality Framework (TUQF)*, a fit-for-purpose framework to reflect the mission of the TU and attest to the academic maturity and autonomy of the IoTs. The publication of *Principles of Internal Quality Assurance and Enhancement for Technological Universities*² and *Quality Enhancement and Assurance of Research*³ were the two outputs of the project. The TUQF project structure and these two outputs formed the original basis for the THEQF.

In 2016, as THEA was formed and its expanded remit and mission became apparent, the IoTs decided to deepen the scope of the TUQF project to encompass all forms of THE and to establish an internationally benchmarked quality framework which:

- + Demonstrates that THEIs have robust IQAE systems in place and capitalises on their track record
- + Demonstrates that THEIs take responsibility for IQAE and the implementation of the Standards and Guidelines for *Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*⁴ (and Irish law, policy and guidance arising from it)
- + Celebrates the unique position and purpose of THE in the Irish education landscape
- + Acknowledges the maturity and value of the academic activity in THEIs
- + Allows and encourages institutions to build their research capacity
- + Encourages the extension of IQAE systems and processes to institutional engagement with stakeholders.

2 | Institutes of Technology Ireland and Dublin Institute of Technology, *Principles of Internal Quality Assurance and Enhancement for Technological Universities in Ireland*, 2014.

3 | Institutes of Technology Ireland and Dublin Institute of Technology, *Quality Enhancement and Assurance of Research*, 2014.

4 | European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*, 2nd edn, 2015.

The understanding and implementation of the THEQF depends on two core concepts: *Technological higher education* and *internal quality assurance and enhancement*. The definitions of these for our purposes are explored below.

3.1 Technological Higher Education

The concept of THE in Ireland has its origins in the provision of higher-level qualifications outside of the university sector, which has been ongoing since the nineteenth century.

The majority of the Institutes of Technology (IoTs) can trace their origins back to the late 1960s, when, as Regional Technical Colleges,⁵ they were founded for the express purpose of addressing technical skills gaps, or to:

“...educate for trade and industry over a broad spectrum of occupations ranging from craft to professional, notably in engineering and science but also in commercial, linguistic and other specialities. They will, however, be more immediately concerned with providing courses aimed at filling gaps in the industrial manpower structure, particularly in the technician area.”⁶

From these humble origins, the IoTs have developed to become an integral part of the fabric of Irish higher education. With their wide regional dispersal and their deep links to the economic and social life of their respective regions, many have evolved as the developmental hubs of their respective hinterlands through the ‘spin out’ of knowledge-intensive new enterprises in their incubator centres, and through providing a ready supply of highly-skilled, employment-ready graduates, that enhance the attractiveness of these centres to foreign direct investment. Three of the institutes – Sligo, Letterkenny and Dundalk – are located in the border region and were central to the sustainability of their respective hinterlands through the years of the troubles in Northern Ireland. They have also

5 | Séamus Ó Buachalla, *Education Policy in Twentieth Century Ireland*, Wolfhound Press, 1988.

6 | *Steering Committee on Technical Education. Report to the Minister for Education on Regional Technical Colleges*, 1967.

been to the fore in the regeneration of these areas in the years since, and must once again resume a position of leadership in the context of BREXIT. Similarly, in Waterford, Athlone and Carlow, the institutes are the only or main third level providers, providing less costly access to higher education to local learners and high quality employment opportunities in new and innovative enterprises, driven by the research agenda within these institutes. In Dublin, the regeneration and reimagining of the Grangegorman campus by the DIT has succeeded as an inspirational and transformational initiative in urban regeneration through the dismal years of the recession that followed the great financial crisis of the late 2000s. The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* provides for a further progression of the concept of THE through the formation of Technological Universities, the functions of which are proposed in the Technological Universities Bill 2015.⁷

The policy discourse around the future of THE envisages:

“... a systematic focus on the preparation of graduates for complex professional roles in a changing technological world.”⁸

This goal challenges the THE sector to respond to the internationalisation agenda for education; while also maintaining their responsiveness to national and regional economic needs.

A key point in setting out principles for quality in THEIs is to bear in mind the original purpose for which THE was introduced to the Irish education and training system:

“If they are to make their most effective contribution to the needs of society and the economy, they must be capable of continuing adaptation to social, economic and technological changes...the progress of these colleges should not be deterred by any artificial limitation of either the scope or the level of their educational achievements.”⁹

The IoTs have successfully fulfilled this ambition for a half-century and will continue to do so as the country and education sector continues to evolve in a dynamic world.

7 | Department of Education and Skills, Technological Universities Bill 2015.

8 | Higher Education Authority, 'Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape', 2012, p. 12.

9 | *Steering Committee on Technical Education. Report to the Minister for Education on Regional Technical Colleges*, 1967.

3.1.a What exactly is THE?

Each THEI is unique, with its own local context, mission, values and objectives. There are common features to THEIs' education and research activities regardless of individual contextual differences. The most salient shared trait is the provision of technological higher education.

THE is distinguished from other forms of higher education and training both by its purpose, and the way the programmes and curricula are developed as opposed to its specific course or disciplinary content.

Other than the purpose for which it is developed, it serves the same societal goals as all of higher education, namely:

- + Public good – generating social capital, supported by the State
- + Driving economic development – generating human capital and growth through State and private enterprise
- + Private good – benefitting the personal and professional development of the individual.

These goals are supplemented in THE by three more:

- + Equality of educational opportunity – offering programmes of education, training and research to all, and actively breaking down socio-economic and historical barriers to entry into higher education
- + Responsiveness – benefitting the local economies and communities where THEIs are active, through proactive, flexible and globally-informed engagements
- + Knowledge-in-use^{G2} – preparing graduates to apply knowledge, skill and competence in response to regional and national economic needs.

In summary, THE is characterised by education, training and research activity across levels 6-10 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) that demonstrably:

- i. Promotes equal and flexible access, transfer and progression (ATP^{G3}) for a diverse learner population and lifelong learning^{G4}
- ii. Produces professionally ready graduates that are distinguished by their capacity to apply knowledge-in-use
- iii. Affects the achievement of regional and national skills policy objectives
- iv. Improves the performance of business and enterprise

- v. Applies research in well-defined technological fields (through IP^{G5} exploitation and technology transfer)
- vi. Informs and shapes itself through engagement with international, national and regional stakeholders
- vii. Collaborates and works with students, partner organisations and agencies in the delivery of programmes and development of the higher education sector.

3.2 Internal Quality Assurance and Enhancement

Quality assurance in higher education is a concept and management system that has arisen to support confidence in the capacity of HEIs to deliver on the goals outlined above (3.1.a).

It has two principal dimensions: *internal* and *external* quality assurance.

The THEQF is concerned with promoting internal quality assurance, which is the set of policies, procedures and administrative systems developed by the institution that enable management control and public assurance of the standards in the education and research programmes and awards offered by an institution. Quality enhancement is a related concept that goes beyond assurance and seeks to create and use these systems as a means to continually develop and improve the quality of education and training activity. Together, we define these interrelated concepts as internal quality assurance and enhancement (IQAE).

The successful delivery of THE depends on the vibrant IQAE system that is embedded in the THEI's culture. IQAE treated as a 'strategic add-on' or an administrative support system does have an impact on the quality of the core activity of a THEI.

"Culture eats strategy for breakfast". (Peter Drucker, n.d.)

The key drivers of a successfully embedded IQAE culture are:

- + A clear articulation of the mission and vision of the institution with priority given to IQAE
- + Strong institutional leadership reinforcing the implementation of the IQAE system.

IQAE in THEIs can be summarised as the set of organisational policies, processes and values that are integrated into the mission, vision and activities, which ensures that the education and research of the institution reaches an acceptable standard, and continues to develop and raise that standard.

3.2.a A note on external quality assurance

External quality assurance of higher education is a shared responsibility between the state and HEIs. Its mechanisms are set out in a significant body of law, policy and guidance implemented through monitoring, reporting and peer review that seeks to provide public confidence in the value of the national investment in higher education and training.

In Ireland, external quality assurance is the remit of Quality and Qualifications Ireland, a state agency responsible for developing policy and mechanisms to provide public assurance.¹⁰ Generally, this means signing off on the internal quality assurance procedures of institutions and periodically reviewing their implementation.

The THEQF is not primarily about external quality assurance compliance, but it may be useful for institutions preparing for external QA engagements.

¹⁰ | Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012; European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*, 2nd edn, 2015.

