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Part IV: Internal Quality Assurance and Enhancement of Engagement

Contents

theqf

technological higher education
quality framework

01 | Introduction

This document is Part IV of the Technological Higher Education Quality Framework (THEQF). It sets out the principles for an Internal Quality Assurance and Enhancement (IQAE) system that supports engagements between THEIs and their stakeholders. The principles in this document are based on the eight high-level principles set out in Part I of the THEQF and on effective practice in Irish THEIs.

This document should be read and used in conjunction with Part I and (for some purposes) it should also be considered in conjunction with the Introduction to the THEQF; Parts I, II and III; and the Appendices.

Section 2 of this document sets out the definitions and concepts that are key to engagement and the range of stakeholders in THE.

Section 3 contains principles for the design of an IQAE system to support engagement for various purposes.

Stakeholder engagement is recognised by THEIs and in public policy generally as a "core element"[1] of the mission of THE, alongside taught provision and research. This prompts us to consider a definition of engagement that suits the purpose of supporting IQAE and an idea of who 'stakeholders' are.

2.1 Definition of Engagement

THEIs habitually connect, communicate and collaborate across their regions and the enterprise sectors they serve. They do this responsively in pursuit of the goal of developing knowledge-in-use[G2]. Superficially, stakeholder engagement could be considered as any interaction between a THEI and anybody interested in their activity. Clearly not all such interactions have an impact on the institution's purpose or teaching and research activity.

A serious definition of engagement embraces a notion of "engaged scholarship" which aims to link teaching and research closely together and to create partnerships with business, industry, civic, and international organisations to inform academic activity. It is assumed that doing so helps the institution to fulfil its role as an agent of public good (Introduction.3.1.a) and, in the case of THE, to be responsive in transmitting knowledge-in-use[G2] to meet regional and national economic and skills goals.

Engagement happens where THEIs interact with stakeholders in a way that is:

+ Planned and deliberately sought
+ Designed to result in the generation of information to be used to inform programmes of education or research or institutional strategy
+ Reciprocal, and mutually beneficial, to the stakeholder and the institution.

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

2.2   Engagement Strategy

The Institutes of Technology as THEIs are fulcrums of social, civic, political and economic capital in their local communities. Not only that, they are significant local landmarks and employers in their regions.

As public bodies with such a pivotal role in the national landscape and their own regions, THEIs invest a significant amount of energy in strategic planning (Part II.2 outlines the context for institutional strategic planning).

Strategic plans have specific regard to stakeholder engagement as one of the core activities of THE, not least because successful delivery of strategy for taught provision and research (the other two core activities) depends on engagement.

The engagement strategy that is implemented throughout, and forms part of the organisation's culture can be expected to:

+ Link tightly with the strategy for learning, teaching and assessment (as described in Part II)
+ Link tightly with the research strategy (as described in Part III)
+ Outline an approach to measuring the impact of engagement with stakeholders
+ Include a mechanism for the THEI to discharge its wider socio-economic responsibilities (Part I.2.1.a)
+ Shape the outward face of the institution and the permeability of boundaries between the institution and employers and other key stakeholders.

2.2.a   A note on the IQAE and implementation of engagement strategy

The concept of internally quality assuring stakeholder engagement is a relatively new one in the field of quality assurance for higher education and one that is pioneered by THEIs in Ireland.

The implementation of engagement strategy should result in the generation of information arising from engagement being fed into IQAE processes that govern the planning, delivery and support of programmes of education and research.

This happens through the strategy being clearly articulated and championed within the THEI.

2.3   Stakeholders

THE aims to:

> *"…reflect the needs of citizens, business, enterprise, the professions and other stakeholders in the region in which the [institutions] are located."*[2]

While institutions will naturally interact with a large number of bodies and individuals who fit into these categories, engagement (as defined above) with some is impossible and with others it is simply not relevant to the purpose of THE or the IQAE system.

For the purposes of establishing and maintaining a system to assure and enhance the quality of engagement for our purposes, the significant stakeholder groups include:

  a. Learners – at all stages of their lifelong learning[G4] journey, from prospective student to alumnus and everything in between

  b. Staff – both support and academic staff

  c. Partners in the HE sector – the universities, HEIs and other institutions and representative bodies

  d. Business and enterprise – regionally and nationally

  e. Civic and community partners

  f. International partners.

There are other stakeholders (for example state agencies like the HEA and QQI) where the engagement mechanism is specified elsewhere (such as in law or regulation).

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2 | Technological Universities Bill 2015, p. 19.

03 | Principles for Internal Quality Assurance and Enhancement of Engagement

This section outlines specific principles for the establishment of an IQAE system that facilitates stakeholder engagement for a variety of specific purposes. They are based on the high-level principles outlined in Part I and divided into six themes:

+ Stakeholder engagement in general

+ Engagement for learning, teaching, assessment and research

+ Educational collaboration

+ Engagement for economic and regional development

+ Engagement for civic and community objectives

+ Internationalisation.

As outlined above, a principles-based approach to IQAE for stakeholder engagement is something of an innovation. The principles are drawn from effective practice across Irish THE and internationally. They are all an extension of Principle 4: Informed Practice and Stakeholder Engagement (Part I.2.4).

3.1 Stakeholder Engagement in General

The THEQF does not describe how stakeholder engagement should be conducted (to do so would run counter to Principle 2: Institutional Autonomy and Academic Freedom (Part I.2.2)). However, engagements governed by IQAE systems have common features:

a. *Consistency of approach* – in terms of:

    i. Solicitation of participation from stakeholders

    ii. Volume and quality of engagement

    iii. Use of engagement outcomes

    iv. Recording and measurement of outcomes from engagement

b. *Reciprocity and collaboration* – all parties involved mutually benefit from the relationship

c. *Tangibility* – engagements do not necessarily only have tangible outcomes, but the interactions between THEIs and their stakeholders do have *some* impact (for example on curricula)

d. *Measurement and information collection* – stakeholder engagement generates usable information recorded by the THEI

e. *Adaptability and sustainability* – engagements facilitate the cultivation of on-going and productive relationships

f. *Provision of information* – stakeholder engagement is supported by the availability and dissemination of information including:

    i. The roles and responsibilities expected of all parties involved

    ii. Any information relevant to the specific engagement

g. *Structural support* – the formation of relationships and engagement events are supported and encouraged by the THEI as an organisation.

The key principle that governs the implementation of these is Principle 4: Informed Practice and Stakeholder Engagement (Part I.3.4).

This principle captures and ensures the overarching approach and attitude to IQAE for engagement. As a result of these, THEIs have useful and impactful relationships across stakeholder groups.

3.2 Engagement for Learning, Teaching, Assessment and Research

THEIs fundamentally exist to provide taught and research programmes to diverse learners, which are delivered by their staff to meet the needs of regional and national enterprise. The way the institution engages with learners, staff and enterprise to build the curriculum is a key part of the process of programme design, monitoring and approval (as well as an external QA requirement). It is also critical to what differentiates THE.

IQAE systems governing engagements for the purposes of improving learning, teaching, assessment and research in THEIs consider:

a. *Learner, staff and employer representative groups* – where such groups (such as students' unions) exist, their democratic structures are engaged to contribute to the co-creation of the curriculum and the proper functioning of the IQAE system. This usually necessitates providing training for representatives

b. *Quality culture* - learners, staff and prospective employers are joint contributors to the culture of the THEI. The IQAE systems bear in mind that without full participation of all three parties, a culture of quality cannot survive in the organisation

c. *Permeability of boundaries* –facilitating the movement of staff and students from the institution into the stakeholder population and back.

> *The key principle that governs the implementation of these (besides Principle 4) is* Principle 3: Quality Culture (Part I.3.3).
>
> *These principles reflect the expectation that students, staff and key stakeholders involved in the educational and research outcomes of THE are engaged with the THEI for the purposes of co-creation of the curriculum and for the pursuit of the objective of regional responsiveness of the institution.*

3.3   Educational Collaboration

THEIs maintain a set of relationships with other education institutions. Of primary concern are those engagements where the purpose is to contribute to the provision of programmes of education or research.

These engagements can be categorised in three ways:

+ *Collaborative academic provision* - THEIs share provision of programmes leading to NFQ awards through linked provision;[3] collaboration, joint provision, and exchange/mobility provision (which may be transnational)

+ *Articulation agreements* – THEIs give progression opportunities to learners associated with other providers

+ *Networks and Collaborations* – THEIs enter into engagements with other institutions for purposes other than provision, but to support learning, teaching, assessment or research.

IQAE policies and processes exist specifically for the purposes of establishing, monitoring and controlling these collaborations and assessing their impact. These address:

a. Governance – how the collaborations are managed and how parties involved will communicate and work together. They should also specify how the IQAE systems that normally operate in taught and research programmes will be applied through the collaboration

b. The special considerations for transnational higher education[4] (where that applies)

c. How the institution facilitates and encourages the establishment of collaborations through workload management, coordination and endorsement

d. Tracking the benefits of networks and collaboration supported by the institution and their impact on taught provision and research.

The key principles that govern the implementation of these (besides Principle 4) are Principle 7: Measurement (Part I.3.7) *and* Principle 8: Consistency with Policy and International Effective Practice (Part I.3.8).

Educational collaboration is one of the distinguishing features of mature and impactful technological higher education. It is also a potentially risky activity with potential consequences for the education system, as well as the THEI itself. This principle reflects the sectoral commitment to mitigate this risk.

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3 | Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012.

4 | IHEQN, *Guidelines for the Approval, Monitoring and Review of Collaborative and Transnational Provision*, 2013.

3.4 Engagement for Economic and Regional Development

THEIs drive economic development (Introduction I.3.1.a). In THE, in particular, this economic development is envisaged as being particularly tailored to the region where the institution is located, as well as contributing to broader national objectives. Engagement with local employers and enterprises for the purposes of building the local economy is a fundamental part of THE policy[5].

The IQAE system supports engagement for economic ends by ensuring systematisation and measurement of these engagements. IQAE policies and processes address:

a.   Tracking and facilitating IP[G5], knowledge transfer and industry collaboration in both directions – into the curriculum and into industry

b.   Industry-based educational activity including (but not limited to):

   i.   Research and development

   ii.   Mobility of staff between industry and academia (for CPD[G9] purposes and employment)

   iii.   Business Incubation Centres and Campus Companies

c.   Seeking feedback on the curriculum content in terms of currency, focus, threshold concepts, graduate skills etc

d.   Relationship management and tracking

e.   Measurement of the attributable impact of the institution on regional business and enterprise including:

   i.   Job creation

   ii.   Sales/revenue impact

   iii.   Product development

   iv.   Consultations.

The key principle that governs the implementation of these (besides Principle 4) is Principle 7: Measurement (Part I.3.7).

These principles reflect the need for the THE sector to track its economic impact in order to advocate for its own activity and to ensure a sound rationale for the response to regional needs that it strategically chooses.

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

3.5   Engagement for Civic and Community Objectives

Civic and community engagement is broader than the design of programmes of education and research. It is to do with the impact that HEIs have in their communities, as significant local institutions, employers, engines for economic growth and centres of political, social and cultural capital. Civic and community engagement is not an 'add-on project', but an attitude to strategic activity[6].

THEIs develop engagements and supporting IQAE systems that support:

a.   Cultural development in the region through:

　　i.   Extracurricular and non-educational activities

　　ii.   Outcomes of educational programmes (in the arts for example)

b.   Specific knowledge-based collaborations between the THEI and the wider community[7]. The THEQF acknowledges and adopts the campus engage principles in this area:

　　i.   Recognition of previous and existing achievements in civic engagement

　　ii.   Promotion of civic and community engagement in institutional mission and strategy

　　iii.   Use of community-based learning, community-based research, public scholarship and volunteering activities aligned with learning, teaching and research

　　iv.   Building a campus community imbued with civic culture

　　v.   Opening campuses to local communities through social, cultural, academic, sporting and artistic activities

　　vi.   Continuation of the lifelong learning and widening participation agendas

　　vii.   Addressing regional development, regeneration and research agendas

　　viii.   Acting in a sustainable way in terms of the environment, community well-being and economic development

　　ix.   Contributing to knowledge exchange with wider society by actively communicating the relevance of educational and research activity

　　x.   Advocacy for resources for high-impact civic engagement.

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6 | Rhonda Wynne, 'Higher Education Civic Engagement: Project Orientation', in *AISHE-J* 6:1 (2014).

7 | Campus Engage, *Campus Engage Charter*, 2015.

The key principle that governs the implementation of these (besides Principle 4) is
Principle 1: Academic and Student-centred Values (Part I.3.1)*.*

These principles reflect the fact that THEIs are part of the landscape of Irish higher education and also part of their local communities (as employers and cultural institutions). The reputation of Irish higher education and training depends to some extent on institutions working to benefit their communities.

3.6   Internationalisation

The internationalisation of higher education has been a feature of Irish policy for at least the past decade.[8] As institutions in a small, open economy, the most compelling rationale for this is the creation of an international network of ambassadors and advocates within institutions and teaching partners with a view to building economic and other links.

As part of national and their own internationalisation strategies, THEIs support the mobility of students across international borders both within and beyond the European Higher Education Area. This necessitates engagement and supporting IQAE systems to ensure that the experience of international students is comparable to domestic students, and that facilitate international comparators and the outward portability of THE qualifications made by Irish THEIs.

Specifically, THEIs have policy and process that addresses:

a. The numbers and profile of international students and which guarantees the international accessibility of the curriculum, public information and research activity[9]
b. Mechanisms for international benchmarking and comparison
c. The way in which the THEI contributes to and learns from international effective practice in technological higher education.

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8 | Department of Education and Skills, *Irish Educated: Globally Connected*, 2016.

9 | NUFFIC, *2016-2020 Strategic Agenda. Internationalisation: A World of Difference,* 2016.

Principles for Internal Quality Assurance and Enhancement of Research

The key principle that governs the implementation of these (besides Principle 4) is Principle 8: Consistency with Policy and International Effective Practice (Part I.3.8).

These principles mainly reflect the need for THEIs to proactively pursue (and monitor) their international engagements, partly because learning from international comparators is a key strategic objective of Irish higher education.

As well as this, there is a need to use those engagements to inform teaching and research activity to suit the internationalisation agenda.

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