

Submission on the Review of Ireland’s International Education Strategy

October 2013

Introduction

QQI is a state agency under the aegis of the Department of Education and Skills. It was established in November 2012 by an amalgamation of four bodies: the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and the Irish Universities Quality Board. QQI has assumed the statutory functions of those bodies. It has new functions to develop an International Education Mark for providers of education and training offering programmes to international students, to establish a database of programme and qualifications and a register of providers. Through carrying out this work QQI can bring more coherence between qualifications and quality assurance in further and higher education and training, build on the successes of the legacy bodies, and promote public confidence and trust.

QQI has a broad remit across education and training in Ireland. It has a key role in the qualifications system through its custodianship of the National Framework of Qualifications. Its work concerns learners in diverse settings - schools, adult education, English language schools, vocational training and higher education and training; providers of further and higher education and training; Government departments, State agencies and funding bodies; regulatory bodies; professional bodies; qualifications awarding bodies; sectoral and representative bodies and international bodies responsible for quality assurance and qualifications.

QQI acknowledges the valuable contribution to Irish society and economy of international students who choose to come to study, research, live and work in Ireland. The internationalisation of Irish education is enhanced by the integration of international students into all aspects of educational life in Ireland. Domestic students also benefit from participating in education in other countries. Outbound and inbound student mobility are both important contributors to the internationalisation of Irish education.

This submission will focus primarily on Issue 4 in the consultation paper*: Strengthening Ireland’s reputation for quality*. The content of this submission is organised under three themes:

1. Regulatory Framework
2. Interpretations, Data and Research
3. Networks and Partnerships
4. **Regulatory Framework**

International evidence suggests that the sustainability in international student enrolments is dependent on institutions and their communities having sufficient infrastructure and support services to meet the demands of significant numbers of international and domestic students[[1]](#footnote-1).

Investing in Global Relationships: Irelands International Education Strategy 2010-2015[[2]](#footnote-2) positions quality at the heart of Ireland’s international education offer:

*‘*Ireland has an international reputation for academic quality and for strong quality assurance procedures. This provides an extremely strong basis for the promotion of high-quality international education. However, prospective students also require reassurance about the overall international student experience available in institutions.’

The quality of the educational experience for all students, domestic and international, results from confidence in the academic rigour of programmes and qualifications and positive experience by students of various supports and service, before, during and after investing in period of education.

QQI works with stakeholders to promote the enhancement of quality in Ireland’s further, higher and English language education and training, and quality assures providers. QQI supports and promotes a qualifications system that benefits learners and other stakeholders. Education and training providers are the primary source of innovation in terms of developing value added education, training and research propositions for learners. QQI aims to support provider led educational innovation that is in the interests of learners at home and abroad. This is consistent with the principle that providers have primary responsibility for quality. Within its statutory remit, QQI will take the necessary and appropriate action in cases where a provider’s actions present a potential risk to the quality of a learner’s experience or to the reputation of Irish education, training or research.

QQI has strengthened the accreditation process for new providers seeking access to initial programme validation and for providers seeking recognition from ACELS for English Language Teaching (ELT). Providers need to demonstrate that they have the capacity to sustain the delivery of quality education and training to all students. Strengthened accreditation is part of the development by QQI of an overall quality assurance framework aimed at promoting and enhancing the quality of further, higher and English language education and training.

*International Education Mark*

QQI will establish a code of practice for the provision of programmes of education and training to international learners and will authorise the use of an International Education Mark (IEM) by quality assured providers that demonstrate their compliance with a statutory code of practice for the provision of programmes to international students. The IEM forms part of the quality framework that will assist in the promotion of Ireland as a destination for high quality international students. As a brand, the IEM will signal public confidence in the quality of education and training services to international students.

*Strengthened protection for learners*

The protection of enrolled learners (PEL) arrangements set out in the Qualifications and Quality (Education and Training) Act 2012, build on a similar provision set out in the Qualifications (Education and Training Act) 1999. They pertain to programmes of three months duration or longer where moneys are paid by or on behalf of the learner and which lead to QQI awards. Certain public providers are exempt in the Act from this requirement, including the universities, the Institutes of Technology and the Dublin Institute of Technology. As the awards of the RCSI are not made by QQI, it is technically also exempt from the requirement.  QQI has developed protocols to assist providers in the fulfilment of their legal obligations in this regard.

As with the previous 1999 provision, the new PEL requirements protect students who have paid fees and been enrolled on a programme of three months duration or longer in circumstances where, for whatever reason, the programme ceases prior to completion. Students in these circumstances may either transfer to a similar programme of another provider (provided that that programme meets the requirements of the Irish visa regime), or, have their moneys refunded depending on which PEL arrangement the provider in question has in place. Significantly, however,  those international students who pay fees, but subsequently have their visa application rejected, or for whatever personal reason of their own cannot travel to Ireland to commence study on a programme, are not protected under the current PEL arrangements, as in this instance the programme on which they are enrolled has not ceased prior to completion. In order to make a visa application, students are required under the Irish immigration regime to pay fees upfront to the provider in order for the visa application to be considered.  This may leave international students exposed to providers with limited or no refund policies, or who retain a significant proportion of the fee as an administrative charge.

The IHEQN guidelines[[3]](#footnote-3) include a standard for such cases where students have paid fees but subsequently have their visa application refused. The standard requires a full refund in tuition fees in such cases. The application of a similar standard for all providers seeking authorisation to use the IEM will be considered.

*Student Complaints*

In cases where a provider’s complaint handling mechanism does not satisfy a student, they should have access to a separate and independent process. There are a number of complaint handling agencies that have authority to investigate complaints made by international students in relation to the quality of educational services, for example, the National Consumer Agency, ICOS and INIS have a role in investigating complaints. It is important that there is close coordination among State supported agencies that have a role in handling complaints and resolving disputes concerning international students.

The Ombudsmans (Amendment) Act 2012 can examine complaints in relation to the 'administrative actions' of public bodies that provide education and training related services, which occur on or after 1 May 2013 only. Potentially, this development will strengthen the protection afforded to international students attending publicly funded providers of education and training. Under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and training) Act 2012, QQI administer a range of statutory functions to ‘relevant providers’, including providers that are not public bodies. The Ombudsmans Act 2012 should be amended to extend access to an independent complaints handling mechanism to clients of all providers classified as ‘relevant providers’ under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training Act) 2012.

QQI has a function to develop a statutory code of practice for the provision of programmes to international students. The code will include requirements for providers to have formal internal processes for handling student complaints and resolving disputes. Where there is evidence of a pattern of complaints against a relevant provider, QQI can initiate a statutory review of the provider concerned. QQI does not have a statutory remit to investigate complaints made by students or to intervene in disputes between students and providers.

There may be a risk to our competitive position where all international students do not have recourse to an independent, external body in cases where they are dissatisfied with the process or outcome of a provider’s internal mechanisms for handling complaints or resolving disputes. In this regard, it is worth noting that the Council of Australian Governments require providers to use an independent, statutory external complaints body. This is intended to ensure that international students will be able to take their complaint to their State or Commonwealth Government authority if they consider that the provider’s response to the complaint is unsatisfactory.[[4]](#footnote-4)

*Foundation courses for international students*

There is a growing demand from international students for foundation courses that prepare students for access to undergraduate and post-graduate programmes in higher education. The need to develop expertise and competence in the area of EAP foundation and in-sessional programmes and teacher training was highlighted as a need in *Ireland’s International Education Strategy.*

Foundation type programmes in Ireland can be categorised under three broad types.

1. Affiliated arrangements

Organisations such as Kaplan, Study Group International and Navitas provide foundation programmes and related services to a higher education institute. These arrangements are common in the UK. In Ireland TCD and UCD have an agreement with Study Group International that is typical of this approach. Agreements between the HEI and the provider may specify progression pathways following successful completion of the foundation course.

1. Higher Education Institutions in-house foundation programmes

Higher Education Institutes provide their own foundation programmes and will grant access to undergraduate or post graduate programmes following successful completion. These courses are sometimes also referred to as access courses and will typically include English language instruction, academic preparation and general support for international students to settle into their new environment.

1. English Language Teaching Organisations foundation programmes

Either stand-alone programmes or programmes delivered in conjunction with higher education Institutions. Sometimes labelled as English for academic purposes (EAP), programmes focus on English language proficiency and terminate with certification such as IELTS.

These three types of foundation programmes have the potential to support international students to improve their English language and academic skills and can also provide a supportive environment for these students to become comfortable and confident in an unfamiliar setting. However, this type of provision in Ireland is not well defined or understood by most policy makers. Foundation courses vary in duration, curriculum, assessment practices, post study access options and supports and certification practice.

QQI will complete a review of provision in this area and will co-ordinate the development of relevant award standards where there is a need to enhance the transparency and recognition of these types of programmes for international students. Internationally, standards for foundation programmes are available which could provide useful reference points in developing national standards, see for example the work of BALEAP (British Association of English for Academic Purposes) and IATEFL (International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language)

*International Student Satisfaction and Engagement*

The [National Student Survey](http://studentsurvey.ie/wordpress/) piloted in 2013 may provide potential to generate information and knowledge about international student’s experience of higher education in Ireland. The Australian Government[[5]](#footnote-5) administers a survey of onshore international student satisfaction in higher education, further education and English language sectors. The Australian survey is modelled on the [International Student Barometer](http://www.i-graduate.org/services/international-student-barometer-and-student-barometer/) survey which Institutions can use to generate bespoke feedback from their international students.

1. **Interpretations, Data and Research**

Interpretations of key concepts should accommodate developments in practice so that policy development does not become detached from or lag behind practice.

Robust data collection and research require standard classifications so that knowledge can be accumulated over time, trends can be identified and international comparisons can be considered. Timely and relevant knowledge and information should inform policy making. The lexicon of international education requires precision and should be compatible with dynamic regulatory, technological, economic and social contexts in which the practice of international education takes place. The usage of the terms *international student* and *trans-national education* provide two illustrative examples of the inconsistency between concept, policy and practice.

*International Student*

For the purposes of Ireland’s international education strategy, ‘international students are broadly defined as students normally domiciled outside the jurisdiction who have come to Ireland specifically to undertake a programme of education.’ (p30)

Section 2 of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012[[6]](#footnote-6) interprets an international learner as ‘a person who is not an Irish citizen but is lawfully in the State primarily to receive education and training’.

While the State has a legitimate interest in understanding patterns of student mobility into Ireland, these official definitions do not comprehend the participation trends of international student in many Irish based educational institutions. Significant numbers of international students in higher education institutions are offshore and patterns of student mobility suggest that growth in international student recruitment will be for home based rather than host country provision. Developments in ICT are likely to accelerate these trends. Defining international students by citizenship and by their in-country status fails to take account of these emerging trends and developments it also presents challenges for the robustness of national data collections, the quality of data analysis and the validity of international comparisons.

Adopted in 2006[[7]](#footnote-7), the OECD convention is to use the term “international student” when referring to students crossing borders for the specific purpose of studying and the term “foreign student” for non-citizens enrolled at an institution of education outside their home country, but who have not necessarily crossed a border to study (therefore not strictly mobile, and cause for an over-count of actual mobility figures). The OECD includes the following characteristics in defining international students.

* Permanent Residence: Students are considered internationally mobile if they are not permanent residents of the host country in which they pursue their studies.
* Prior Education: Students are considered internationally mobile if they obtained the entry qualification to their current level of study in another country.

HEA collect data from higher education institutions, this includes returns on participation by international students. Higher education institutions have interpreted international students in different ways and this has led to inconsistent returns and raises questions as to the reliability of the data. There is a need for data collection agencies to work with common interpretations of the term international student so that institutions providing data returns do so in a reliable way and agencies charged with planning and implementing policy are well informed.

Ireland does not collect comprehensive data on international students attending English Language Teaching Organisations. INIS collect data on registered non-EEA students in Ireland, while Marketing English in Ireland conduct an annual survey of their member organisations and extrapolate national figures based on response rates of between 60-70%. Fáilte Ireland conduct an annual survey of ACELS recognised ELTOs. Comprehensive data on international students in Ireland primarily to learn English is not available. Given the significance of the ELT sector to national objectives for international education, this situation should be addressed.

In recognition of the diversity of international education in practice and the heterogeneity of international students, the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act 2012 should be amended to include a more comprehensive interpretation of international student that is consistent with the operating environment in which QQI is required to regulate and to promote international education.

*Trans-National Education (TNE)*

The contribution of trans-national education (TNE) to sustainable growth in international education is well established and continues to grow. Enterprise Ireland data indicates that in 2012, 23% of Ireland’s international students in higher education institutions were located offshore. In the UK the number of students currently undertaking UK HE qualifications outside the UK is higher than the number of international students in the UK. Institutional mobility is becoming as important as student mobility as countries compete to recruit students globally.

The rapid increase in demand for TNE coupled with the complexity of activities involved and the geographical distances involved present challenges to quality assurance agencies especially if quality assurance processes are weighted towards domestic and in house provision. It is important that TNE activity is reviewed with a level of scrutiny that is sufficient to assure the quality of provision. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the UK recently completed a review of transnational education in mainland China[[8]](#footnote-8) The review identified three questions for quality assurance agencies

* How to deal with the variety of types of TNE in a cost effective way?
* How should risk be categorised?
* How will TNE review engage with other QA agency processes?

Published external quality assurance reviews of higher education institutions in Ireland have raised similar concerns. QQI will continue work collaboratively with stakeholders to address these questions.

Transnational education is defined in Ireland’s International Education Strategy as ‘‘education where the degree-awarding institution and the student are located in different countries and it encompasses a diversity of operations ranging from distance education and on-line learning to franchising and fully fledged branch campuses”.

Enterprise Ireland[[9]](#footnote-9) adopted a more expansive definition borrowed from the Canadian experience where TNE is generally agreed to refer to ‘*any education delivered by an institution based in one country to students located in another. In its broadest sense, it covers... online and distance learning and its hybrid/supported variants (the largest chunk in terms of student numbers), articulation arrangements, twinning programmes that typically lead to double or joint degrees, franchising and validation arrangements, and international branch campuses*’

Guidelines developed by the Irish Higher Education Quality Network[[10]](#footnote-10) focus on collaborative and transnational arrangements that involve the delivery of taught programmes. The network defines transnational provision as ‘*the provision or partial provision of a programme of education in one country by a provider that is based in another country’.*

The guidelines also include a list of interpretations that reflect common usage of associated terminology.

In light of the growing proportion of off-shore and virtual provision of international education and in order to facilitate the systematic evaluation of the international education sector, there is a need for a shared conceptual understanding of *transnational education* and associated terms including: *International branch campus; Franchise/twinning programmes; Articulation agreements; Double/dual degree programmes; Joint degree programmes; Validation programmes ; Access/feeder programmes, credit transfer/study abroad programmes, short-term or partial credit programmes, distance learning programmes/ virtual universities, tuition providers/ teaching centres, bi-national campuses, independent campuses, corporate training and intermediary agencies.* While some of these terms are defined in national legislation, there are international sources that also provide guidance in this area, see for example recent work published by the British Council [[11]](#footnote-11)

Quality assurance guidelines for providers, to be developed by QQI, should enhance the collective clarity of terminology used to describe the diversity of transnational arrangements.

1. Networks and Partnerships.

Internationally recognised qualifications provide a foundation for student mobility. Transparency, trust and confidence in Irelands qualifications system contributes to the proposition that education providers can offer to international students. Ireland has been to the forefront in international developments relating to both the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (‘Bologna Framework’). Qualifications Frameworks and related transparency instruments such as credit (ECTS and ECVET), recognition tools such as NARIC and the Lisbon Recognition Convention along with information and skills intelligence tools such as Europass and Euroguidance are all intended to support greater mobility for students. On a global level national and regional qualifications frameworks have the potential to nurture sustainable relationships between diverse education and training and qualifications systems. Many of these international tools are emerging as assets for education and training providers or for other agencies with an interest in promoting Ireland as a destination for international students and to assist in building relationships in high priority markets.

It is recognised that collectively, these policy instruments lack coherence and a holistic vision,[[12]](#footnote-12) more effective promotion of the coherence and simplification of these European transparency tools has the potential to create flexible learner pathways across borders and can reduce risks for inbound and outbound student mobility.

Memoranda of Understanding, co-operation and bi-lateral agreements between QQI and qualifications authorities and quality assurance counterparts in other jurisdictions, help build confidence between qualifications systems and promote greater sharing of market intelligence related to international education.

Ireland participates in the Roundtable on the Integrity of International Education is a forum at which the UK, Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and the US meet to share knowledge and experience and identify common areas of practice and concern, as well as scope for collaboration. These types of networks are important, international standards are influential in a global market place for students and researchers. The Statement of Principles for the Ethical Recruitment of International Students by Education Agents and Consultants[[13]](#footnote-13) is an example of the contribution that such networks can make.

Concluding Comments

Assuring the quality of education and training provision and qualifications is fundamental to gaining and maintaining the credibility of providers, qualifications and the national system of education and training worldwide. Disreputable providers of education and training and ‘educational misconduct’ reinforce the need for clear standards for international education and for strengthened and coordinated regulation of the education and training, quality, immigration and legal dimensions of international education. There are lessons to be learned from the experience of other countries where the reputation for international education has been damaged as a result of growth strategies that were not accompanied by the appropriate regulatory and student support infrastructure.

ENDS

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4. International Student Strategy for Australia 2010-2014. Council of Australian Governments. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Australian Education International <https://aei.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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12. European Commission Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes. Strasbourg, 20.11.2012 COM(2012) 669 final [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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