**Submission of QQI to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection re *Draft General Scheme of a Technological Universities Bill***

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) would like to thank the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection for its invitation to make this presentation on the *Draft General Scheme of a Technological Universities Bill*.

By way of context and as the members of the Joint Committee are aware, QQI has a legislative responsibility for the external quality assurance of the 14 Institutes of Technology included within this draft legislation. Since the enactment of the Regional Technical Colleges Act in 1992, the general direction of travel for the institutions covered by that legislation has been towards greater autonomy and responsibility for their own programmes of education.

The enactment of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act of 1999 allowed for the Institutes of Technology to be granted delegated authority by the then Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) to make their own awards within the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), which was introduced under the same Act. By 2006 all 13 Institutes of Technology, following individual external evaluations, were delegated awarding powers up to the level of Honours Bachelor Degree in the NFQ. With the passage of time, all of the Institutes have been granted delegated authority for postgraduate taught programmes and many institutes also have received delegated authority for postgraduate research programmes within prescribed disciplinary areas. Many of the Institutes of Technology have also established joint degree programmes with other bodies including Irish universities and overseas higher education institutions.

Between 2008 and 2011, all 13 Institutes underwent Institutional Quality Review which incorporated evaluations as to whether the Institutes were operating quality assurance procedures in line with the 1999 Act and the 2005 European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, commonly referred to as the ESG. These evaluations by independent external teams (including international experts) also incorporated evaluations as to how well the Institutes were managing their delegated authority responsibilities. The outcomes of all of these reviews are publicly available.

With the establishment of QQI under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act of 2012, the autonomy of the Institutes was extended further with the clarification of the Institutes' status as awarding bodies with powers, for example, to award joint degrees.

The journey I have just described is one of institutions being given more autonomy and more responsibility balanced by periodic evaluation and public accountability. This is entirely in keeping with the central principle of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance whereby the primary responsibility for the quality of education and its assurance lies with individual higher education institutions. All global rating and ranking systems for higher education are led by countries and systems characterised by high levels of institutional autonomy. The journey is also consistent with the National Strategy for Higher Education.

The Heads of this Bill further propose that any Technological University so established will become a designated awarding body under the 2012 Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act along with the other self-awarding institutions, namely the universities, Dublin Institute of Technology and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland.

While there is currently a legislative difference in the relationship of QQI with the universities, DIT and RCSI which are all designated awarding bodies under the 2012 Act and the other 13 Institutes of Technology, QQI’s policy approach since establishment has essentially been the same for all: we act as the external quality assurance agent for awarding bodies.

Furthermore, QQI is aware that it is not currently the intention of some of the Institutes of Technology to pursue Technological University status at this time. The Bill is currently silent regarding any change to the awarding status of these Institutes. QQI believes that it is important that these Institutes also have clear ownership of their own awarding activities and this Bill may provide an opportunity to solidify an appropriate designation in that regard for institutions, many of which have been operating with delegated authority to make their own awards for more than a decade.

The mission and strategy of a self-awarding public higher education institution is largely shaped by the institution itself, within the framework of national policy. Well-functioning and successful higher education institutions are well-led and well-governed. This General Scheme provides for a governance system that is in line with best international practice, with the aim of being fit for purpose in terms of size and overall composition. The new governance specification is also consistent with the system-wide findings in a review commissioned by QQI into the institutional quality review processes conducted by its predecessor bodies, which found, inter alia, the need to:

* Improve the integration of strategic planning, governance, decision making and quality assurance processes
* Sharpen top level governance and leadership processes and
* Decrease the size, range and complexity of governance structures

As the body responsible for ensuring that higher education institutions establish and operate access, transfer and progression procedures consistent with the 2012 Act, the inclusion of the nominees of the newly-established Education and Training Boards is very much welcomed by QQI. The competence-based outline of the governance system is also clearly consistent with best international practice.

Since its establishment in 2012, QQI has worked with the Institutes of Technology and the other higher education institutions in a manner that is consistent with our published values of being independent, collaborative, professional and improvement-oriented. We have committed to extending our current model of annual dialogue visits for the self-awarding institutions to the Institute of Technology sector, reflecting a relationship between quality assurance body and higher education institution that is more appropriate to a maturing sector.

In general, QQI will seek to collaborate with the Institutes to support the design of quality assurance that enables their changing circumstances, both through merger and eventually, for those that successfully pursue their ambitions for Technological University status. In this regard, QQI has been pleased to provide input along with other external parties to the developing *Technological Universities Quality Framework* (TUQF) which is being designed by the 14 Institutes of Technology*.*

In terms of the details of the General Scheme, QQI would also be happy to suggest some technical changes that would make the Bill more consistent with the terminology of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act of 2012.