

External Quality Assurance Audit Report



National Commission for
**Further and
Higher Education**
Malta

**Malta College for Arts,
Science and Technology
(MCAST)**

Carried out between the
4th - 8th May 2015

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Abbreviation List

AGRI	Institute of Agribusiness
COI	Council of Institutes
ECTS	European Credit Transfer System
ECVET	European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training
EQA	External Quality Audit
ESF	European Social Fund
GOZO	Gozo Campus
IAD	Institute of Art and Design
IAS	Institute of Applied Science
IBC	Institute of Business and Commerce
IBCE	Institute of Building and Construction Engineering
ICS	Institute of Community Services
ICT	Institute of Information & Communication Technology
IEEE	Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineering
IME	Institute of Mechanical Engineering
LSU	Learning Support Unit
MCAST	Malta College of Art, Science & Technology
MI	Maritime Institute
MQF	Malta Qualifications Framework
NCFHE	National Commission for Further and Higher Education
QA	Quality Assurance
WBL	Work-Based Learning

1. Executive Summary

1.1 Section A: Background

1.1.1 The Peer Review Panel

The Peer Review Panel was composed of:

External Peers

- Birgit Hanny, Vice Managing Director ASIIN
- Jana Möhren, Head of International Office ASIIN

Student Peers

- Ryan Falzon
- Francienne Muscat

Staff Member of National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE)

- Sandro Spiteri, Head of Quality Assurance Unit NCFHE

1.1.2 Specific Terms of Reference and Main Lines of Inquiry

Following the Scoping Visit carried out by the EQA Panel on 15th-17th of April 2015, and perusal of documentation presented by MCAST, the initial main lines of inquiry for this EQA were:

- How far does the impressive horizontal and vertical diversity, with regard to student population, subject areas, qualification levels and corresponding lecturer profiles affect structures, processes and organisational culture in delivering and assuring quality in teaching and learning all over MCAST?
- How far do major on-going change processes affect structures, processes and organisation culture in delivering and assuring quality in teaching and learning all over MCAST?

The above-mentioned major lines of inquiry were connected to the standards for internal quality assurance ruling the present review.

1.2 Section B: Key Findings, Judgements and Recommendations

1.2.1 Standard 1 - Policy for Quality Assurance

Good practice identified

The strategic plan and its connection to the quality policy of the college is considered to be an effective instrument for sharing management objectives among central and Institute management levels, and for enhancing commitment to corporate quality objectives by a wide range of institutes representing diverse subject fields.

Judgment

MCAST meets Standard 1.

Recommendations

The panel recommends finalizing and publishing the presented quality manual as an instrument guiding through existing and upcoming elements of MCAST's quality policy.

MCAST should check whether external stakeholder representatives' input is consistently ensured in the strategy developing processes, independent from the individual membership in the Board of Governors.

1.2.2 Standard 2 - Institutional Probity

Judgment

MCAST meets Standard 2.

Recommendations

MCAST needs to have a more stable and sustainable financial environment in which to be able to plan its long-term growth.

MCAST could make better use of market opportunities for generating its own funds that will assist in its financial sustainability and allow for more comprehensive QA measures.

The QA, Curriculum and CPD Departments need more human resources to be able to extend and enhance their procedures, for example, in terms of post-course student feedback; the QA of work-based learning; and CPD for Institute Directors and part-time staff.

1.2.3 Standard 3 - Design and Approval of Programmes

Good practice identified

The process for the design and approval of programmes, following a clear logic based on MCAST strategy, allows for an efficient and straight-forward preparation and implementation of new programmes.

The role definition and allocation of responsibilities for each procedural step within the quality assurance of new programmes facilitates a consistent implementation of internal quality objectives.

Strict learning outcome orientation is fostered by the structure of templates used for the design and approval of programmes.

A high level of obligation towards the use of templates and documents makes it easy for participating units and staff members, in preparation for a new programme, to implement quality expectations consistently.

Judgment

MCASTS meets Standard 3.

Recommendations

MCAST should ensure that student perspectives are involved in the programme design process, in a suitable manner, that not only fulfills formal obligations, but at the same time, reflects the diversity of the student population.

1.2.4 Standard 4 - Student-centred Learning, Teaching and Assessment

Good practice identified

The learner orientation is implemented in a very coherent manner, down to assignments submitted by students, and is facilitated by the provision of corresponding templates making it applicable for all staff members.

The internal verification procedure is used for sharing good practice in teaching and, especially, assessment methodology among lecturers.

Judgment

MCAST meets Standard 4.

Recommendations

The panel recommends that MCAST modifies the students' grievance and appeals policy and mechanisms by making them more accessible and encompassing conflict settlement and resolution, before a final formal resolution is taken. They should fit different student realities and inspire confidence among all internal stakeholders.

1.2.5 Standard 5 - Student Admission, Progression, Recognition and Certification

Judgment

MCAST meets Standard 5.

Recommendations

The peers would recommend investigating the reasons why a minority of students are not well enough informed about admission and progression regulations. The latter emphasises a need for MCAST to refashion its general communication strategy.

1.2.6 Standard 6 - Teaching Staff

Good practice identified

The allocation of specific time slots for lecturers for quality related meetings allows for regular discussion without interference with teaching obligations.

A special training course for teaching in VET is offered to all staff members to familiarize them with the peculiarities of VET education and didactics.

Judgment

MCAST meets Standard 6.

Recommendations

MCAST must find solutions for a more systematic inclusion of part-time lecturers in quality assurance and improvement instruments, e. g. including "Wednesday meetings", appraisal and CPD courses – especially in cases of courses contributing significantly to the learning success within a study programme.

MCAST is encouraged to enhance communication with all lecturers - with a particular focus on satellite institutes- about the changes related to the introduction of home-grown programmes and, consequently, the role of lecturers in programme implementation.

The panel suggests finding means of balancing out the day-to-day communication possibilities for the Gozo campus' lecturing staff towards programme-owning institutes, regardless of the institute or correspondence which is occurring.

1.2.7 Standard 7 - Learning Resources and Student Support

Good practice identified

MCAST's coherent combination of student support services for enhancing the learning experience and the education success for a highly diverse student population exceeds the common level at Further and Higher Education Institutions in the EHEA.

Judgment

MCAST meets Standard 7.

Recommendations

The panel suggests further developing the coherent approach of support services by coordinating them with programme review and improvement, especially with regards to didactic diversification and including full- and (if carrying major parts of a course or programme) also part-time lecturers in the delivery of educative support.

It is recommended to define indicators and focus data collection within quality assurance activities on the effectiveness of learning resources and equipment all over MCAST and feed respective findings into corporate management meetings as well as into the review of programmes procedures.

1.2.8 Standard 8 - Information Management

Good practice identified

The collection of individual reasons for drop-outs allows for direct conclusions about programme quality and allows those in charge to take action with regards to programme/course design and framework parameters where necessary.

Judgment

MCAST meets Standard 8.

Recommendations

MCAST should investigate the reasons why relevant information for applying and studying at the college does not reach a minority of the students' population. It is also recommended that MCAST's communication strategy should be revised to target those students who would benefit the most.

Student satisfaction and graduates feedback should be taken into account to ensure that their ideas and needs are adequately taken into account in quality assurance and further development of programmes, courses and the learning environment.

1.2.9 Standard 9 - Public Information

Judgment

MCAST meets Standard 9.

Recommendations

The panel recommends that MCAST consistently publishes information about ECTS/ECVET for all courses.

MCAST is advised to find a suitable solution for the provision of information regarding pass rates to the public.

1.2.10 Standard 10 - On-going Monitoring and Periodic Review of Programmes

Judgment

For programmes of external verifiers / foreign awarding bodies: Standard 10 is not applicable to MCAST.

For national qualifications / home grown programmes: MCAST requires improvement to meet Standard 10.

Condition

The panel requests that the draft Programme Review Procedure (DOC 28), related Milestone Plan and Action Plan are formally approved and responsibilities within MCAST are designated within six months.

Recommendations

The panel recommends:

- to implement the periodic review process as foreseen in the action plan for programme reviews (area for improvement 2) and to connect it (as input or output),
- to scope any findings from internal and external audits (area for improvement 5) ,
- to scope any findings from student feedback from different sources (area for improvement 3),
- to scope any findings from the planned complaints management (area for improvement 4).

The panel recommends defining – or collecting if dispersed and informally already agreed upon – the operational quality objectives and indicators for their achievement for on-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes and courses. For ensuring efficiency and effectiveness of the process designed, this recommendation simply suggests clarifying and communicating from what quantitative and qualitative data MCAST would recognize that a programme or course fulfils the internal quality expectations and focusing the collection of data for monitoring and periodic review on these indicators.

The panel suggests enlarging periodic review activities to *all* kind of education offers MCAST provides in the own interest of the institution for assuring a comparable quality level throughout the complete education portfolio.

1.2.11 Standard 11 - Cyclical External Quality Assurance

Judgment

MCAST meets Standard 11.

2. About the External Quality Audit

2.1 Introduction

The External Quality Audit (EQA) of MCAST was undertaken between 04th and 08th of May 2015. This was the first EQA for MCAST and one of the first EQA for a further or higher education institution accredited by the National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE).

2.2 The Peer Review Panel

Evaluation subject	Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST)
The peer panel	Birgit Hanny, M.A., MBA (Vice Managing Director ASIIN)
	Ryan Falzon (Student at University of Malta)
	Dipl.-Kulturw. Jana Möhren (Head of International Office ASIIN)
	Francienne Muscat (Student at University of Malta)
	Sandro Spiteri (Head of Quality Assurance Unit NCFHE)

2.3 Institutional Context

The Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) was established in 2001 by Government, by bringing together a number of already extant state vocational institutions. It has undergone rapid expansion and is now Malta's leading post-compulsory vocational education and training institution, with ten Institutes in Malta and the Gozo Centre. MCAST is state-funded, but has also actively sourced EU funds for its infrastructural and curriculum developments projects. Presently, MCAST has over 11,000 full-time students, and offers 170 full-time and over 300 part-time vocational courses ranging from certificates to degrees (MQF Level 1 to Level 6). MCAST collaborates closely with local industries to address the present and future needs of Malta's economy.

The institutional context and specific situation at MCAST will be further elaborated in Chapter 2.5.

2.4 General Terms of Reference, Aims and Objectives

Quality assurance in Malta is underpinned by six principles that determine the remit and function of the National Quality Framework for Further and Higher Education of the NCFHE (the Framework), and the relationship between internal and external quality assurance to enhance learning outcomes.

- i. The Framework is based on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and enriched by the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocation Education and Training (EQAVET) perspective.
- ii. The Framework contributes to a National Culture of Quality, through:
 - increased agency, satisfaction and numbers of service users;
 - an enhanced international profile and credibility of providers in Malta;
 - the promotion of Malta as a regional provider of excellence in further and higher education.
- iii. The Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) is fit for purpose.
- iv. The External Quality Assurance (EQA) is a tool for both development and accountability. The EQA shall ensure that the internal quality management system of the provider is:
 - fit for purpose according to the provider's courses and service users;
 - compliant with standards and regulations and contributing to the development of a national quality culture;
 - contributing to the fulfilment of the broad goals of Malta's Education Strategy 2014-24;
 - implemented with effectiveness, comprehensiveness and sustainability.
- v. The Quality Improvement Cycle is at the heart of the Framework.
- vi. The integrity and independence of the EQA process is guaranteed.

The EQA provides public assurance about the standards of higher education qualifications and the quality of the learning experience of students. It presents an opportunity for providers to demonstrate that they adhere to the expectations of stakeholders with regards to the programmes of study that they offer and the achievements and capabilities of students. It also provides a focus for identifying good practice and for the implementation of institutional approaches to the continuous improvement in the quality of provision.

NCFHE has a responsibility for ensuring that a comprehensive assessment is conducted for all higher education providers in Malta. The EQA provides an opportunity to assess the standards and quality of higher education in Malta against the expectations and practices of provision across the European Higher Education Area, and internationally.

The EQA examines how providers manage their own responsibilities for the quality and standards of the programmes they offer. In particular, the following issues are addressed.

- The fitness for purpose and effectiveness of internal quality assurance processes, including an examination of the systems and procedures that have been implemented and the documentation that supports them.
- The compliance with the obligations of licence holders with established regulations and any conditions or restrictions imposed by NCFHE.

- The governance and financial sustainability of providers including assurances about the legal status of the provider, the appropriateness of corporate structures and the competence of staff with senior management responsibilities.

The EQA benchmarks the QA system and procedures within an institution against eleven Standards:

1. Policy for quality assurance: entities shall have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management.
2. Institutional and financial probity: entities shall ensure that they have appropriate measures and procedures in place to ensure institutional and financial probity.
3. Design and approval of programmes: self-accrediting providers shall have appropriate processes for the design and approval of their programmes of study.
4. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment: entities shall ensure that programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in the learning process.
5. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification: entities shall consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student 'life-cycle'.
6. Teaching staff: entities shall assure the competence and effectiveness of their teaching staff.
7. Learning resources and student support: entities shall have appropriate funding for their learning and teaching activities and sufficient learning resources to fully support the students' learning experiences.
8. Information management: entities shall ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.
9. Public information: entities shall publish information about their activities which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to-date and readily accessible.
10. On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes: entities shall implement the 'Quality Cycle' by monitoring and periodically reviewing their programmes to ensure their continuing fitness for purpose.
11. Cyclical external quality assurance: entities should undergo external quality assurance, approved by NCFHE, at least once every five years.

Peer Review Panels essentially ask providers the following question about their arrangements for quality management:

'What systems and procedures are in place and what evidence is there that they are working effectively?'

The approach to quality assurance can be encapsulated in a number of key questions which providers should ask themselves about their management of quality.

1. What are we trying to do?
2. Why are we trying to do it?
3. How are we trying to do it?
4. Why are we doing it that way?
5. Is this the best way of doing it?
6. How do we know it works?
7. Could it be done better?

Answers to these questions should form the basis of the provider's critical assessment and response to the self-evaluation questionnaire.

The approach of EQA is not simply about checking whether providers adhere to regulations; it examines how providers are developing their own systems to address the expectations of sound

management of educational standards and the quality of their learning and teaching provision. It does not involve the routine identification and confirmation of criteria - a 'tick-box' approach - but a mature and reflective dialogue with providers about the ways in which they discharge their obligations for quality and the identification of existing good practice.

2.5 Specific Terms of Reference and Research Questions

Following the Scoping Visit carried out by the EQA Panel on the 15th-17th April 2015, and perusal of documentation presented by MCAST, the initial main lines of inquiry for this EQA were:

- How far does the impressive horizontal and vertical diversity with regard to student population, subject areas, qualification levels and corresponding lecturer profiles affect structures, processes and organisation culture in delivering and assuring quality in teaching and learning all over MCAST?
- How far do major on-going change processes affect structures, processes and organisation culture in delivering and assuring quality in teaching and learning all over MCAST?

During the scoping visit and external quality audit the peer panel gained insight into (quality) management structures, processes as well as into "cultural" characteristics throughout MCAST from different perspectives by assessing documents and discussing with members of all management levels, with students and lecturers, with programme and student support service coordinators from central units and Institutes.

The terms "structures", "processes" and "culture" are used within this report as follows:

- Structures mean all kind of organisational setting, material and human resources (static components for managing an organisation).
- Processes are meant to be a series of activities which convert inputs into the (intended) outcomes.
- Culture of an organisation consists of the predominant values and behavioural patterns which guide most of the actions of its members.

The above-mentioned major lines of inquiry – which need to be connected to the standards for internal quality assurance ruling the present review in the upcoming chapters – are deduced from the following observations on "diversity" and "change" within MCAST:

Preliminary observations on diversity at MCAST:

- Horizontal diversity: MCAST's education mission leads to a broad range of subjects covered in differently structured education offers from vocational certification courses, degree programmes and continuous education training offers, as full- and part-time solutions. At present, this broad subject-base is mirrored in an organisation structure of 10 subject-related Institutes and one cross-functional institute (MCAST Gozo Centre). All of them have their own management structures and responsibility for the delivery of MCAST's education offers – thus the ownership for quality in teaching and learning – in their respective field (apart from the Gozo Centre being responsible for cross-field delivery as regional hub). The subject specific diversity

covered by the Institutes consequently is reported to respond to the needs of highly diverse professional fields, labour market and industry structures - literally from small handicraft or farming business to medium and large scale high-tech industries as well as different kind of creative and media business. Thus, the external stakeholders for MCAST's education delivery to the Maltese economy and the local populace request differentiated channels of communication and interaction.

- Vertical diversity: MCAST's student population shows high diversity with regard to age and corresponding maturity, preparation for the respective studies chosen, entry and progression pathways. This diversity is even reinforced through MCAST's mission as central vocational education institution of the country with the very broad range of subject fields and through the valuable task of offering appropriate education possibilities to learners able to learn and, also to those hindered by different circumstances, to successfully conclude education life cycles without additional support. All this demands high variety of lecturer reactions in terms of personal interaction styles, didactics and roles definition and – regarding the different qualification levels to be covered – also in terms of vocational and / or science driven expertise. It also imposes the question if, for example, a 23-year old student achieves the required outcome profile of his or her course level if structurally treated like a 16-year old with regard to attendance rules, degree of self-driven learning etc..

The panel would doubt that such complex diversity could be effectively and efficiently handled with a “one size fits it all”-approach when structuring quality management for MCAST, designing (quality) procedures and communicating with the different groups of stakeholders. Thus, it seems a bottom-line-challenge for MCAST (quality) management to balance the need for coherent and rigorous internal processes all over the institution producing comparable results with the need to addressing and involving highly diverse internal stakeholders (mainly students and lecturers) and external stakeholders (mainly potential employers).

Preliminary observations on (organisational) change at MCAST:

- High change dynamics in responding to external needs and development: Almost all dialogue partners (central and de-central management, lecturers from different Institutes, programme/institute coordinators from different Institutes, central units such as QA, Curriculum Development, Research and Innovation, Continuous Professional Development and Work Based Learning and especially employer representatives) gave examples of intense interaction of MCAST members and units at different levels from their specific perspective with counterparts in business and industry, in community services and in the respective associations and public-private-bodies of the country. Furthermore, the document on MCAST's strategic direction contains several elements that can be read as commitment to continuous, short term reactivity on developments and needs in the (national) employment markets (e. g. the strategic objectives and measures with regard to an entrepreneurship centre, developing partnerships, apprenticeship scheme, work-based-learning, institute-to-industry synergies, student employability all connected to concepts and single projects presented in the documentation and meetings during the present EQA). In the end, an effective reactivity signifies frequent changes in educational offers or introduction of new offers whilst others are selected out. Such self-imposed high change dynamic calls for high efficiency in the development and re-design of education offers. At the same time, it needs the support of those directly affected by continuous

change in teaching and learning – namely of lecturers and students – simply in order not to overstress them.

- One major change project affecting structures, processes and culture of delivering quality in education at MCAST is the on-going shift from external qualifier courses to so-called home grown educational offers aiming at all levels of qualification in the MCAST portfolio. Whilst Level 6 (Bachelor degree programmes) operates within the sphere of continuous professional education at MCAST, the development and continuous improvement of qualification Level 1 to 5 courses took and partly still takes place outside MCAST under the responsibility of the respective external provider (foreign awarding bodies) with control mechanism on the implementation at MCAST in place (such as external examiners and assessors). Described as part of MCAST's development strategy, this change towards home grown programmes acts as a major component of the whole education portfolio implying significant changes also with regard to structures and processes dedicated to the development and continuous improvement of MCAST's own programmes as well as a different attitude and approach by the Institutes' management, coordinators and lecturers taking over full responsibility for the quality they deliver to students. As – naturally – each single newly developed programme needs at least one piloting cycle in implementation in order to detect eventual design gaps, running such big change projects for the education portfolio of MCAST implies a structural risk on quality in teaching and learning for the first generation studying in a new course or programme. With regards to the cultural dimension of an organisation, changes of such dimension would most probably again provoke higher stress levels and higher communication and information needs of stakeholders involved and affected compared to “day to day business” in settled processes.
- In addition, MCAST central and de-central management representatives report on plans of an upcoming re-organisation project that would affect the existing Institutes' structure and the present distribution of responsibilities for the different education offers and with this also processes with regard to development, improvement and delivery of quality in education. This potential re-organisation project also fits into the strategic development plans presented for MCAST and is meant to better enable the whole institution to respond to the above described high vertical diversity. Nevertheless, it would at the same time signify another major change for people working and studying at MCAST.

The panel would regard this agglomeration of challenges in terms of diversity and change dynamics for effective (quality) management of an education institution as almost unique in a Europe-wide perspective. They therefore want to express their respect for all members of MCAST at all levels and in all different roles and functions for the personal commitment and professionalism they witnessed during the assessment exercise.

3. Analysis and Findings of Panel

3.1 Standard 1: Policy for Quality Assurance

Policy for quality assurance: entities shall have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management.

Main findings

MCAST has published a short quality policy statement on its website confirming that all programmes “are designed, validated and periodically reviewed with the involvement of staff, students, industry and other stakeholders” and committing the institution to a “structured Quality Management System”. The peers found this quality policy reflected in an internal strategy plan (MCAST Strategic Direction 2014-16) approved by the institution’s Board of Governors and detailing activities, projects and measures to be undertaken until 2016 in six so called “strategic thrust” – among those No. 1 “Developing the Quality of Vocational Education”.

A series of policy documents – approved by the central Council of Institutes (COI) and published on MCAST’s website – are meant to rule the implementation of the institution’s vocational and professional education and training mission, setting quality parameters for several processes directly affecting student life cycles (e. g. Registration and Certification Policy; Assignments, Assessments and Appeals Policies and Procedures; Internal Verification Policy; Programme Design, Development, Approval and Review Policy; Policy for guarding against intolerance or discrimination against students of staff; Policy of Recruitment; Counselling Services Policy, etc.). Part of the policies are further detailed in procedure documentations and regulations – still under the responsibility of the COI and published on the website. Management representatives, the institution’s quality manager, programme coordinators at institute level as well as students, confirmed during the audit, that relevant policies, procedures and regulations are also published in the so-called “student handbooks” or “induction books”, distributed to students at the start of each academic year.

A draft quality manual was presented during the EQA, giving an overview of the structures, division of responsibilities and administration processes of the quality management system itself and showing the landscape of core processes of the institution, and the quality management aims as such – mainly the curriculum design, development and approval of VET programmes/courses and their implementation – divided into 6 sub-processes (admission, exit and graduation process; realisation of programmes and courses; learner support services realisation; realisation of services to industry; realisation of R&I and entrepreneurship activities; work based learning activities). Furthermore, the quality manual documents the interconnections between the institute’s mission, its strategic thrusts and its different policies and subsequent rules and regulations. The draft status of the quality manual and the recent documentation of the process-maps illustrate to the panel that the responsible persons at MCAST understand the necessity of creating a transparent reference point offering guidance and overview to possibly interested internal and external stakeholders on its quality management system. In the view of the peers, the draft quality manual collects and logically structures elements that have already existed in the daily practice of the institution but would not have been recognizable at once as a coherent system without further research. The panel had no doubts that the units and persons at

MCAST governing the quality management system have sound experience in designing and controlling processes.

In terms of structures for quality management, MCAST has a central department named Curriculum, Quality, CPD, R&I and Entrepreneurship with two units whose representatives report to heavily interact with regard to the quality in teaching and learning all over the institutions: the Quality Assurance unit and the Curriculum unit. While the Quality Assurance unit is responsible for basically running all quality related planning, controlling and reaction activities or processes and to continuously improve the quality management systems with its instruments in place, the Curriculum unit is responsible for the design, development, approval and review of national qualification courses. In view of the panel, it is sensible to combine those two units within one department. When visiting their offices, the peers found open doors and people from both departments discussing and sitting together over their work.

With regard to processes for ensuring academic integrity and freedom, MCAST's self-assessment report points to its compliance with national legislation, to its governance structure and to standardized recruitment processes on the basis of merit. MCAST has in place central and corporate boards that regularly meet and keep minutes (Board of Governors, Council of Institutes, Administrative Bureau, Corporate Appeals Board, Corporate Disciplinary Board, Programme Approval Board) and, in each of the Institutes, a Board of Studies (BOS), Institute Appeal Board, Institute Disciplinary Board, End of Year Degree Rectification Board. Throughout the desk review and discussions onsite, the panel would not find indication of governance bodies not in place or not working as foreseen. It found templates in use for ensuring comparability and transparency in recruitment processes. Furthermore, the panel would count other policy papers presented – such as the Intellectual Property Policy or Plagiarism Policy – as elements for ensuring academic integrity and freedom.

With regards to procedures for guarding against intolerance of any kind or discrimination against students or staff, the self-assessment report points at the college's philosophy of inclusion and respect for diversity and individual dignity. In view of the panel, two published documents provide definitions of behaviour or actions regarded as not acceptable and the respective handling of such situations: the so-called Student's Grievance Policy and Procedure and the Students Disciplinary Procedure. From a cultural perspective, the panel would also consider the variety of centrally provided student support services (discussed in more detail under Standard 7) and their recently introduced organisational extension by appointing student support service coordinators among the academic staff in each institute as means for supporting the development of a culture of mutual respect and tolerance.

The panel considers the responsibilities and roles of central units, Institutes, different management levels, programme/institute and student support coordinators within Institutes, lecturers and students with regard to quality delivery and assurance to be laid down and communicated in different documents and with different means.

In terms of communication channels for enabling exchange about quality policy and objectives, about daily experience in the running of programmes and courses and about the students' education experience, the peers found that the central formal interface between institute levels and central administration and management levels are the institute directors having the role to transport into their Institutes what is discussed and decided centrally or at corporate level in the Council of Institutes. Within the Institutes, the official communication seems to follow the hierarchical

governance structures as well, with the directors, deputies and the Institute Board of Studies being the formal backbone structures.

During the EQA, it was of major interest for the panel to find out in how far the central units organising the quality management for teaching and learning and the development and review of programmes would interact with the Institutes in order to ensure that policies and quality objectives are implemented where teaching and learning takes place in practice: between lecturers and learners. Findings in this regard will be reported under several of the following Standards. Generally speaking, the panel found informal but lively interaction patterns (individual communication, project related meetings, working groups on single issues) between institute representatives and central units' representatives from management but also of programme-/institute coordinators with the members of the Curriculum Quality Assurance, CPD, R&I and Entrepreneurship Department as well as the Academic Operations and Student Services Department that deal with delivery and improvement of educational offers.

The panel was impressed by the fact that participants in separate audit discussions of any kind, cross-over all Institutes and central bodies, representatives from highest management levels to single lecturers and students almost unanimously expressed a shared understanding of MCAST's education mission, highlighting its practical and professional orientation, employability as quality objective, the college's function serving society as vocational education institution and a certain "no one should be left behind"- mentality. Throughout the meetings of the audit week the peers got feedback that could be seen as some kind of "corporate identity" – in some cases strongly connected to a single institute and in other cases connected to MCAST in general.

Nevertheless, the peers were concerned – but would not know about any simple solution – that a small percentage of the students in the audit discussions reported not knowing about MCAST's policies (together with relevant procedures) but at the same time confirmed to having received a student handbook and being aware of the website, and to seeing that e-mails from different MCAST units delivered to them but that they were seen as being overwhelming and thus treated as "spam".

The two main internal stakeholder groups regarding quality in teaching and learning – students and lecturers – are involved in the development of the college's quality and other policies primarily via their official representatives in the Council of Institutes at corporate level and in the respective Board of Studies. Besides this participation in the decision-making, both groups have no further role in developing and drafting the strategic level documents like policies and the strategic plan for MCAST.

With regards to external stakeholders, they have a formal role in the Board of Governors that decides about the strategic development lines for the college. However, while the law stipulates that the members stem from the education sector, vocational training, the economy, industry and services sectors or in the social sectors, they are nominated in their individual capacity at the discretion of the Minister and are not, therefore, stakeholder representatives as such. There is thus no formal representative role of different stakeholder groups in the strategy process with a view to quality assurance. Despite this, as mentioned, the peers were assured by industry representatives that they are satisfied with the openness of MCAST members at different levels of management, administration and institutes for their needs and views and that they would know to whom to address their specific requests within MCAST – if more strategic or related to a single programme, course, R&D, project or other.

Though formalized interaction channels for internal and external stakeholders are easier to assess in an external quality audit, the peers consider the reported existence of networks and interactions of a significant number of lecturers (especially if in functions as internal verifiers, programme- or institute coordinators or at the same time being part-time members of central units and part-time lecturing), directors and deputy directors of institutes as well as central level management with “their” professional field and respective industries and business as an important asset for implementing MCAST’s vision and projects connected to multidisciplinary curricula, entrepreneurship and work based learning.

Good practice identified

The strategic plan and its connection to the quality policy of the college is considered to be an effective instrument for sharing management objectives among central management and institute management levels, and for enhancing commitment to corporate quality objectives by a wide range of institutes representing diverse subject fields.

Overall judgment for standard

MCAST meets Standard 1.

Recommendations for improvement

The panel recommends finalizing and publishing the presented quality manual as a framework guiding through existing and upcoming elements of MCAST’s quality policy.

MCAST should check whether external stakeholder representatives’ input is consistently ensured in the strategy developing processes, independent from the individual membership in the Board of Governors.

3.2 Standard 2: Institutional Probity

Institutional and financial probity: entities shall ensure that they have appropriate measures and procedures in place to ensure institutional and financial probity.

Main findings

Educational institutions within the public sector are already subject to stringent national financial and administrative regulations, and to national legislation that regulates the appointment of senior personnel and the selection of staff. The EQA does not seek to duplicate the national regulatory structures and procedures already in place. Thus, for educational institutions within the public sector, Standard 2 is interpreted in terms of the capacity and resources of the provider to implement effectively its internal quality assurance procedures to improve the learning experience.

MCAST set up its Quality Assurance (QA) Department in 2009. The MCAST IQA Self-Assessment Report states that: “The ethos of the Department is that quality assurance needs to be focused on the added value to the customer, both internal and external, as identified by the Organisations’ Mission Statement and Quality Policy (Pg. 17). It therefore has a clear developmental function.

The QA Department is partnered by the Curriculum and CPD Departments, both set up recently, that work closely together with the Registrar's Office to ensure that quality is monitored and maintained at the stages of curriculum development; staff probation, appraisal and professional development; curriculum implementation; learning outcomes and student metrics. Student metrics include data on participation, termination, appeals and, to a much lesser extent, student feedback. All the Institute Directors, Curriculum Coordinators and staff that the Panel interviewed considered that the QA, Curriculum and CPD Departments were adequately staffed by competent, approachable and supportive personnel. Personnel in the QA, Curriculum and CPD Departments have been appointed according to established MCAST procedures, and themselves undergo training and professional development experiences.

Apart from the central staff within the QA Department and its partner Curriculum and CPD Departments, MCAST has invested strongly in a cohort of Curriculum Coordinators. As from the academic year 2014-15, the number of Curriculum Coordinators more than doubled. They have a statutory position with a reduced teaching load and an extra financial allowance. MCAST has a system of envelope funding, and it had to prioritise its costs to ensure the financial sustainability of this innovation. All the Institute Directors, Curriculum Coordinators and staff that the Panel interviewed were very positive about the introduction and enhancement of the Curriculum Coordinators. They felt that the Coordinators provided necessary and effective support to staff, especially in the context of the transition from a reliance on a number of international qualifications systems with external quality safeguards to a national post-compulsory vocational qualification system that is being developed and maintained by MCAST itself.

As from academic year 2014-2015, the QA Department has its own line item in the MCAST budget. Like many other educational entities in the public sector, MCAST receives confirmation of its yearly budgetary allocation during the budget debates in Parliament, when the academic year has already started. Also, apart from the significant sourcing of ESF and ERDF funds, MCAST's capacity to generate funds from its own activities is as yet under-developed, with income generated from fee-paying part-time courses at circa 5% of its yearly budgetary allocation. All this hinders MCAST's capacity to make longer-term plans for its financial sustainability in terms of its plans for growth. This may also impact the capacity of the institution to implement more comprehensive QA measures.

Good practice identified

The coordination and synergy between the QA, Curriculum and CPD Departments is an asset for MCAST.

The strengthening of the cohort of Programme Coordinators in each Institute was a valid response to the challenge of ensuring expected quality assurance process and outcome standards in the transition from international to national qualification systems.

Overall judgment for standard

MCAST meets Standard 2.

Recommendations for improvement

MCAST needs to have a more stable and sustainable financial environment in which to be able to plan its long-term growth.

MCAST could make better use of market opportunities for generating its own funds that will assist in its financial sustainability and allow for more comprehensive QA measures.

The QA, Curriculum and CPD Departments need more human resources to be able to extend and enhance their procedures, for example, in terms of post-course student feedback, the QA of work-based learning, and CPD courses for Institute Directors and part-time staff.

3.3 Standard 3: Design and Approval of Programmes

Design and approval of programmes: self-accrediting providers shall have appropriate processes for the design and approval of their programmes of study.

Main findings

MCAST currently delivers two distinct types of programmes, namely those of seven foreign awarding bodies (Edexcel, BTEC, ILM, City & Guilds, AAT, ITEC, EASA, and IMO) and so-called home grown programmes with a national vocational qualification award. All degree programmes (MQF Level 6) are home-grown. Furthermore, in the current educational year (2014/2015), all programmes at Levels 1-3 are also home-grown. Home grown programmes also include the part-time courses on offer. The foreign awarding bodies' qualifications at the other levels will be phased out in the upcoming years. As outlined above, it should be noted that MCAST is not responsible for, nor can it influence, the design and development of the foreign awarding bodies' qualifications. Therefore, the standard is only partially applicable for these programmes.

The central Curriculum Department, under the Vice-Rectorate for Curriculum, Quality, CPD, R&I and Entrepreneurship, is the unit in charge of the design of programmes. Programme approval is the responsibility of the Board of Studies of each Institute and, subsequently, the Programme Approval Board at corporate level. The latter is placed at the highest management level of MCAST, composed of the Principal, Deputy Principal and Registrar.

A number of templates for different stages and aspects of programme design and approval guarantee a consistent adherence to quality guidelines for programme characteristics. The procedures for programme proposals and programme design for full-time and part-time programmes (DOC 013 Programme Design, Development and Approval, DOC 101 Course Proposal Approval Form) are part of the MCAST controlled and approved document system. All MCAST staff members have access to these forms and documents through the *eportal* (College SharePoint). The templates provide for information to be given about credit points, access requirements, intended learning outcomes, assessment methodology, and necessary resources. The use of controlled templates ensures that these required items are consistently indicated. Information about credit points, admission requirements, career opportunities as well as possible progress routes to higher level offers for home-grown programmes is also included in the publically available prospectus as well as the programme specifications. Where applicable, the different entry routes in terms of necessary certificates and passes, indicate the targeted student groups. Course admission requirements are furthermore part of the document system (DOC 185). The procedure includes an admission complaints process (see also Standard 5, elsewhere in this report).

The prospectus clearly indicates the awarding body for each programme. All home-grown programmes at Levels 1-4 are based on ECVET while programmes at Levels 5-6 are based on ECTS. In the case of foreign awarding bodies' qualifications, MCAST does not exercise any influence on the use of ECVET or ECTS.

The process for programme design is stipulated in the above-mentioned documents and includes the allocation of responsibilities. One new instrument established in the course of the current educational year is the position of programme coordinators. These are recruited from among the lecturing staff and contracted on an annual basis with a reduced teaching load. Programme coordinators play a major coordinating role in the design of new programmes, as stipulated in the Terms of Reference for this position, in collaboration with the Director for Curriculum Development. The only two institutes where no programme coordinator posts have been created- fully acknowledged by the panel- are Gozo where no "own" programmes are developed and the Institute of Agribusiness where, in practice, the function is taken over by the Institute coordinator. Ownership for the different steps of a curriculum development procedure is indicated in the documented procedure (DOC 013).

Ideas and input for new programmes, however, come from a number of sources, both within MCAST (for example lecturers) as well as from external experts. A major external stakeholder, in particular in light of the vocational orientation of the majority of MCAST programmes, is the national industry. The first step of the above-mentioned programme design procedure thus stipulates the consolidation of demands and needs from the labour market and industry. The Programme Coordinators' duties also include the communication and organisation of meetings with relevant stakeholders in the pre-programme phase. In addition to the explicit procedural steps, all discussion partners at management, Institute level, as well as lecturers, convincingly described several, typically informal, communication channels with labour market representatives. In particular, the Work-Based Learning related activities allow for direct communication, with a view to expressing new developments and concurring changing requirements for workers' qualifications, between staff members and the industry, for example, when students are visited during their placements. The industry representatives met during the visit confirmed in discussions the receptiveness of MCAST to suggestions and needs which have already led to the implementation of new programmes (for example in the field of horticulture).

As one of the main pillars of the vision of MCAST, the panel observed wide-spread efforts to enhance the inclusion of entrepreneurship and work-based learning as fostered through the corresponding corporate level units and the corresponding policy. The activities under this policy focus on the new home-grown programmes by increasing student placements and also staff placements as part of continuous professional development. These elements were acknowledged as a benefit to new programmes by a majority of discussion partners.

Student participation is not currently foreseen in the formal curriculum development procedure, nor are they involved in any of the institutional bodies charged with programme approval (Curriculum Development unit, Programme Approval Board). On an informal level, the vast majority of staff members feel that they are in very close communication with students and thereby in a position to observe and express students' expectations. While students met by the panel confirmed generally to the functioning of direct communication and discussion channels, their input to the specific issue of programme *development* is not a significant part of this. Student and external stakeholder involvement

in programme *review and improvement* will be more explicitly discussed under Standard 10 elsewhere in this report. The decision not to include students *formally* in the programme design process was a conscious one by the MCAST management based on the conviction that input from students to necessary programme learning outcomes, competences and curricular content for new subjects would be rather limited, while generally being convinced that students' needs were sufficiently taken into account by the staff members involved in these processes. The panel largely shared the concerns about the limits of the value of student input in programme design processes and overall felt that MCAST was well aware of its obligation to involve students in its quality assurance mechanisms. The panel thus in principle understood the provision of MCAST to be seen in light of the expectation that all quality assurance mechanisms must be fit for purpose, thus taking into account the specific situation of the provider's stakeholders – in this case particularly its service users – rather than constitute a mere formal fulfilment of written standards. Nevertheless, it seems possible and reasonable to gather some sort of student feedback in one of the procedural steps through a number of possible mechanisms (i.e. focus groups, formal inclusion of students in the concerned bodies). In this context, the panel emphasized that while formal student representation in one of bodies responsible for programme design might formally fulfil any obligations of MCAST but might not duly reflect the diverse student population mentioned above, with different types of students being able to provide different level of input. The panel stressed that the way this issue is addressed is entirely up to MCAST.

MCAST has contracted external experts, for example, under the frame of ESF-financed projects, to develop new curricula both for the home-grown programmes already implemented and those to be started in the next academic years. Overall, the transfer from external award qualifications such as BTEC to home grown programmes has resulted in significant changes in the sense of ownership felt by the Institutes, specifically at lecturer level. During the discussions, it became evident that lecturers who have an additional role as programme coordinators or subject coordinators have contributed significantly to an enhanced identification with the design of programmes. The way this role is lived, however, varies noticeably from Institute to Institute, and also has consequences for the level of identification felt by those lecturers who have not taken up any specific roles. While at some Institutes lecturers have autonomously launched initiatives and drawn up proposals for new programmes – which were then fed into the pre-defined process – staff at other Institutes were uncertain about their possibilities and options as well as designated responsibilities in this regard. Consequently, the number of lecturers who have been personally involved in the programme design – and this might also be largely due to the outsourcing – is rather low at present. Yet, as these few individuals are considered by their peers as a point of reference in curriculum-related questions (also with a view to programme implementation as described elsewhere in this report), their role is highly influential in the subsequent taking over of ownership of curriculum design in the future. In a similar manner, the extent to which staff members have accepted their new roles and responsibilities and rather embrace it as a chance for adjusting the programmes more to the local needs also differs widely. In this context, the need to ensure inclusion of all lecturers again seems essential with a view to ensuring that already at the stage of programme design all stakeholders are taken on board. The panel thus positively acknowledged that the quality assurance of new programme design, with a particular focus on internal stakeholders, is also identified as one of the on-going initiatives for improvement by the QA unit, proposing, for example, information seminars for lecturers.

Good practice identified

The process for the design and approval of programmes, following a clear logic based on MCAST strategy, allows for an efficient and straight-forward preparation and implementation of new programmes.

The role definition and allocation of responsibilities for each procedural step within the quality assurance of new programmes facilitates a consistent implementation of internal quality objectives.

Strict learning outcome orientation is fostered by the structure of templates used for the design and approval of programmes.

A high level of obligation to make use of templates and documents makes it easy for participating units and staff members in preparing for a new programme to implement quality expectations consistently.

Overall judgment for standard

MCAST meets Standard 3.

Note to the NCFHE Quality Assurance Committee (QAC): The panel members intensively discussed the need for balancing the importance of the numerous characteristics within this Standard, i.e. the panel discussed intensively to which extent a less satisfactory performance for one of the Standard's bullet points should be weighed against good and very good performance for other bullet points under the present Standard and how such a balance should influence the judgement in which direction. Taking into account that out of 12 characteristics (bullet points) indicated in the Standards the vast majority (10-11) were found to correspond to the reality in the design and approval of programmes at MCAST – weighting especially high the learning outcome orientation – the panel concluded that the standard is met. The panel is very well aware that the NCFHE QAC is the only body in a position to interpret and decide for the Maltese system which aspects or characteristics of a standard shall be weighted higher or lower for the overall decision. With regard to the (formal) involvement of students in the design and approval of programmes the panel follows to a certain extent the argumentation of MCAST that – of course – diverse students' perspectives need to be taken into account in programme development whilst the immediate involvement of student representatives in the design work is not the most efficient and effective way to do so – especially because of the very high diversity within the student population. Those students actively taking part in shaping policies and processes of MCAST and holding positions in its bodies already today suffer from low reaction and feedback coming from the overall student community. The panel feels that it would not be a good option to simply burden the low number of active students (from higher level programmes) with more study-time consuming tasks for the overall system. Thus the panel decided to express the following recommendation for improvement, asking MCAST to optimize its fulfilment of the standard with regard to all its characteristics by finding a way that would reflect its specific needs to provide inclusion of the perspective and needs of a highly diverse student population.

Recommendations for improvement

MCAST should ensure that student perspectives are involved in the programme design process in a suitable manner that not only fulfills formal obligations, but at the same time, reflects the diversity of the student population.

3.4 Standard 4: Student-centred Learning, Teaching and Assessment

Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment: entities shall ensure that programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in the learning process.

Main findings

The divergence between external awarding bodies' and home-grown programmes also has an influence on the implementation of student-centred teaching and learning and assessment. While didactical methods, delivery modes and assessment for external programmes have been largely prescribed by the awarding bodies and their quality assurance mechanisms, MCAST has had, in particular during this pilot year, to define its quality objectives and related tools for the teaching and learning of home-grown programmes. While some of the policies from external qualifiers are intended to be taken over (internal and external verifiers, for example), not all activities have come to a full circle of implementation to date. As such, the process for external verification is still under design, and in fact, identified as an area of improvement by MCAST itself.

Furthermore, the high diversity of the student population as detailed above also has a major influence on the implementation of teaching and learning and assessment. The organisational set-up of MCAST caters for those diverse student needs at several levels. The corporate student support service units (see also Standard 7) cater specifically to learners at lower levels and those with learning difficulties. In addition to generic counselling and advice, the Learning Support Unit and Key Skills coordinators are convincing initiatives in this context. With an even higher level of social engagement figure, the Inclusive Education Unit as well as the Pathway to Independent Living programme, demonstrates MCAST's commitment to society as defined in the institutional strategy. At institute level, in terms of new staff positions to be seen in line with the newly created position of programme coordinator mentioned elsewhere, the equally new Student Support Service Coordinators who are currently being phased in at the different institutes also attest to the commitment to addressing student diversity. At another level in terms of student diversity, the Work Based Learning unit at corporate level provides higher level students with the opportunity to more effectively enter into the labour market, thus reflecting once more a key strategic priority, by strengthening students' capabilities to autonomously functioning in a real-life environment.

For the external awarding bodies' programmes, teaching material and thereby didactical methods down to the weekly delivery were pre-defined with limited flexibility for teaching staff in its implementation. However, the new home-grown programmes, while being designed and prepared centrally and by the programme and subject coordinators, put a higher emphasis on individual lecturers' responsibility for their classrooms. In this context, the weekly time slot for lecturers' meetings is a predefined element for revision of didactical methods and exchange of experience among staff. As reported by lecturers from different Institutes to the panel, the possibilities for interaction for the improvement of the delivery of education and of didactics are highly valued. Nevertheless, the processes for the distribution of new teaching material for the new home-grown programmes are not entirely transparent for all lecturers. Different practices seem to be in place at the different Institutes leading to uncertainties in particular where programmes are delivered at different locations. The panel felt, however, that the question was rather one of individual communication and management rather than of structural deficiencies as further elaborated below.

Programme specifications and unit description templates also constitute an element of quality assurance for teaching and learning as they determine the objectives, learning outcomes, related content, delivery and assessment methods for the respective unit. The clear connection between the intended learning outcomes and the assignments was considered exemplary by the panel as the unit descriptions and course specifications very transparently illustrate how the achievement of intended outcomes can be effectively assessed through the different allocated methods (assignments).

The clear orientation on learning outcomes figures explicitly in the assessment policies (DOC Quality Manual Draft) and exemplary elements are in place and form part of the controlled document system (Doc 018: Assignments, Assessments and Appeals Policies and Procedure for Levels 1 up to 5). Tools for lecturers such as the templates for assignment briefs provide guidance on the connection between learning outcomes and assignment activities, differentiating between individual and group assignments. The briefs also have the advantage of conveying the learning outcome orientation to the students because the different tasks they have to complete are also matched to the learning outcomes. In this context, the regulations also stipulate how feedback shall be given to the students (delays, forms). Consequently, the assignment briefs, task information and assessment sheets all also put a clear emphasis on learning outcomes.

In a similar manner, grading criteria are equally stipulated in the approved policy documents mentioned above and are followed through in the assessment feedback given to students. In order to ensure consistency and fairness in the assessment processes, a two-fold verification system has been in place for external awarding bodies' qualifications, parts of which are already taken over for home-grown courses. More specifically, the Internal Verification (IV) system is transferred to the new home-grown programmes. Accordingly, all assignments are checked by an Internal Verifier in line with the documented procedure (DOC 086 Internal Verification Procedure). The IV procedure not only includes the check of the assignment briefs and matching the tasks against the learning outcomes, but also includes sample checks of the assessments handed in by students, grading and feedback to students. As the panel learned from several lecturers during the meetings, the IV procedure is often used for internal discussions where experience with teaching and assignment methodology and practices are shared with a view to personal improvement.

The procedural rules for assignments furthermore include stipulations for mitigating circumstances (extenuating circumstances, further specified in DOC 188 College Board Procedures) and a feedback deadline set at normally three weeks (DOC 18) though the sampling of learners' works also has to take place before feedback is given to students. While the procedures and templates for all assignment related issues are in place, and publically available including on the website, a number of issues seem to arise in their implementation, as communicated during the visit and also visible from some comments in the EQA Student Questionnaire managed by the NCFHE shortly before the visit. More specifically, some cases were reported where the information about the assessment method and criteria for marking were changed during the year and communicated late not only to students, but also to the lecturers who had to carry out the assignments. Further cases relate to ineffective scheduling which lead to peaks in assignment deadlines. In the same manner, issues were reported where the guidelines for the deadline for giving feedback to students was not adhered to.

The panel acknowledged that many of the cases described above and mismatches between written and defined guidelines and implementation practice could result from the on-going shift to home-grown

programmes where well practiced procedures are no longer as steady, or felt as steady, as before. The need for an external verification – as had been common practice for foreign awarding bodies' programmes – was shared by all discussion partners. The counterpart procedure for the external verification previously taken over by the foreign awarding bodies is not yet established. In the frame of the review mechanisms for home-grown programmes, as further detailed within criterion 10, a system of external verification for courses at Levels 4-6 is also under discussion at MCAST. The peers encouraged MCAST to ensure that any external verification procedures are closely aligned to other means of programme review (such as the Programme Review Procedure).

At the same time, while the panel gained knowledge of single, problematic cases, it did not become completely clear to which extent those responsible at MCAST were aware of them, and, moreover, in a position to judge whether in fact single cases were predominant or more general problems at hand. It was felt that all levels of MCAST staff considered the formal appeals procedure to be a major tool for dealing with such occurrences to bring about improvements.

The panel would regard appeals and grievance policies, rules and procedures to be necessary elements for effectively protecting the individual rights of students if threatened in their study experience. Though abstract data from appeals and grievance procedures taking place in an institution can be a valuable source for quality managers to find out about potential structural deficits in the delivery of teaching and learning, the peers would not regard appeals and grievance policies, rules and procedures as instruments of quality assurance as such. Appeals and grievance rules and procedures from this perspective are seen rather as last resort and – necessary – repair functions in education management systems whilst higher effect on quality of teaching and learning would be expected from offering structural and procedural opportunities to effectively settle potential conflicts before appeals and formal grievance prosecution becomes necessary.

With regards to MCAST's provisions for appeals and dealing with grievances, respective policies and procedures are defined and published in an accessible way to students (student handbook, website, and prospectus). When an appeal of grievance is presented by a student to the Institute Appeals Board, the peers could not find indication that the procedures would not work as foreseen and effectively be concluded. From the presented records on appeals presented at the Corporate Appeals Board (as the second instance of the appeals procedure at MCAST), it becomes evident that the appeals procedure is mainly used by students for questioning marks and examination results. Students and lecturers from some institutes reported their impressions that the first appeals instances at Institute levels tend to produce more decisions against the individual student's request whilst the following second corporate level in their perspective acted more in favour of the students' requests. However, the figures about the Corporate Appeals Board show at least for the period 2012-2015 (Brief Report on MCAB), this perception was not matched by reality as a majority of appeals were rejected.

Nevertheless, whilst an appeals procedure is in place and seems to be effective within its limited scope – mainly on marking and assessment of students - the panel noted from discussions and from EQA student questionnaire results that an elevated number of students either reported not knowing about the appeals possibility or do not consider it to be useful because the first level appeal has to be presented at Institute level. As mentioned elsewhere in this report, the current communication means of providing information in the student handbooks, emails and the website did not seem to reach all students. Part of the students seemed also not to consider appealing because they considered the

appeals body at Institute level to be biased. The panel discussed intensively whether the addition of a student member to the appeals body, specifically at Institute level, would be a suitable means of ensuring that students would be more accepting of the appeals system, but did not find an easy solution to this question. While the panel understood the intention of the central QA unit in having such a two-level appeal system, namely that issues would be resolved where they occurred and thereby having a less formal “feel” to them, this intention did not translate into a practice shared by the internal stakeholders concerned. Thus, the panel would suggest, though, that MCAST reviewed internally if the two-level-approach in the appeals procedure could be modified by giving the institutes an opportunity to settle potential conflicts at their level even before an appeal is regarded to be necessary – by in fact creating an approach with less of the last resort approach -, and at the same time offering a corporate instance that is trusted by all parties involved.

Furthermore, it is seen as challenge to MCAST’s central and decentralized (quality) management and for the communication strategy towards a highly diverse student population that – in spite of the proven accessibility of information on appeals and the intense utilization of e-mails for spreading information among students – significant numbers of students simply would not notice this information.

In fact, the topic of an informal grievance and complaints policy – understood as a means of general complaints and feedback for quality enhancement rather than only solving formal issues mainly on assessments as discussed above – is part of the documented procedures (DOC 035 Students Grievance and Complaints Policy). However, the way it is outlined anticipates a very high level of maturity and responsibility on the students’ part which, again, might not be suitable due to the described diversity of the student population. At the moment, a significant number of students’ concerns seem to be ignored depending on whom they decided to voice them to, with a great variety of handling this among the Institutes. Therefore, in principle it is reasonable that clear communication channels to the adequate department are set up. However, the prescription that students should share their concerns directly with the corporate level Director of Information and Student Support Services does not seem to engrain the expected level of confidence as students might feel insecure about proceeding in such an “official” manner. It is up to the institution to find adequate means of facilitating different levels students to voice their concerns while, at the same time, making sure that feedback loops, i.e. information relayed back to the students about how their concerns are being dealt with, are included. The panel acknowledged that the issue has already been identified as area for improvement (IQA Report Opportunities for Improvement, areas 3, 4) by the QA department.

As previously alluded to, the responsiveness of lecture to the changing practices in teaching and assessment differs among the institutes. While the panel generally observed a very high level of acceptance of the cultural changes, some lecturers also seemed not to be ready, or sufficiently informed, about the new expectations towards them which included a higher degree of responsibility for choosing didactic tools and preparing material as well as reacting to problems arising due to the piloting situation. In the same manner, a different culture was noted by the panel at different institutes of ensuring that, even within the stricter restraints of foreign qualifications, the assignment methodology was adequate for the level of programme, not least in relation to the maturity of the students, and for the type of intended learning outcome. Thus, lecturers in many cases took up the initiative of assuming the ownership of the programmes in which they were involved and actively finding the appropriate interaction channels with those responsible within their Institute or centrally.

Good practice identified

The learner orientation is implemented in a very coherent manner, down to assignments, and is facilitated by the provision of corresponding templates making it applicable for all staff members.

The internal verification procedure is used for sharing good practice in teaching and especially assessment methodology among lecturers.

Overall judgment for standard

MCAST meets standard 4.

Note to the NCFHE Quality Assurance Committee (QAC): the panel members intensively discussed the need for balancing the importance of the numerous aspects within this Standard, i.e.. the panel discussed intensively to which extent a less than satisfactory performance for one of the Standard's bullet points should be weighed against good performance for others and how such a balance should influence the judgement in which direction.

Recommendations for improvement

The panel recommends that MCAST modifies the students' grievance and appeals policy and mechanisms by making them more accessible and by also including conflict settlement before steps are undertaken. They should fit different student realities and inspire confidence among all internal stakeholders.

3.5 Standard 5: Student Admission, Progression, Recognition and Certification

Student admission, progression, recognition and certification: entities shall consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student 'life-cycle'.

Main findings

The panel found documented and published regulations and a series of templates to be used by students throughout their studies life cycle ruling their admission, progression, recognition and certification.

The peers understand that the MCAST prospectus serves as main information source and tool for students in the admission phase – available online and distributed during a regular event called MCAST Expo – containing data on every single qualification's entry requirements, intended outcomes, professional relevance, content, as well as on additional services such as career guidance, learning support unit, library etc..

In addition, the panel reviewed (available also on the website) General Rules and Regulations, Course Admission Regulations, Student Enrolment Procedure, Course Admission Regulations, Student Attendance Procedure, forms used for application and different registration and progression purposes of students and samples of a student or induction handbook. They learned about induction sessions taking place at the beginning of the academic year organised in each Institute and about invitations to parents of students in Foundation Courses for presentations during the evening.

The Course Admission Regulations list mechanisms to take into consideration relevant qualifications, accredited or recognised by NCFHE, relevant periods of study, prior formal, non-formal and informal learning (specifying overseas qualifications, other qualifications, mature entrants and accreditation of prior experiential learning).

Depending on the type of programme or course and qualification level, successful students receive MCAST certificates, Certificate Supplements and Diploma Supplements. In the case of courses and programmes of a foreign awarding body (such as BTEC, AAT, IFS, ITEC, City and Guilds) their certificate templates are to be used.

The peers regard the tools in place to collect, monitor and manage information on student progression – although mainly depending on manual collection and processing of data between institutes and the registrar’s office – as catalysts that produce relevant data and allow for the monitoring of the student’s individual progression.

Throughout the review of documents and the audit discussions, the peers came to the conclusion that rules and procedures for admission, progression, recognition and certification of students do generally exist at MCAST, are accessible, consistently applied and professionally handled.

The panel’s findings were confirmed by the majority of students during the audit discussion that all relevant information regarding admission, progression and recognition is published, understandable and accessible to them – thus spread over different documents. Still, some students indicated in the pre-EQA student questionnaire organised by NCFHE (422 responses out of 11,000 full time students) that the information on their course, fees and payment, on refund policies, on enrolment procedures and necessary documentation was mostly insufficient – whilst the majority of student confirmed sufficiency in this survey.

Discussing eventual effects of the all-over 80% attendance requirement during the audit visit, the panel recognized an on-going discussion among MCAST staff – lecturers and coordinators, central units’ representatives, students themselves – about the usefulness of the attendance rules and especially the percentage to be reached. The peers would agree with the observation that with higher qualification levels, and thus more mature students, typically a higher degree of self-management and responsibility towards educational success would be expected. Furthermore, they shared the concern of some of the lecturers that learning effects might be endangered in the situation of Level 4 and 5 students for whom attendance duties over one study day accumulate to non-stop activity in classrooms from early mornings till late afternoons. On the other hand, the peers understand that monitoring students’ attendance produces relevant data for offering suitable support to individual students at the right time, as within the student support services a decline in attendance is read as an indicator for potential need of support of a different kind. They also follow the argument of other lecturers that the vocational nature of education offered at MCAST would require the training of practical skills which can be offered within the campus facilities.

In the opinion of the peers, this discussion brings again into focus the challenge to address a high diversity of students at different levels of qualification and of different age and with different preparation for their studying with appropriate structural provisions that allow flexibility and, at the same time, ensure coherent rules and processes for the whole institution.

Overall judgment for standard

MCAST meets Standard 5.

Recommendations for improvement

The peers would recommend investigating the reasons why a minority of students are not informed enough about admission and progression regulations, and to connect this with its general communication strategy.

3.6 Standard 6: Teaching Staff

Teaching staff: entities shall assure the competence and effectiveness of their teaching staff.

Main findings

Within MCAST, two units share the main responsibility for staff management and development at corporate level. The corporate HR unit is in charge of overarching staff matters. While working conditions for lecturing staff, including working hours, are largely stipulated by a collective union agreement, the HR department has the ability to influence parameters affecting the teaching conditions. For example, it can determine rules for maximum student numbers per class or determine the placement of full-time or part-time lecturers or employ lecturers across institutes in order to create synergies. As another example, the key skills lecturers at Levels 1-2 are deployed at several institutes.

The Continuous Professional Development Centre (CPD) within the Quality Assurance Department manages the QA appraisals of lecturers and the further development programmes such as “Teaching Certificate VET”. The Teaching Certificate in VET is offered at no charge to all lecturers of MCAST, though the number of participants is restricted and the number of part-time lecturers who have participated in the programme is extremely low. Nevertheless, lecturers demonstrated full awareness of the offer for further development: in addition to the TVET programme they can attend evening training offers. Further options for professional development include the placement of lecturers in the frame of the work-based learning systems. Lecturers are convincingly encouraged to participate in these programmes and do so in an adequate manner.

The quality assurance processes in place for ensuring the competence of teaching staff principally do not differentiate between types of staff members, though in practice current emphasis is given to full-time staff. Both the recruitment criteria and procedures and the lecturers performance appraisal are stipulated within the controlled document system (Doc 063 Personnel Recruitment, Doc 021 Recruitment Procedure, Doc 054 Lecturer Performance Appraisal Procedure, Doc 093 Lecture Performance Appraisal Form) with additional elements such as induction sessions for new lecturers implemented on an annual basis. The calls for applications and the COI-approved recruitment procedure in combination with the clear job descriptions for management level positions and terms of reference for coordinating functions led the panel to confirm clear, fair and transparent standards set and implemented.

Additionally, the Online Educational Forum gives guidance on relevant issues of original teaching methods and changing environments. The lecturers’ appraisal is understood as an important

instrument not only for ascertaining possible need for staff training, but also for providing feedback to the lecturer with a particular focus on didactic capabilities for the use of modern and adequate teaching methods (Lecturer Performance Appraisal Status Report). While participation in the appraisal process is voluntary, all those selected to date, on a random basis, have agreed to it. The focus so far has been on providing pedagogical advice and personal feedback but MCAST is in the process of linking the appraisal process more clearly to CPD process by designing specific CPD training courses on issues regularly arising from the appraisals. The feedback and improvement oriented approach to assuring staff quality attests to a learning organisation having chosen a developmental system rather than one using disciplinary action.

Nevertheless, the consistent application of the quality assurance methodology across the different lecturer types makes for one of the main challenges deriving both from the diversity of staff employed and the requirements to staff competences: on the one hand, a significant number of part-time staff and their interaction with full-time staff have to be handled. On the other hand, lecturers need to teach at very different levels of qualifications dealing with very diverging student groups. The ratio of the number of full-time and part-time staff members varies among the institutes (from 5 to 45%) as does their share in the actual teaching load (from 2 % to nearly a fourth of the teaching load). Generally, the panel observed a shared attitude among the lecturers that the inclusion of part-time lecturers is regarded as an asset for the programmes, specifically with a view to the strategically desired labour-market relevance, as these lecturers were ideally suited to bring in up-to-date knowledge about developments in the respective field.

However, the application of the above-mentioned CPD activities to part-time staff remains sporadic. Furthermore, the involvement of part-time staff in the regular staff meetings on programme and/or department level remains equally isolated. The designated time period implemented institution-wide for all staff members to be able to hold meetings (Wednesday afternoon) constitutes an important element of ensuring that lecturers are updated about programme-relevant developments, can exchange experiences and feedback on teaching methodology, share concerns and plan courses. However, part-time lecturers are not systematically included in these meetings. Among the reasons communicated to the panel figure time- and finance related issues, i.e. the fact that part-time staff was paid for the teaching hours per se only.

The culture of communication and information exchange among staff members is observed as varying greatly among institutes. This in turn influences the awareness of lecturers of the ongoing changes such as the switch to home grown programmes and its implications for teaching and assessing methodology. Where communication is more intense, the ownership of lecturers felt towards programmes was higher resulting in more active engagement in taking up more responsibility in the way the new programmes are implemented in actual teaching. The latter not only applies to those lecturers who have taken up coordinating roles, but also the readiness of all lecturers to engage with their peers. The panel noted the impression of some staff members that direct communication with their counterparts was not always welcomed. In particular, where issues are decided at the main campus corporate units or Institutes, information exchange with lecturers at these Institutes has to be carefully observed.

Good practice identified

The allocation of specific time slots for lecturers for quality related meetings allows for regular discussion without interference with teaching obligations.

A special training course for teaching in VET is offered to all staff members to familiarize them with the peculiarities of VET education and didactics.

Overall judgment for standard

MCAST meets Standard 6.

Recommendations for improvement

MCAST is recommended to find solutions for more systematically including part-time lecturers in quality assurance and improvement instruments, e. g. including “Wednesday meetings”, appraisal and CPD – especially in cases of courses contributing significantly to the learning success within a study programme.

MCAST is encouraged to enhance communication with all lecturers and among lecturers, with a particular focus on satellite institutes, about the changes related to the introduction of home grown programmes and consequently the role of lecturers in programme implementation.

The panel suggests finding means of balancing out the day-to-day communication possibilities for the Gozo campus’ lecturing staff towards programme-owning institutes, no matter which institute or correspondence is occurring.

3.7 Standard 7: Learning Resources and Student Support

Learning resources and student support: entities shall have appropriate funding for their learning and teaching activities and sufficient learning resources to fully support the students’ learning experiences.

Main findings

General findings on the funding and strategic financial planning possibilities of MCAST are discussed under Standard no. 2.

From the review of documents, the discussions on site as well as the visit of facilities of the main campus (including the Institutes located there), the Gozo campus, the satellite Institute of Agribusiness, Institute of Art and Design and Institute of Building and Construction Engineering the panel would consider that the college has appropriate structures and processes in place to distribute and allocate the available resources in a way that learning and teaching activities for all levels of qualification are basically supported and equipped. The college at present gains benefit from effectively applying for additional European funding for an impressive (re-)construction project at the main campus and plans for enlarging the premises of the Institute of Art and Design.

In the series of meetings with students, lecturers, programme/institute and student support service-coordinators from different Institutes, the peers collected a picture of overall satisfaction with classroom facilities, technical equipment at disposal for student’s practical experience, lab equipment

and library services. At the same time, the panel also got indications on missing, old or broken technical or lab equipment in single premises and on difficulties for students to access a library hub in one of the satellite institutes, as well as even having no possibilities to produce photocopies within this Institute's facilities. The peers have found very clear differences between Institutes with this regard: While in some institutes a vast majority of students expresses satisfaction with learning facilities, in others complaints tend to prevail.

The peers discussed with the students and lecturers of different Institutes in how far they would have addressed such issues and got feedback to the point that corrections took place. Also, with this in mind the answers differ significantly between Institutes. Thus, the panel concluded that the quality assurance of learning and teaching facilities and equipment at present depends on working feedback channels within each Institute and – to a certain extent – from the cultural dimension of commitment of full- and part-time academic staff and the management styles chosen at Institute level.

The self-evaluation report of MCAST points at the Library and Learning Resource Centre (LLRC) and at the IT services provided for staff and full-time students with regards to resources assisting student learning. The peers share the view expressed by participants in the audit discussions that library access in part of the Institutes located outside the main campus is limited due to limited resources to provide more extensive access hours in all of the library's hubs. This situation is felt to be disadvantageous by the students of these Institutes compared to their colleagues studying at the main campus.

Whilst the peers would also agree with statements about the library's computer pool to be out-dated, they learned that – contrary to other higher education institutions – there is still seen a need for providing desktop computers to MCAST students instead of offering broad and fast LAN access for private mobile devices.

With regards to support offers that meet the needs of a highly diverse student population, the panel found a range of clearly defined services designed and carried out by highly motivated members of the central Academic Operations and Student Services Department. The peers would confirm that the recent appointment of student support service coordinators within the single Institutes creates a more direct accessibility of these services important to students that might need assistance of different kinds. In parallel to the introduction of programme coordinators at Institute level, the students also support service coordinators – members of the academic staff taking over this additional function – who appear to become important elements for cross-institute communication and exchange about good practices as well as between central units and institutes. Key-skills-subject coordinators need to be mentioned as the third element supporting cross-structural communication as well.

The peers found in place – reflected by a separate internal management report of 2014 containing status analysis, strengths and areas for development – a portfolio of (free of charge) student support offers such as individual counselling, student advisers for guiding students to the services, career guidance, inclusive education with a series of different offers, student liaison manager for students in problematic situations, pathway to independent living for students with intellectual disabilities, personal development seminars and respective didactic support, sports department, chaplaincy and a youth hub at MCAST – the latter exclusively at the main campus. Most impressive for the panel is the well-tuned division of roles and labour and cooperation approach between the single units carrying out these student support services.

The information on the services mentioned is presented online, included in student/induction handbooks, presented during induction sessions and spread through the coordinators within Institutes.

The peers found the described support structures and processes fit for purpose and accessible. They have no doubt about the appropriate experience, qualification and attitude of the support and administrative staff delivering support services. The coherently designed and implemented student support can be regarded as exemplary in the European education sector.

Nevertheless, also in the case of these services – similar to other information on central issues for organising and facilitating students' life – the peers noted a certain number of students in discussion rounds not being aware of the services that would probably help exactly this group of obviously not easy to reach students to successfully conclude their education. Without having collected precise information – on purpose – about the student participants' profiles in discussion rounds, the panel got to the assumption that those not aware of different kind of available information belong to the younger age group of students enrolled in lower level courses. The panel observed that students taking over representation roles and participate actively in councils and student associations tend to belong to the older group of qualification MQF/EQF Levels 4, 5 and 6. It became also evident from discussions with students throughout all Institutes that the fact of high diversity in the student population regarding age, attitudes towards studying, behaviour, subject specific interests seem to cause chasms and is a stressing factor among students themselves. Those well informed and actively participating in MCAST's campus life, in student elections and extra-curricular activities unanimously express disappointment about their own difficulties to reach and include other groups of students not interested in participation who behave disrespectfully in front of lecturers and fellow students.

Thus the peers considered it as one of the biggest future challenges for MCAST – in implementing its inclusive education mission with major socio-economic impact on the Maltese education sector and its services for society – to continue developing solutions for including highly diverse student groups in internal processes related to the quality of teaching and learning and the support structures for it – having reached already a level of exemplary good practice. The peers would not see that traditional ways of student participation via elected representatives within the governance structure would include a critical enough number of individuals from such diverse population.

Good practice identified

MCAST's coherent combination of student support services for enhancing the learning experience and the education success for a highly diverse student population exceeds the common level at further and higher Education Institutions in the EHEA.

Overall judgment for standard

MCAST meets Standard 7.

Recommendations for improvement

The panel suggests further development of the coherent approach of support services by coordinating them in tandem with programme and course review and improvement especially with regard to didactic diversification and including single full- and (if carrying major parts of a course or programme) also part-time-lecturers in the delivery of educative support.

It is recommended to define indicators and focus data collection within quality assurance activities on the effectiveness of learning resources and equipment all over MCAST's education offers and feed respective findings into corporate management meetings, as well as into review of programmes procedures.

3.8 Standard 8: Information Management

Information management: entities shall ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.

Main findings

The Registrar's Office constitutes the main unit within MCAST responsible for managing data relevant to programme and student life-cycle management. A database with student data including enrolment and contact information forms the basis of the student-related information management system. Among the records of all active students, it is possible to select those in special situations. Attendance information, retention, grades and pass data is also included in the database. The latter information is provided manually by lecturers and institutes in collaboration with the Registrar. In order to avoid the relatively high risk of errors as well as delays in the availability of data due to the manual handling of data, the switch to a more automated information management system is planned as part of the mid-long term strategy for 2014-2016. The panel strongly supported this plan and urged for a very quick implementation of the IT-based system which would be considered to be state of the art in educational institutions today.

All data is available to all staff members through the College Share Point System. However, Institute members, including Directors and programme coordinators, have to actively seek information in case they want to use it for quality reviews. No automatic analysis of the data in terms of its relevance for the check of quality objectives is carried out and provided to those in charge of programme enhancement.

As a particularly valuable item, in the view of the panel, among the information gathered at and provided by the Registrar, figure the reasons for student drop-outs as they are interviewed for their reasons and also for detailed information about their new activity (employment or other). This allows programme coordinators and the Quality Assurance department to identify whether reasons for drop-outs lie within the set-up and implementation of programmes and thus would provide indications for improvement needs. It is not clear to the panel, however, to which extent this source of data is already fed into quality assurance instruments. Tracer studies of graduates can also contribute to enhancing programmes as they target graduates as important source of information and link between the institution and the world of work. While they provide information about employment rates and career paths, they are not, as far as the panel can observe, yet used consequently for such tasks. .

As analysed in further detail within Standard 10, student feedback about their satisfaction with the programmes is currently gathered in rather informal ways. While again pointing to the high relevance awarded to direct communication and student-lecturer relations, there is awareness in the Quality Assurance Department of the need for balancing between this direct feedback culture and more

systematic, structured means of gathering feedback. In principle, students' satisfaction can be ascertained through informal mechanisms, including direct discussions between lecturers and students when this in turn constitutes a "regular" instrument. The panel observed a very high level of emphasis and thus common understanding among those met during the visit of the personal lecturer-student communication and its importance for providing information on programme quality. In designing instruments for collecting student satisfaction, great care must be given to ensuring that the data gathered is actually useful to its intended purpose of enhancing programme quality (e.g., with regard to the achievement of intended objectives) and allows those in charge to derive meaningful indications for where specific needs for enhancement lie. Thus, surveys which are too generic in character, or do not allow the allocation of issues raised to particular institutes, programmes, units or else, will lead to difficulties in identifying concrete, implementable actions for improvement. Closure of feedback loops by involvement of all stakeholders in this sense is essential.

Good practice identified

The collection of individual reasons for drop-outs allows for direct conclusions about programme quality and allows those in charge to take action where necessary.

Overall judgment for standard

MCAST meets Standard 8.

Recommendations for improvement

MCAST should investigate the reasons why relevant information for applying and studying at the college does not reach a minority of the students' population. A restructuring of the communication strategy is needed to ensure that the target group is apprised of the relevant information.

The panel recommends to MCAST to revise the way it collects student satisfaction and graduate feedback to ensure that their ideas and needs are adequately taken into account in quality assurance and further development of programmes, courses and learning environment and that feedback loops are closed.

3.9 Standard 9: Public Information

Public information: entities shall publish information about their activities which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to-date and readily accessible.

Main findings

As mentioned above (Standards 5 and 8), the website and the prospectus are the main source of publicly available information containing data for each single qualification's entry requirements, intended outcomes, content, qualification awarded (differentiating between home grown and foreign), qualification level, as well as further learning opportunities, by clearly demonstrating possible progress routes within Institutes. The part-time prospectus in this regard per se provides information about further learning opportunities.

The panel noted, however, as MCAST has stated in their self-evaluation report, that information about credits (ECTS or ECVET) is only published for those part-time courses for which at least 4 ECVET are awarded upon successful completion. This could be improved, particularly in light of the new home-grown courses, where MCAST is no longer dependent on foreign awarding bodies'. Again, with reference to Standard 5 above, the panel's findings were confirmed by the majority of students during the audit discussion that all relevant information regarding admission, programme objectives, progression and graduation was sufficient and they felt well informed before making their decision as well as feeling secure in their choice during their studies. Still, some students indicated in the pre-EQA student questionnaire organised by NCFHE (422 responses out of 11,000 full time students) that the information on their course, fees and payment, on refund policies, on enrolment procedures and necessary documentation was mostly insufficient – however, the majority of student still confirmed their satisfaction in this survey. .

Information about additional services such as career guidance, learning support unit, library etc., is also easily accessible on the website. Similarly, General Rules and Regulations, Course Admission Regulations, Student Enrolment Procedure, Course Admission Regulations, Student Attendance Procedure, forms used for application and different registration and progression purposes of students are also available on the website.

The panel acknowledged the information provided in the self-assessment report that pass rates are not made publically available but directly communicated to the Ministry, while referring to the statistics published by the NCFHE, which include student and graduate numbers. While pass rates are not ideally suited to provide information about the quality of an educational offer, they might constitute an interesting piece of information for interested students. MCAST's QA department should thus consider publishing the information with due diligence.

Overall judgment for standard

MCAST meets Standard 9.

Recommendations for improvement

The panel recommends that MCAST consistently publishes information about ECTS/ECVET for all courses.

MCAST is advised to find a suitable solution for the provision of information regarding pass rates to the public.

3.10 Standard 10: On-going Monitoring and Periodic Review of Programmes

On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes: entities shall implement the 'Quality Cycle' by monitoring and periodically reviewing their programmes to ensure their continuing fitness for purpose.

Main findings

Whilst the planning and implementation part of the quality cycle for programmes and course offers at MCAST is dealt with under Standards 3 and 4, the present Standard 10 covers the 'check' and 'act' part of the cycle.

As with the above mentioned Standards, the panel recognized that for assessing the reality of MCAST under the present Standard, it had to differentiate between programmes and courses delivered under the regime of an external verifier and those called home-grown, programmes and courses developed and delivered in full autonomy and responsibility by MCAST under national legislation.

In the case of external verifier programmes and courses – still a significant number in the college's education portfolio – a substitute mechanism for periodic review of programmes is in place and not governed or controlled by MCAST: monitoring and periodic review take place according to the rules of the certifying organisation, the latter sending in audit teams, external verifiers or examiners, deciding about scope and process of such external review, delivering reports on the findings, deciding about necessary corrections and monitoring their implementation when repeating the exercise. The peers had at their disposal an external examination visit plan, samples of external examiners'/verifiers' reports and follow up action plans showing a closely meshed control process in place. As long as the findings of these externally controlled processes are taken into the internal management processes of MCAST at central and institutes level, and combined with existing or new internal data sources with regards to students progression, drop out reasons, satisfaction and feedback of different stakeholder groups (students, lecturers, employers), lessons learned during student support activities etc., an internal doubling of monitoring and review processes is not needed for these kind of programmes and would, in fact, be deemed a rather inefficient exercise.

With regard to home-grown or national qualification courses completely designed, delivered and controlled by the college the peers found a very recent – in fact drafted between the scoping visit and the EQA visit – but principally convincing draft process design and description that foresees the input from students, lecturers, industrial stakeholders and from eventually available other external review reports, and that assigns the ownership for compiling a review report to the respective programme-coordinator. The panel understood that the first wave of home-grown programmes was introduced in autumn 2014 and – as reviews are planned every three years – this process is not yet urgently needed. Thus a comprehensive judgement of the *implementation* of the present standard for these programmes and the related review mechanisms is not yet possible.

The peers were informed by lecturers and programme-coordinators of some Institutes that "focus groups" seem to be in place for critically accompanying the "piloting" phase of the recently introduced home grown programmes Level 1 to 3, discussing strengths and weaknesses discovered during this

first implementation and bringing forward necessary corrections towards Institutes' management and/ or the curriculum development department. The peers did not see documentation on these focus groups but thought them to be an important element for ensuring immediate reaction regarding problems in the implementation of a new programme the students might suffer from and also for feeding programme coordinators and central quality units with valuable information that can be used for avoiding the same problem occurring in other programmes.

The peers acknowledged the report on areas of improvement and related quality objectives presented as the second step of the internal quality self-assessment report by the college management and related to the six strategic thrusts of the strategic plan 2014-2016. For each area of improvement, there are defined concrete actions to be taken within the upcoming months. In this document, MCAST has identified the formal programme review of national / home-grown vocational qualifications as an area of improvement and recognises that its present review procedure design does not yet completely cover the requirement of the IQA standard, in particular with respect to the inclusion of internal and external stakeholders. Accordingly, two actions are presented as having recently commenced: revising the programme review procedure accordingly and setting a milestone plan for the programme reviews – the latter also handed out to the peers. Both documents were not yet approved by the relevant bodies, i.e. did not have an ownership yet, as they had been recently prepared between the scoping visit and the external quality audit itself.

Furthermore, MCAST has defined the consolidation of internal and external audit processes as one of its areas of improvement in quality management in reaction to the shift from programs of foreign awarding bodies to national qualifications. Actions are planned with regards to identifying audit structures needed for each programme level, establishing so-called audit protocols for each audit structure identified, allocate resources and implement internal audits for reporting to top management from September 2015 onwards.

Nevertheless the peers would regard the already existing formalized feedback and quality control elements in use (e. g. formal participation of student representative in decision boards, online student surveys, employer feedback surveys, lecturer appraisals status report presented with the documentation) as first steps towards systematised student and employer input but not yet focused on quality in teaching and learning and – importantly – on the achievement of the promised skills and competences by a high enough number of learners. Further involvement of students and potential employers – as asked by the standard - does not appear to be foreseen in an institutionalized way into the monitoring and review of programmes and courses, regardless of whether external verifier programmes or home- grown programmes are discussed.

The peers would agree with MCAST's management that neither student representatives nor employer representatives should be burdened with a series of meetings and working group sessions discussing aspects of programme re-design (e. g. latest subject specific developments, didactic solutions, learning outcome taxonomies...) not belonging to their individual fields of expertise and / or experience. But the panel was convinced that MCAST experts from central units and among the academic staff of Institutes would be more than able to design and agree on lightweight but effective structural offers to students and potential employers participating and giving concrete feedback in review exercises on those elements of a course or programme affecting their immediate interests.

In addition to the documented and formalized feedback channels and surveying activities, the panel again found lively examples of intense interaction and exchange among lecturers within several institutes of MCAST – especially when covering additional functions such as internal verifier positions or coordinator positions – discussing the improvement of on-going programmes, exchanging practices in implementing courses and didactic choices, even elaborating concepts for new programmes and courses in exchange with their respective industry and business contacts and presenting these concepts to the Institute’s management and responsible Boards of Study before the central curriculum development process would even start. The peers considered such informal patterns of communication and exchange as very important for the delivery of quality to students in each single lesson and classroom. They discussed with lecturers, coordinators, management of Institutes and central level representatives in how far the significant number of part-time lecturers could and would be included in such interactions. The panel would point out that such inclusion will become even more important with the growing responsibility of all academic staff in the shift from externally verified and controlled programmes to self-owned offers. It is understood that especially part-time lecturers often act within narrow time schedules and would have limited possibilities to simply add hours of presence at the college. Nevertheless – especially in those cases where part-time lecturers carry central units of a course or programme with regard to the learning outcomes to be achieved all over – it might be critical for ensuring coherent quality levels to design framework conditions that would support the inclusion of all kind of lecturers into internal, formal, but even more important, informal communication patterns in terms of continuous monitoring of course and programme delivery and in periodic reviews

Overall judgment for standard

For programmes of external verifiers / foreign awarding bodies: Standard not applicable to MCAST.

For national qualifications / home grown programmes: MCAST requires improvement to meet Standard 10.

Recommendation for a condition

The panel requests that the draft Programme Review Procedure (DOC 28), related Milestone Plan and Action Plan are formally approved and responsibilities within MCAST are designated within six months.

Recommendations for improvement

The panel recommends:

- to implement the periodic review process as foreseen in the action plan for programme reviews (area for improvement 2) and to connect it (as input or output),
- to scope any findings from internal and external audits (area for improvement 5),
- to scope any findings from student feedback from different sources (area for improvement 3),
- to scope any findings from the planned complaints management (area for improvement 4).

The panel recommends defining – or collecting if dispersed and informally already agreed upon – the operational quality objectives and indicators for their achievement for on-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes and courses. For ensuring efficiency and effectiveness of the process designed, this recommendation simply suggests clarifying and communicating from what quantitative

and qualitative data MCAST would recognize that a programme or course fulfils the internal quality expectations and focusing the collection of data for monitoring and periodic review on these indicators.

The panel suggests enlarging periodic review activities to *all* kind of education offers MCAST provides in the own interest of the institution for assuring a comparable quality level throughout the complete education portfolio.

3.11 Standard 11: Cyclical External Quality Assurance

Entities should undergo external quality assurance by, or with the approval of, the NCFHE on a cyclical basis according to NCFHE guidelines, once every five years.

Main findings

MCAST has fulfilled this standard by virtue of hosting this EQA referred to in this Report. This is the first EQA of MCAST.

Overall judgment for standard

MCAST meets Standard 11.

4. Response by the Provider



Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology

EQA Audit (4th to 8th May 2015)

Action Plan for Improvement

EQA Peer Team Findings	Action for improvement	Owner	Target implementation date / Status
<p>Recommendation 1.1 The panel recommends finalizing and publishing the presented quality manual as an instrument guiding through existing and upcoming elements of MCAST's quality policy.</p>	<p>The Quality Manual is to be updated to reflect the changes arising from the College transformation process, as well changes of the internal processes arising from the EQA recommendations.</p>	<p>QA</p>	<p>Jan-16</p>
<p>Recommendation 1.2 MCAST should check whether external stakeholder representatives' input is consistently ensured in the strategy developing processes, independent from the individual membership in the Board of Governors</p>	<p>The College is satisfied that the 2014/16 Strategic Plan development process also included inputs of external stakeholders other than the individual membership in the Board of Governors. However, the College will ensure in the development of the next Strategic Plan that the process of obtaining both the input and also feedback on the output is traceable to the various external stakeholders / sources.</p>	<p>Senior Management</p>	<p>Mid 2016</p>

Recommendation 2.1

MCAST needs to have a more stable and sustainable financial environment in which to be able to plan its long-term growth.

In liaison with the Ministry, the College is committed to provide opportunities to all Learners who have an interest in initiating or continuing their vocational studies. The College administration regularly reports its financial situation to the Board of Governors. The College is also committed to ensure efficiency and effectiveness in its operation. The comments below also refer.

Senior Management

Ongoing

Recommendation 2.2

MCAST could make better use of market opportunities for generating its own funds that will assist in its financial sustainability and allow for more comprehensive QA measures.

Under the guidance of the Board of Governors and the Principal & CEO, the MG2I (MCAST's commercial entity) is assigned the responsibility to set-up collaborative partnerships with stakeholders. A number of these collaborative partnerships translate into financial / resource benefits that are invested and hence contribute directly into the operational needs of the College, Institutes and Centres. The main beneficiaries from these funds are the Lecturers and Learners. These local and international partnerships are announced from time to time in the local media and on the College website.

The College also strives to ensure that its EU projects Office has the appropriate Leadership and staff resources to ensure that on-going and new, potential EU funded projects are administered appropriately.

Senior Management

Ongoing

Recommendation 2.3

The QA, Curriculum and CPD Departments need more human resources to be able to extend and enhance their procedures, for example, in terms of post-course student feedback; the QA of work-based learning; and CPD for Institute Directors and part-time staff.

A number of initiatives are in place / planned as follows:

1) A WBL Director has been appointed during August 2015 to supplement the existing set-up.	Senior Management	Done
2) The roles of Programme Coordinators have been revised and issued to reflect the organisational changes that are resulting from the College Transformation process. The new role of Institute Vocational Coordinator will allow for more subject focus in liaison with both the Director Curriculum / QA and also the Deputy Director Programme Management (College). The selection process will be completed by end September 2015.	HR/QA	Sep-15
3) The College is also renewing the role of Subject Coordinators and updating the Terms of Reference to reflect the College transformation process. The selection process will be completed by end September 2015.	HR/QA	Sep-15
4) A request has been made for two additional full time QA Officers.	HR/QA	Awaiting approval
5) A number of lecturers have been assigned the responsibility to follow students during their work based learning. These lecturers will be responsible for the support, follow-up and quality assurance of Learners on apprenticeship/internship programmes.	WBL Office	Ongoing
6) Where required, an external subject expert is assigned to supplement the curriculum design and development process.	QA	Ongoing

Recommendation 3.1

MCAST should ensure that student perspectives are involved in the programme design process in a suitable manner that not only fulfils formal obligations, but at the same time, reflects the diversity of the student population.

A number of pilot studies with a diverse student population will be performed in order to identify an appropriate method for obtaining student perspective and student involvement in the programme design process. Following these pilot studies, a review will be undertaken to establish a structured approach for student feedback as part of the programme design and development process.

QA

April-16

Recommendation 4.1

The panel recommends that MCAST modifies the students' grievance and appeals policy and mechanisms by making them more accessible; also including conflict settlement before formal, last resort steps. They should fit different student realities and inspire confidence among all internal stakeholders.

With the introduction of the Deputy Director Programme Management, it will be possible to review the grievance and appeals procedure in particular at Levels 1,2 and 3 (Foundation College). An exercise will be carried out to identify possible improvements in the current procedure in order to inspire more trust among the internal stakeholders.

QA

Feb-16

Recommendation 5.1

The peers would recommend investigating into the reasons why a minority of students feels not well enough informed about admission and progression regulations, and to connect this with its general communication strategy.

1) The Institute Directors are being requested to ensure that sufficient information is disseminated to the Learners during the upcoming Learner induction meetings.

Institute Directors

Sep-15

2) Reference to progression regulations is also being re-emphasized in the Student Induction Handbooks for the academic year 2015/16. All new and continuing students are provided with a personal copy.

Institutes / QA

Sep-15

3) The admissions, enrolment and exemptions processes are being combined into one regulation in order to ensure that decisions taken at COI level can be updated into the new regulation and communicated in real-time to all stake holders.

QA

Oct-15

4) Three new regulations are being issued, namely Foundation College, Technical College and University College. Each regulation will address the specific aspects pertinent to the College level, including clear guidelines of the progression rules.

QA

Oct-15

5) Once the above documents are approved, an explanatory note will be sent to the Learners together with the updated documents.

QA

Nov-15

Recommendation 6.1

MCAST is recommended to find solutions for more systematically including part-time lecturers in quality assurance and improvement instruments, e. g. including “Wednesday meetings”, appraisal and CPD – especially in cases of courses contributing significantly to the learning success within a study programme.

The College will be exploring with the College Heads possibilities to identify opportunities relating to general communication, CPD and appraisal of part-time lecturers. A detailed action plan will then be agreed and implemented.

QA

Nov-15

Recommendation 6.2

MCAST is encouraged to enhance communication with all lecturers and among lecturers, with a particular focus on satellite institutes, about the changes related to the introduction of home-grown programmes and consequently the role of lecturers in programme implementation.

The Director Curriculum disseminated information (including programme specifications) of the new programmes (2015/16) to the Institutes during June 2015. A structured process is in place to receive feedback from lecturing staff.

QA

Jun-16,
on-going

Recommendation 6.3

The panel suggests finding means of balancing out the day-to-day communication possibilities for the Gozo campus’ lecturing staff towards programme-owning institutes, no matter which Institute or correspondence is occurring.

Following a top management decision, a full review of the communication issues between the Gozo Campus lecturers and the respective (Malta based) Institute lecturers is being undertaken. A meeting has already been coordinated by the Head of Foundation College.

Head of Foundation College

Sep-15

QA to follow-up on the matter.

QA

Jan-15

Recommendation 7.1

The panel suggests to further develop the coherent approach of support services by coordinating them also with programme and course review and improvement especially with regard to didactic diversification and including single full and (if carrying major parts of a course or programme) also part-time-lecturers in the delivery of educative support.

The programme review process will be widened to allow for the recommendation, where and as when required. The College also notes the envisaged contribution by the Subject Coordinators, The Institute Vocational Coordinators (both being reinstated for a two-year term) and the new Deputy Directors Programme Management.

QA

Nov-15

The Programme Review Procedure will be updated accordingly to reflect the interaction with these internal stakeholders.

QA

Dec-15

Recommendation 7.2

It is recommended to define indicators and focus data collection within quality assurance activities also on the effectiveness of learning resources and equipment all over MCAST’s education offers and feed respective findings into corporate management meetings as well as into review of programmes procedures.

A management review process will be undertaken in order to identify appropriate measurable, owners and reporting structures.

QA

Jan-16

Recommendation 8.1

MCAST should investigate the reasons why relevant information for applying and studying at the college does not reach a minority of the students' population and is recommended to adapt its means of communication to ensure that it fits the respective target group.

The College will review and possibly identify the possible cause/s of this finding by the Review Panel. Irrespective of the outcome of this internal review, the College will take the appropriate actions in particular at MQF/EQF Levels 1,2 and 3 in order to ensure that the respective target groups are well informed of their progression paths into the Technical College.

QA

Feb-16

Recommendation 8.2

The panel recommends MCAST to revise the way it collects student satisfaction and graduate feedback to ensure that their ideas and needs are adequately taken into account in quality assurance and further development of programmes, courses and learning environment and that feedback loops are closed.

Following consultation with the Teacher's Union, QA will propose a College-wide Learner feedback strategy for internal consultation and management approval followed by its implementation.

QA

Mar-16

Recommendation 9.1

The panel recommends that MCAST consistently publishes information about ECTS/ECVET for all courses.

As an interim measure, the College will upload an explanatory note on the College website explaining the work load of each programmes in terms of ECVETs / ECTS.

Registrar's Office

Oct-15

The College will publish information regarding ECTS/ECVET with the next issue of the Prospectus.

Registrar's Office

Jan-16

Recommendation 9.2

MCAST is advised to find a suitable solution for the provision of information regarding pass rates to the public.

The matter will be discussed with the Ministry in order to determine an appropriate solution

Senior Management

Mar-16

Condition 10

The panel requests that the draft Programme Review Procedure (DOC 28), related Milestone Plan and Action Plan are formally approved and responsibilities within MCAST are designated within six months.

The draft Programme Review Procedure (DOC 28), related Milestone Plan and Action Plan are to be formally approved and responsibilities designated.

QA

Dec-15

Recommendation 10.1

The panel recommends to implement the periodic review process as foreseen in the action plan for programme reviews (area for improvement 2) and to connect it (as input or output)
o to scope and findings from internal and external audits (area for improvement 5)
o to scope any findings from student feedback from different sources (area for improvement 3)
to scope any findings from the planned complaints management (area for improvement 4)

The periodic review process will be updated to include the feedback (input/output) of the various sources identified in the recommendation.

QA

Feb-16

Recommendation 10.2

The panel recommends defining – or collecting if dispersed and informally already agreed upon – the operational quality objectives and indicators for their achievement for on-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes and courses. For ensuring efficiency and effectiveness of the process designed, this recommendation simply suggests clarifying and communicating from what quantitative and qualitative data MCAST would recognize that a programme or course fulfils the internal quality expectations and focusing the collection of data for monitoring and periodic review on these indicators.

The set of operational quality objectives pertinent to whether a programme or course fulfils the internal quality expectations will be identified, measured, monitored and reported.

QA

Mar-16

Recommendation 10.3

The panel suggests enlarging periodic review activities to all kind of education offers MCAST provides in the own interest of the institution for a assuring a comparable quality level throughout the complete educational profile.

A number of periodic reviews are already in place in the various aspects of programme realisation and student support. However, an exercise will be carried out to identify harmonisation of reviews and reporting.

QA

Mar-16

Dated :

10th September 2015

Compiled by:

Ing. P Dalmas, Director QA

Approved by:

Ing. V Maione, Deputy Principal, Curriculum Development, Quality Assurance, R&I

Mr S Cachia, Principal & CEO

Annex: Review Panel Bio Notes

In the setting up of the review panel for the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology, the NCFHE sought to maintain a high degree of diligence in the process of selection of the members of Peer Review Panel. The Panel sought to be composed of foreign high level specialists in quality assurance to act as External Peers, professionals and practitioners of quality assurance frameworks, as well as students who, prior to the audits, attended Training Seminar for Prospective Tertiary Education Student Evaluators, acting as Student Peers.

The following bio notes present the profiles of the members of Peer Review Panel. The bio notes are correct as at the time of when the EQA review was carried out (4th to 8th May 2015).

Head of Review Panel/External Peer: Ms Birgit Hanny

Ms Hanny is a Vice-Managing Director of ASIIN and a Member of the executive board of European Quality Assurance Network for Informatics Education (EQANIE). She is a specialist in development and enhancement of criteria and procedural principles for external quality assurance at higher and further education institutions (at system institutional and program level), training and consulting in organisation development and total quality management for education institutions.

Prior to her career at ASIIN, Ms. Hanny was a senior consultant at KPMG in the fields of public and financial services. She was also a research fellow of European studies.

External Peer: Ms Jana Möhren

Ms. Möhren is the Head of International Office at ASIIN and serves as Secretary General of EQANIE. Moreover she works in the Secretariat of European Alliance for Subject-Specific and Professional Accreditation and Quality Assurance (EASPA). Ms. Möhren is a specialist in implementation and enhancement of external QA procedures, training and consulting in EQA. Previously Ms Möhren was involved in international key account management.

Student Peer: Mr Ryan Falzon

Mr Falzon is a student of University of Malta, currently reading for a Degree of Medicine and Surgery. For the past three years he took an active involvement as member of the Malta Medical Students' Association. Although not being part of the executive board of the mentioned student association, he coordinated new projects. Mr Falzon is also the Education Commissioner at Kunsill Studenti Universitarji (KSU).

Student Peer: Ms Francienne Muscat

Ms Muscat graduated with a bachelor's degree in Law with International Relations (LLB), and currently reading a doctoral degree in law (LLD) at University of Malta. She also graduated with a Diploma of Notary Public in 2014. Ms Muscat is also a Student Representative on Senate and Education Coordinator at KSU. Previously she served as the Secretary General of the Gozo University Group (GUG).

NCFHE Staff Member: Mr Alexander Spiteri

Mr Spiteri is the Head of the Quality Assurance Unit at the NCFHE. In the past, he worked at the Ministry for Education and Employment as a Director for Curriculum Management and eLearning and a Director for Quality Assurance within the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education. He was also a part-time lecturer in Maltese Methodology at University of Malta where he acted, inter alia, as a Coordinator and main provider of B.Ed Course Specialization on Parental Involvement and

Parental Lifelong Learning. Until 2007 he served as an examiner and tutor of theses and teaching practice.

Mr Spiteri was heading the Foundation for Educational Services. Over the years he wrote the proposed national policy in the area of Adult Basic Skills. As a Senior Executive in charge of the Training, Development and International Project Unit he coordinated all international projects of the Foundation.