National Commission for Further and Higher Education
Malta

COVERING NOTE TO THE EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AUDIT REPORT
PREPARED BY NCFHE FOLLOWING A REVIEW OF THE
INSTITUTE OF TOURISM STUDIES

FEBRUARY 2016

INTRODUCTION

The NCFHE Board has received from the Quality Assurance Committee and has endorsed the attached report drafted by the external review panel which has been set up to carry out an external quality assurance review of the Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS)in line with the requirements of the National Quality Assurance Framework. The review took place between the 4th and the 8th May 2015 and the report reflects the findings as at this time.

The Board understands that this was a pilot, but fully-fledged external quality audit in line with the Letter of Intent dated 4th December 2012 a copy of which is attached, from which much value has been derived and much has been learnt. In principle, all external reviews carried out cannot be compared against each other. The EQA was undertaken within the context of an ESF-funded project on which the ITS was a partner.

It should be noted that the external quality assurance audit (EQA) of the Institute of Tourism Studies cannot be compared with those conducted on any other educational institutions. All entities are measured against established criteria, rather than against each other. These criteria are laid down in the Malta Quality Assurance Framework, based on the European Standards and Guidelines which inform the quality assurance systems of all countries signatory to the European Higher Education Area.

The Board also noted that this was the first-ever such external quality assurance audit of the ITS and has taken due account of the learning process which this has inevitably entailed.

The Board is determined that the Commission should carry out its regulatory responsibilities for standards in further and higher education independently, even-handedly, objectively and in a transparent manner. But it is also extremely conscious that it is breaking new ground in Malta, where a culture of accountability and sensitivity to constructive criticism has still to take root.

The Commission has been keen to ensure that these first-ever external quality audits are firm but fair, and impartial and objective as possible taking due account of the learning process they have inevitably entailed.

The response to the external quality assurance audit by the Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS) is also attached.

ANALYSIS

The EQA is a tool for both development and accountability. The EQA has reviewed the internal quality assurance system of the ITS and assessed whether the system is
- fit for purpose according to the ITS's courses and service users;
- compliant with standards and regulations and contributing t the development of a national quality culture;
- contributing to the fulfilment of the broad goals of Malta's Education Strategy 2014-2024;
- implemented with effectiveness comprehensiveness and sustainability.

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. Ongoing 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.

The main lines of inquiry for this EQA were:
- fitness for purpose and effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes used by the provider, including an examination of the system's structure, the documentation it produces and the evaluations of quality conducted by the provider;
- compliance with obligations of licence holders under these regulations, where applicable, as well as any conditions or restrictions imposed by the Commission on the licensee under these regulations;
- appropriate investigatory mechanisms to ensure financial probity, and to ensure that the persons occupying headship positions are fit and proper persons to deliver further or higher education programmes.

The EQA review intends to review the provider at a particular point in time and takes into consideration the procedures, practices and relevant documentation made available to the panel during the review.

FINDINGS

On the basis of the findings documented in the report, the panel has concluded that the provider has met Standard 11; requires improvements to meet Standards 4, 5 and 6; and have provided a number

of recommendations to enable the ITS to meet Standards 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 9 and 10. The recommendations are meant to enhance further good practice and improve of the standards already in place.

The panel emphasised that the EQA review of the Institute of Tourism Studies took place under exceptional circumstances. ITS at the time of the review found itself in a transient phase, where the Institute was about to reinvent itself in almost all aspects of its operations. Practically all key academic and administrative leadership positions were being recruited and new strategic plans for the coming years were being negotiated and were about to be published. With regards to the establishment of a institute wide quality assurance system, most of the envisaged quality assurance loops for key operations in the area of teaching and learning as well as administrative support services were newly designed and were waiting to be implemented without having already produced tangible results. Combined with the absence of dependable action plans, accompanying key performance indicators and underlying financing arrangements in line with a short and mid-term strategic plan already in place, the auditors made it the first priority to simply evaluate what was found on the ground instead of assessing the value of future scenarios or plans to be implemented in the future..

The teaching staff expressed their commitment to contributing to a brighter future of ITS and endorsed a lot of the presented change agenda. The review team took note of these developments and discussed the potential of the proposed changes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The report recommends that the provider focuses mainly on and presents plans on the following elements:
- all vacant senior and middle management positions within ITS are reviewed for fitness for purpose and filled in;
- the IQAC or equivalent becomes a statutory entity with dedicated financial and human resources;
- the statutory relationship between the Board of Governors, the Board of Studies, the PQVB and the IQAC or equivalent is clarified to ensure fitness for purposes, appropriate governance and due process;
- ITS develops effective communication systems between all structures, levels and stakeholders of the institution;
- ITS develops effective financial management procedures and structures to ensure that its budget it properly used.

FOLLOW UP

The Commission is already in receipt of a plan for action at the ITS and is informed that the institution has already taken up some of the recommendations with substantial improvements registered. The Commission will be documenting these actions in a follow-up to this EQA audit. The follow up, which will take place in July 2016, will review the take up and implementation of recommendations put forward by the panel in the report.

The Commission has been keen to ensure that these first-ever external quality audits are firm but fair, impartial and objective as possible taking due account of the learning process they have inevitably entailed.

10th February 2016