COVERING NOTE TO THE EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AUDIT REPORT
PREPARED BY NCFHE FOLLOWING A REVIEW OF THE
MALTA COLLEGE OF ARTS, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

MARCH 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 Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology 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 underlines that this was a pilot, but fully-fledged external quality assurance audit in line with Letter of Intent dated 4th December 2012 (copy attached) from which much value has been derived and much has been learnt. The EQA was undertaken within the context of an ESF-funded project on which the UoM was a partner.

It should be noted that the external quality assurance audit (EQA) of the MCAST is *sui generis* and 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 MCAST 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 MCAST 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 MCAST and assessed whether the system is
- fit for purpose according to the MCAST'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:
- How far does the horizontal and vertical diversity with regard to student population, subject area, qualifications 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 ongoing change processes affect structures, processes and organisation culture in delivering and assuring quality in teaching and learning all over MCAST?

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. On the basis of the findings documented in the report, the panel has concluded that the provider meets all the Standards except for standard 10 where it needs improvement. Even though most of the standards have been met, the panel has put forward a number of recommendations for each Standard. The recommendations are meant to enhance further good practice and improve of the standards already in place.

FINDINGS

On the basis of the findings documented in the report, the panel has concluded that the MCAST meets Standards 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11; and requires improvements on Standard 10.

The panel has noted that the strategic plan and its connection to the quality policy of the college are considered to be an effective instrument for sharing management objectives. MCAST set up its QA Department in 2009 which is partnered by the Curriculum and CPD Departments which in turn work closely with the Registrar's Office. Apart from the central staff within the QA Department, MCAST has invested strongly in a cohort of Curriculum Coordinators which have provided necessary and effective support to staff especially in the context of the transition from reliance on a number of international qualifications systems to a national system of post-compulsory vocational qualifications.

They noted that the process for the design and approval of programmes allows for an efficient and straight forward preparation and implementation of new programmes. The role definition facilitates a consistent implementation of internal quality objectives while strict learning outcomes orientation is fostered by the structure of templates. Furthermore a learner orientation is implemented in a very cohere manner and facilitated by the provision of corresponding templates. The panel has noted with satisfaction the coherent combination of student support services for enhancing the learning experience and the education success for a highly diverse student population. The collection of individual reasons for drop outs allows for programme redesign and framework parameters, were necessary.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The report recommends that:
- The QA manual is published and ensure a more consist input from external stakeholder representatives.
- MCAST should seek to have a more financially sustainable environment; seek to make better use of market opportunities; and to dedicate more resources to the QA, Curriculum and CPD departments.
- Students are better involved in the programme design process; modifies the students' grievance and appeals policy to make it more accessible; and improves its admission and progression communication strategy.
- Improvements are made on the systemic inclusion on part time and Gozo-based lecturing staff in quality assurance instruments, programme reviews and enhancing communication channels.
- Data collection focuses also on the effectiveness of learning resources and equipment and findings feed into corporate management meetings and programmes review cycles.
- ECTS/ECVET information is more regularly published and information about pass rates is also made available to the public.
- The Draft Review Procedures are formally approved and responsibilities within MCAST are designated.

FOLLOW UP

MCAST has drawn up an action plan for improvement and this is included in the report. The Commission will be monitoring the implementation of this action plan and will carry out a follow-up review in July 2016 to document the improvements.

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.

CONCLUSIONS: FOLLOW UP

The Board has taken note of the above recommendations and the good standards achieved. It notes with approval that MCAST has drawn up an action plan for improvement and this is included in the report.

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 by the MCAST of the recommendations put forward by the panel of international Higher Quality Assurance experts in their report.

March 2016