



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
UNIVERSITY OF MALTA

March 2016

INTRODUCTION

The NCFHE Board has endorsed the attached report from the Quality Assurance Committee covering the report (also attached) by the external review panel of international Higher Education Quality Assurance experts which was set up to conduct a pilot external quality assurance audit of the University of Malta in line with the requirements of the National Quality Assurance Framework. The audit took place between the 20th and the 24th April 2015 and the report reflects the findings as at that time.

The Board underlines that this was a pilot, but fully-fledged external quality assurance audit in line with Letter of Intent dated 8th April 2014 (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 University of Malta 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 University of Malta 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 University of Malta (UoM) 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 UOM and assessed whether the system is:

- fit for purpose according to the UOM'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 2014-2024;
- implemented effectively, comprehensively and sustainably.

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 ensure 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 are 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 audits: entities should undergo external quality assurance audits, approved by NCFHE, at least once every five years.

The main lines of inquiry for this EQA were:

- the consistency, effectiveness and impact of the IQA system of the UOM and how it fulfils the national Standards;
- the role of the Academic Programmes Quality and Resources Unit (APQRU);
- human resources issues: how staff are employed, deployed, inducted and supported;
- the integration of teaching with research, and the link between study and employment.

The EQA review is designed 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 UOM meets Standards 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 11; has surpassed the requirements of Standard 7; and requires improvements on Standards 1, 8, 9 and 10.

The panel has noted that a detailed QA system exists and is available on the entity's website and that a programme validation committee and relevant procedures are already in place for programmes to be reviewed more regularly supported by APQRU. The panel noted that an extensive assessment

policy and procedure is also in place and that a number of human resources processes support the QA policy. A number of the quality assurance mechanisms were new and have been recently implemented. Others are still in the formative stages of development and require further monitoring and refinement. The international experts noted that the financial reporting meets the current legal requirements. Good governance would suggest the need for more articulated budget analysis and projections, and greater clarity and transparency in the figures which have been made available. The annual government budgeting system hinders UoM'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.

Overall, the academic staff and students are content with the available resources for teaching and learning, as well as the necessary infrastructure for Information and Communications Technology. The great efforts undertaken by UoM in the last few years to improve the infrastructure are evident in IT services (e.g., with the provision of the Virtual Learning Environment, the excellent equipment for video lectures that connects the campus of Gozo with Malta). Similarly, in the library (the manifold instruments for online research, bibliographical consultancy, the bibliographic management software RefWorks as well as the very expensive packages of e- journals) are appreciated by staff and students.

The international expert panel has put forward a number of recommendations for each Standard. These recommendations are meant to enhance further good practice and improve the standards already in place.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The report recommends that the provider focuses mainly on:

- Developing and disseminating further a more holistic QA system which would include a review mechanism, as well as making available more resources for QA procedures to be more fully implemented in faculties and entities.
- Directing resources at APQRU and having focal point persons in faculties and institutes in order to strengthen the quality culture.
- Having a more stable and sustainable financial environment and to better align budgeting per faculty/institute with a uniform budget process for allocating resources.
- Ensuring enough resources are dedicated to programme review and a more systemic and standardised approach is adopted which includes more than one external expert and involved external stakeholders.
- Refining the workload calculation formula in order to stimulate more self-study based teaching methods.
- Developing a more consistent policy and processes for feedback on assessment, assessment criteria for each task and the use of the Turnitin software.
- Standardising and completing description of programmes available online(including learning outcomes, assessment and teaching methods); installing a programme coordinator in all faculties/institutes to supervise programme quality; reviewing programmes more consistently; setting up automatic procedures to collect, monitor and manage information study progression;
- Developing transparent and effective procedures to recognise and validate prior learning.
- Establishing a professional development support unit; more formal processes for staff review and development as well as establish a process for dissemination outcomes of the end of study unit evaluation and data on student withdrawal.

CONCLUSIONS: FOLLOW UP

The Board has taken note of the above recommendations. It notes with approval that the Commission is already in receipt of information that the UOM has taken up some of the recommendations and that improvements have already been made or are in hand.

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

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