

**Quality Review
of the
Further Education Training and Awards Council**

FINAL REPORT of Expert Panel

November 2007

Quality review of the performance by the Further Education Training and
Awards Council of its functions

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

- 1 The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI, hereafter referred to as the 'Authority') appointed a Panel Chaired by Mr Jim Flanagan, consultant and former Director of the Irish Agriculture and Food Development Authority, Teagasc, to review the performance of the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC, hereafter referred to as the 'Council') with particular reference to its principal statutory functions as contained in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 and taking into account the objectives established by the Council. The Panel was also asked to consider the processes of the executive of the Council for performing such functions. In addition, the Panel was asked to benchmark the extent to which, in performing these functions, the Council complied with the Common Quality Assurance Framework for European vocational education and training.

Review process

- 2 The Panel Chair and Independent Secretary held a planning meeting with the Chief Executive and representatives of the Authority and Council respectively in the offices of the Council on 23 August 2007. Panel members subsequently attended a briefing organised by, and held in the offices of, the Authority on 11 September 2007. (One Panel member joined the briefing by video conference link). The Chief Executive and representatives of the Authority and the Council provided briefings on their respective organisations as did the Chair of the European Network on Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training, Barbara Kelly, Director of Awards and Standards in the Council. Following this, the Panel agreed a programme of on-site meetings involving some 80 people including: the Chairman and members of FETAC's governing body, the Council's Chief Executive and a number of Council staff; representatives of a range of providers offering, and learners undertaking, Council awards; representatives of other stakeholders, including the Authority, the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC); representatives of employer, union, and higher education organisations and professional bodies; and (via teleconference link) European stakeholders. These meetings were held in the offices of the Council between 1 and 3 October 2007.

Evidence

- 3 A key document considered by the Panel was the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) prepared by the Council. This was made available to all Panel members in advance of their initial briefing meeting. The on-site visit provided oral evidence for the Panel and enabled it to validate, or otherwise, the views of the Council as expressed in the SER. In addition, the Council provided documentation in support of its SER and additional documentation in response to requests by the Panel before and during its on-site visit.

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Conclusions

- 4 The Panel acknowledges the significant progress made by the Council since its establishment and, in the light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, concluded that:
- the Further Education and Training Awards Council has performed all its principal statutory functions satisfactorily in a complex environment taking into account the objectives established by the Council for performing these functions;
 - the Council's internal processes reflect best practice, are considered and are appropriate;
 - in the performance of its relevant functions, the Council complies with the Common Quality Assurance Framework for European vocational education and training.

Commendations

- 5 The Panel wishes to commend the Council on:
- i. developing the FETAC 'brand' [paragraph 2.6];
 - ii. maintaining appropriate continuity with previous awarding arrangements in the early years of its existence [2.6 & 2.28];
 - iii. establishing quality assurance as a foundation for making awards in further and vocational education in Ireland [2.20];
 - iv. establishing a reputation as an organisation committed to promoting quality, securing and maintaining standards and setting appropriate national benchmarks [2.56];
 - v. the consultative approach adopted by it in discharging its functions and objectives [2.56];
 - vi. its significant role in facilitating change within the further education sector in Ireland and in contributing to the wider process of national education and training development [2.56];
 - vii. its learner-centred focus [3.6];
 - viii. the accessibility and approachability of its staff [3.6];
 - ix. its generally good relations with providers [3.6]; and
 - x. the commitment and leadership that it has demonstrated in relation to the development of vocational education and training in Europe, particularly in respect of the quality assurance arrangements underpinning such education and training [4.10].

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Recommendations

- 6 Based on discussions during its on-site visit, the Panel concurs with the Council's own analysis and summary of the most significant issues raised by stakeholders during the Council's consultation with stakeholders which preceded the Panel's review process. These issues, taken from Sections 2 and 6 of the SER are listed below.
 - i. The need for a comprehensive suite of awards to meet the needs of learners, providers and social and economic needs.
 - ii. FETAC's capacity to meet the demand for new awards.
 - iii. The recognition of FETAC awards as awards with status and value, in particular with employer and industry groups.
 - iv. The full implementation of all FETAC functions and the challenge of achieving this through partnership with others.
 - v. The need for a system of assessment and certification which supports diverse modes of learning.

- 7 Arising from these issues, the Panel recommends that the Council:
 - i. simplifies and streamlines as much as possible its procedures for renewing existing, and approving new, awards [paragraph 2.8];
 - ii. gives priority to completing the development of standards for awards [2.11];
 - iii. takes into account more prominently the diversity of providers in giving help and support to providers seeking to comply with Council's requirements [2.21];
 - iv. considers ways in which the Council might improve its engagement with industry, and advance workplace learning in the context of the National Skills Strategy [2.21];
 - v. the further development of a system of assessment and certification that supports diverse modes of learning [2.36];
 - vi. considers ways in which non-FETAC awards may be used more effectively to meet the demand for awards in the short-term and considers how it might bring such awards within the Framework to aid learner progression [2.42];
 - vii. works with HETAC to resolve the continuing confusion and ambiguity around awards at Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications and in promoting greater understanding of the rationale underpinning the two award types[2.48];

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- viii. in consultation with NQAI, takes the initiative in commencing discussions with relevant stakeholders to explore the options for, and implications of, delegation to make further education and training awards provided for under Section 19 of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 [2.54];
 - ix. speeds up the pace at which it implements its policies, consistent with the maintenance of appropriate standards [2.57];
 - x. pursues issues of common interest between itself, the Authority and HETAC in areas such as, for example, quality assurance, programme design, data collection and analysis, and research [2.57];
 - xi. produces documentation for public consumption in a more user-friendly language and format in general and for specific target groups where necessary and feasible [3.6];
 - xii. considers, as a matter of urgency, providing a Certificate to each learner as soon as possible after successful completion of a programme leading to a Council award [3.17].
- 8 As it plans for the future, in particular as it finalises its second Strategic Plan, FETAC will, no doubt, wish to take into account the conclusions of the Panel, in particular the above recommendations which the Panel believes are of direct relevance to the issues and challenges identified by FETAC in the final chapter of its SER.

Acknowledgements

The Review Panel wishes to place on record its gratitude to the officers and staff of the Council and the Authority for the professional, practical and personal support given to Panel members in preparing them for the review and during their on-site visit, and to the Chair and members of the Council's Board who met the Panel. In particular, the Panel is most appreciative of the information and insights provided during the initial briefing; the work done by Council staff to ensure the availability of people to meet the Panel during its on-site visit; the documentary evidence provided by Council staff; and the logistical support provided by both Council and Authority staff. The Panel would also like to thank all those who met the Panel during the on-site visit; their input was invaluable.

Jim Flanagan
Review Panel Chairman
November 2007

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PART ONE Background

Introduction

- 1.1 The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) appointed a Panel Chaired by Mr Jim Flanagan, consultant and former Director of the Irish Agriculture and Food Development Authority, Teagasc, to review the performance of the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) with particular reference to its principal statutory functions as contained in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 and taking into account the objectives established by the Council. The Panel was also asked to consider the processes of the executive of the Council for performing such functions. In addition, the Panel was asked to benchmark the extent to which, in performing these functions, the Council complied with the Common Quality Assurance Framework for European vocational education and training. The Panel's full Terms of Reference and membership are given in Appendix 1.

Review process

- 1.2 The Panel Chair and Independent Secretary held a planning meeting with the Chief Executive and representatives of the Authority and Council respectively in the offices of the Council on 23 August 2007. Panel members subsequently attended a briefing organised by, and held in the offices of, the Authority on 11 September 2007. (One Panel member joined the briefing by video conference link). The Chief Executive and representatives of the Authority and the Council provided briefings on their respective organisations as did the Chair of the European Network on Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training, Barbara Kelly, Director of Awards and Standards in the Council. Following this, the Panel agreed a programme of on-site meetings involving some 80 people including: the Chairman and members of the Council, the Council's Chief Executive and a number of Council staff; representatives of a range of providers offering, and learners undertaking, Council awards; representatives of other stakeholders, including the Authority, the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC); representatives of employer, union, and higher education organisations and professional bodies; and (via teleconference link) European stakeholders. These meetings were held in the offices of the Council between 1 and 3 October 2007. The programme for the on-site visit 30 September to 3 October 2007 is given in Appendix 2.

Evidence

- 1.3 A key document considered by the Panel was the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) prepared by the Council. This was made available to all Panel members in advance of their initial briefing meeting. The on-site visit provided oral evidence for the Panel and enabled it to validate, or otherwise, the views of the Council as expressed in the SER. In addition, the Council provided documentation in support of its SER and additional documentation in response to requests by the Panel before and during its

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on-site visit. A summary of the key documentary evidence consulted by the Panel is given in Appendix 3.

Context

The Irish education system [Note 1]

- 1.4 The Irish education system is sub-divided into four main sections: primary education (first level), post-primary education (second level), further education and higher education (includes enrolments at second and third level). Primary education is typically eight years in duration. This is followed by five or six years of post-primary education. Post-primary education consists of a three-year junior cycle leading to the Junior Certificate examination followed by a two- or three-year senior cycle programme leading to the Leaving Certificate examination. Full-time education in Ireland is compulsory for children between the ages of 6 and 16 or until they have completed the first three years of the junior cycle at post-primary level. A summary of enrolments at different levels in the Irish education system is given in Table 1 below.

Table 1: *Enrolments in the Irish education system in 2004-2005*

Level	Full-Time enrolments in 2004-2005
First level	455,782
Second level	*339,128
Third level	[Note 2] *143,546

Source: *Central Statistics Office*

* These figures include some learners enrolled on further education and training courses. See paragraph 1.5

- 1.5 Education and training which occurs alongside and after second-level schooling but which is not part of the higher education and training system is known as further education and training. Further education and training includes post-leaving certificate courses, craft courses, foundation courses and part-time courses meriting credit which may also be carried towards completing awards. Further education and training courses are run in both public and privately funded institutions and centres.

National Framework of Qualifications [Note 3]

- 1.6 The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was introduced in 2003. It provides a single national framework within which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other and in a way which defines the relationship between all education and training awards. The structure of the Framework is based on the ten levels outlined in Table 2 below. Each level has a level indicator which is a broad description of the learning outcomes at that level in terms of eight sub-strands of knowledge, skill and competence. At each level there are one or more award types, an award type being a class of named awards which share common features and level. The NQAI has overall responsibility for setting and developing level indicators and award type descriptors within the Framework. It is the responsibility of various awarding bodies, namely the State Examinations

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Commission, FETAC, HETAC, the Dublin Institute of Technology, the universities and various professional bodies, to develop the named awards.

Table 2: The National Framework of Qualifications

Level	Awards
1	Level 1 Certificate
2	Level 2 Certificate
3	Level 3 Certificate and Junior Certificate
4	Level 4 Certificate and Leaving Certificate
5	Level 5 Certificate and Leaving Certificate
6	Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate
7	Ordinary Bachelor Degree
8	Honours Bachelor Degree and Higher Diploma
9	Master's Degree and Post-Graduate Diploma
10	Doctoral Degree

Further education and training providers in Ireland

- 1.7 FETAC is the national awarding body for further education and training in Ireland. In general, further education and training awards are placed across levels 1-6 on the NFO, although thus far further education and training awards have only been made by FETAC at levels 3-6 (See also paragraph 2.4). Programmes leading to FETAC awards are offered by a wide range of providers including Failte Ireland, FAS, Teagasc, Bord Iascaigh Mhara, Vocational Education Committees, adult and community education and training centres, a range of private providers and in the workplace. Brief details of the activities and responsibilities of these and other providers and stakeholders are given in **Appendix 4**.

Further education training awards [Note 4]

- 1.8 The majority of the courses provided by these bodies are accredited by FETAC. The types of awards available are described below.
- A **certificate** is a major award and is the principal class of award made at each level. A major award will prepare learners for employment, participation in community and access to higher levels of education and training.
 - A **component certificate** is a minor award derived from, and must link to, at least one major award. Achievement of a minor award provides recognition of learning that has relevance in its own right.
 - A **specific purpose (special purpose)** award is made for specific relatively narrow purposes. It does not have to link to a major award.
 - A **supplemental award** is an award to recognise learning which involves updating/up-skilling and/or continuing education and training with specific regard to occupations

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- 1.9 In 2002, the first full year of FETAC operations, 68,292 awards were made by FETAC. This had risen to 130,226 by 2006, an increase of 191%. Table 3 below summarises the awards made by FETAC in 2006.

Table 3: *FETAC awards in 2006*

Type of award	No of awards	%	No of candidates
Major	26,299	20.2	24,515
Minor	75,703	58.1	65,521
Specific purpose	28,028	21.5	24,777
Supplemental	196	0.2	191
Total	130,226	100.0	111,099*

Source: *FETAC*

* *The total number of candidates does not sum up as some candidates can gain awards in more than one award type*

- 1.10 Table 4 below analyses FETAC awards in 2006 by level in the NFO.

Table 4: *FETAC awards in 2006 by level in the NFO*

Level of award	No of awards	%
3	37,591	19.8
4	27,143	14.3
5	109,961	58.0
6	14,998	7.9
Total	130,226	100.0

Source: *FETAC*

FETAC's statutory functions

- 1.11 FETAC was established in June 2001 under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999. Its remit was to become the single national awarding body for the further education and training sector in Ireland. In addition to unifying the awarding function of the sector, this role involves the determination of standards, promotion of awards and monitoring the quality of programmes and assessment. Sections 12 to 20 of the Act which summarise the statutory responsibilities and functions of FETAC are reproduced as **Appendix 5**.

- 1.12 Sections 12 to 20 of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 make provision for:

- the establishment of a Council (Section 12)
- the membership of the Council (Section 13)
- the functions of the Council (Section 14)
- the validation of programmes by the Council (15)
- the withdrawal of validation by the Council (Section 16)
- appeals to the NQAI against refusal or withdrawal of validation (Section 17)
- quality assurance (Section 18)

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- delegation of authority to make awards (Section 19)
- review and withdrawal of delegated authority (Section 20)

FETAC's mission

1.13 The mission of FETAC, as outlined in its Strategic Plan 2003-2006 (page 10), is to make quality assured awards to learners that:

- are in accordance with national standards within the national framework;
- create opportunities for learners in further education and training to have their achievement recognised; and
- provide systematic progression pathways.

1.14 FETAC's Strategic Plan 2003-2006 sought to give effect to the functions assigned to it under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 by adopting five strategic objectives. These are reproduced below.

- To prioritise and cater for learners' needs by providing further education and training awards that are accessible, relevant, of high quality and status and have national and international currency.
- To work pro-actively with providers of further education and training to develop, agree and implement policies and systems to fulfil FETAC's functions.
- To build and continuously improve the quality of FETAC awards and to promote widespread awareness of this quality among stakeholders in further education and training.
- To enhance the status, recognition and currency of FETAC awards nationally and internationally.
- To build FETAC's capacity as an organisation so that it achieves its mission and vision and delivers a comprehensive and effective service to its stakeholders.

FETAC and the Common Quality Assurance Framework for European vocational education and training

1.15 In May 2004, under the Irish Presidency, the Education Council (of EU ministers) endorsed the principles and approach of the Common Quality Assurance Framework (CQAF) for European vocational education and training. The CQAF constitutes a common and systematic approach to quality assurance to help policy makers and practitioners share best practice and improve quality systems. The Education Council invited member states and the Commission, within their respective competencies to:

- promote the CQAF on a voluntary basis and, together with relevant stakeholders, introduce practical initiatives;
- encourage coordination of activities at a national and regional level to ensure overall coherence; and
- promote cooperative and voluntary networks on an experimental basis, to enable the trans-national exchange of best practice.

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- 1.16 The Framework has four key elements listed below.
- An appropriate model to facilitate planning, evaluation and review of systems at the appropriate levels in member states.
 - An appropriate methodology for review of systems, for example self-assessment, to enable member states at the appropriate level to be self-critical and strive for continued improvements.
 - Monitoring as appropriate at national or regional level, possibly combined with voluntary peer review.
 - Measurement tools developed at national or regional level to facilitate member states to monitor and evaluate their own systems.
- 1.17 The Panel was asked to benchmark the extent to which, in performing its statutory functions, the Council complied with the CQAF. The Panel's consideration of this element of its Terms of Reference is summarised in Part Four of this report.

FETAC, HETAC and the NQAI

- 1.18 An evaluation of the work of FETAC cannot be undertaken in isolation from the roles and work of HETAC and the NQAI, both of which, like FETAC, were established under the provisions of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. The NQAI's principal tasks under the Act are to:
- establish and enable the implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications;
 - enable improved arrangements for access, transfer and progression for learners;
 - facilitate the recognition of international awards; and
 - promote the further and higher education and training awards of FETAC and HETAC.
- 1.19 HETAC's main functions under the Act may be summarised as including:
- making and promoting awards;
 - recognising other awards;
 - determining standards in higher education and training institutions;
 - validating programmes; and
 - assuring the quality of programmes leading to a HETAC award.
- 1.20 There is regular, informal contact between the chief executives and staff respectively of the three organisations. The Panel was given to understand that active consideration is also being given to re-instating the formal tripartite meetings between the executives of the three organisations which had previously taken place on a regular basis.

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PART TWO Statutory functions

Introduction

2.1 FETAC's Self-Evaluation report summarised its main functions under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 as covering the following areas of activity:

- awards and standards;
- quality assurance;
- programme registration and validation;
- assessment;
- recognition of other awards;
- access, transfer and progression;
- the recognition of prior learning; and
- delegation of authority.

Part Two of this report considers the work of FETAC under each of the above areas of activity in turn. Where appropriate, reference is also made to FETAC's five strategic objectives as summarised in paragraph 1.14.

Awards

Legacy awards

2.2 On its establishment in June 2001, FETAC adopted the processes and procedures of the former awarding bodies, namely NCVA, NCEA, An Foras (FAS), the National Tourism Certification Board and Teagasc, for which a provisional transition period of five years was provided in Section 12 (3) and (4) of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. This transition period was extended with effect from September 2005, following consultation with the NQAI, enabling FETAC to use, '... to a decreasing extent as much as it considers necessary ...' the processes and procedures of the former awarding bodies '... until June 2006 ...'. The Panel was given to understand, however, that this arrangement, and presumably the formal transition period, is still in place. Since its establishment to the end of 2006, FETAC has made 536,425 awards in total.

Classification of awards

2.3 During 2005, FETAC commenced a process of classifying all placed awards as major, minor, special purpose or supplemental awards. (See paragraph 1.8 for a description of these awards) and from July 2006, all new awards have been issued according to this new classification. There are now 2,222 named awards, including over 200 major awards and over 1,800 minor awards and all FETAC awards are located within the NQF. All FETAC awards are issued with a designated level (number) and title: Certificate (major); Component (minor); Specific Purpose (special purpose) and Supplemental.

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New awards

- 2.4 In December 2005, FETAC published a new Common Awards System setting out the structure and features for the new awards. Over time all existing awards will be harmonised through the Common Awards System. In 2006 FETAC launched the first new awards developed through the Common Awards System at levels 1 and 2. These new awards are intended to provide access opportunities for learners to achieve a major award. FETAC will identify new award areas for development at all six levels of the framework under arrangements which were being developed at the time of the review in consultation with the former awarding bodies and other key stakeholders.

Promoting Awards

- 2.5 Since its establishment FETAC has sought to establish and promote the FETAC name, 'brand' and awards. This initially involved creating awareness of the FETAC name and subsequently an understanding of FETAC's role and functions based on an external communications strategy contained within FETAC's Strategic Plan 2003-2006. This strategy included press and outdoor media advertising and radio and television campaigns. FETAC's own research has suggested a significant increase both in brand and role awareness between 2003, when 16% of respondents said that they had heard of FETAC, compared with 53% by 2006. FETAC hosted two major events in 2005, a European conference entitled "*Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training: Building Sustainable European Co-Operation*" and the first Quality Assurance Agreement event. In addition, FETAC is actively involved in sponsorship of a range of relevant events. The FETAC website features prominently in all promotional material and publications.

Conclusions

- 2.6 Stakeholder feedback summarised in FETAC's SER acknowledged its success in creating an awareness of the FETAC brand, consistent with the fourth of its five Strategic Objectives (see paragraph 1.14). This was confirmed by many stakeholders to whom the Panel spoke and it **commends** FETAC on its success in this area. The Panel also **commends** FETAC on maintaining appropriate continuity with previous awarding arrangements in the early years of its existence, consistent with FETAC's strategic decision on its establishment to prioritise, for a transition period, continuity of service to learners over the longer-term objective of setting up new systems.
- 2.7 Stakeholders, nevertheless, acknowledged that it is important for FETAC to ensure that an appropriate range of awards is available, particularly in the services sector. More generally, the views of stakeholders to whom the Panel spoke concurred with FETAC's own analysis of stakeholder feedback concerning the need for a more comprehensive suite of awards to meet the needs of learners, providers and social economic needs.
- 2.8 The scale of the challenge facing FETAC is demonstrated by FETAC's own estimate that of approximately 300,000 learners per annum in the further education and training sector, approximately 100,000 only are receiving FETAC awards each year. There is clearly a significant opportunity, then, for FETAC to develop and grow the number and range of awards it makes in

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the future, in addition to the requirements of the National Skills Strategy, and to facilitate this the Panel **recommends** that FETAC simplifies and streamlines as much as possible its procedures for renewing existing, and approving new awards as one way of encouraging the development of relevant awards.

Standards

2.9 Since its establishment, as already noted, FETAC has determined standards through the processes and procedures of a number of former awarding bodies. To assist and inform the development of its own policy for determining standards FETAC commenced a formal consultation phase in 2004. A Standards Forum, representative of key stakeholders, was established in January 2004 to assist and advise the Council in the development of its policy. The outcome of this consultation was the policy, Determining Standards, agreed by the Council in 2005. That policy focuses on a strategic and planned approach to the development of awards and standards based on a partnership approach with involvement from key stakeholders. It provides for the establishment of:

- a Standards Advisory Board, representative of key national stakeholders, to quality assure the process of determining standards; and
- a number of Standards Development Groups to develop and review standards for awards at levels 1 to 6.

2.10 Guidelines for the Standards Advisory Board and Standards Development Groups and criteria for the development of new award standards were developed in 2006. The Advisory Board itself was established in March 2007 and the first standards development group in April 2007, in partnership with the Road Safety Authority to develop standards for a new award in 'Driving Instruction'. New Standards Development Groups, taking into account the requirements of the different occupational sectors, will be established in line with FETAC's awards plan.

Conclusions

2.11 Stakeholders to whom the Panel spoke confirmed the significant progress made by FETAC in consulting on, and establishing, a framework within which appropriate standards can be developed in a large and diverse sector of education and training consistent with the NFQ. In the light of the progress made thus far, the Panel **recommends** that FETAC now gives priority to completing the development of standards for awards.

2.12 Taking the development of both new awards and standards, the Panel concurs with FETAC's own analysis of stakeholder feedback and invites FETAC to consider, as it develops its new strategic plan, its capacity to meet the demand for new awards, especially against the background of the requirements of the National Skills Strategy, to which reference has already been made (see paragraph 2.8).

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Quality assurance

Providers

2.13 Following a consultation period of more than two years, FETAC published its provider quality assurance policy in June 2004. Under the policy any provider wishing to register with FETAC for the purpose of offering awards at levels 1 to 6 of the NQF must agree its quality assurance procedures with FETAC. This requirement applied to all new providers from the date of implementation of the policy in January 2005. Existing providers were required to have applied for agreement of their procedures before the end of 2006. The main points of the policy, set out in detail in a document entitled *Quality Assurance in Further Education and Training: Policy and Guidelines for Providers*, are summarised below.

- FETAC recognises the primary role of providers in the establishment and operation of quality assurance.
- All providers must demonstrate the capacity to quality assure their further education and training programmes. While providers' quality assurance systems will vary according to the context and scale of the provider, all must address the same aspects of provision.
- Agreement between FETAC and the provider on the provider's quality assurance procedures is a criterion for provider registration with FETAC.
- Registered providers can submit programmes for validation against new awards.
- FETAC will monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of a provider's quality assurance procedures and will review the agreement within a maximum period of five years.

2.14 Since the process of provider registration began in January 2005, approximately 700 providers, including 136 new providers, have applied to have their quality assurance procedures agreed with FETAC. Of these, almost 60% have agreed their procedures and are now registered providers; the remaining were in the final stages of evaluation at the time of the review. In total, these providers represent approximately 1,200 education and training institutions and centres.

Learners

2.15 FETAC published a policy on protection for learners in 2004. Under this policy, all providers are required to include with their quality assurance application their policy and where appropriate, procedures on protection for learners. This process enables providers either to identify programmes to which learners can transfer or appropriate financial arrangements for the return of fees should they cease provision. There are currently 29 registered providers (out of 700 providers - see previous paragraph) who have programmes on the protection for learner register and who have protection for learner arrangements in place for these programmes.

Monitoring

2.16 The national monitoring processes and systems of the former awarding bodies were adopted by FETAC on establishment and will continue in

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operation until full implementation of FETAC's own policies and procedures. These processes are generally centred on a two-stage approach of centre approval/registration and external examining/monitoring of assessment. In developing its policy on monitoring, FETAC had regard to the existing systems of the former awarding bodies. Following a consultation process FETAC published a policy on monitoring in March 2006 to be implemented with effect from Autumn 2007. The policy will apply to all registered providers and programmes leading to awards at levels 1 to 6. FETAC will monitor providers and their programmes and services and produce an annual monitoring plan identifying priorities in terms of provider types, programmes and awards. The initial stage of monitoring will focus on providers' quality assurance and the attainment of national standards. When new programmes have been validated by FETAC, monitoring will include specific reference to programmes. At the time of the Review, FETAC was in the process of developing tools and procedures for monitoring. These were being tested through a pilot project with a small number of providers. The experience gained from this pilot will inform the full implementation of the policy.

- 2.17 Providers are required to evaluate the programmes and services they offer to learners to identify strengths and areas for improvement. Action plans must then be put in place and progress against plans continuously monitored. These self-evaluation processes must be initiated within one year of achieving a quality assurance agreement with FETAC. The first self-evaluation reports and improvement plans were received by FETAC in late 2006 and by May 2007, a total of 36 such reports had been received and were being evaluated at the time of the Review.
- 2.18 To-date, FETAC has monitored and evaluated the quality of programmes through the continued operation of the processes of the former awarding bodies. Monitoring under the new policy has now commenced with the receipt of self-evaluation reports from providers who were the first to register with FETAC. Full implementation of the monitoring policy will commence in 2008 following an evaluation of an initial pilot project. Through the implementation of these functions FETAC has provided a benchmark for quality assurance in the sector and a large number of providers are now recognised as operating under a national quality assurance framework.

Conclusions

- 2.19 Stakeholders acknowledged, both in the SER and in meetings with the Panel, that the processes for agreeing quality assurance were rigorous, comprehensive, transparent and elaborate. The focus on self-evaluation by providers was particularly welcomed. Stakeholders also highlighted their resource implications. Whilst acknowledging the demands and challenges on providers, FETAC claimed that placing the primary responsibility for maintaining quality assurance on providers, allied with the requirement for all current providers to register with FETAC, had generated a new and concentrated focus on quality assurance across the further education and training sector.

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- 2.20 The Panel **commends** FETAC on establishing quality assurance as a foundation for making awards in further and vocational education in Ireland, in line with the third of its five Strategic Objectives (see paragraph 1.14).
- 2.21 Both FETAC and the Panel recognise that work continues to be required to ensure the recognition of FETAC awards as awards with status and value, in particular with employer and industry groups. As it tackles this issue, the Panel **recommends** that FETAC:
- takes into account more prominently the diversity of providers in giving help and support to providers seeking to comply with Council's requirements; and
 - considers ways in which the Council might improve its engagement with industry, and advance workplace learning in the context of the National Skills Strategy.

Programme registration and validation

- 2.22 Validation is the process through which FETAC evaluates a programme of education and training. It ensures that learners on the programme will have the opportunity to reach the standards for the award to which the programme is designed to lead. Since 2001, programmes leading to awards at levels 3 to 6 were validated by FETAC through the processes and procedures of the former awarding bodies.
- 2.23 The registration of programmes applies to all new and existing providers offering programmes leading to FETAC awards at levels 3 to 6 on the framework. An online electronic programme registration system was opened in March 2006. Data was evaluated against a broad set of criteria relating to:
- compliance with award requirements;
 - title issues; and
 - duration issues.
- 2.24 In 2006, over 700 centres from the further education sector registered almost 5,000 programmes with FETAC, 2,000 of which led to a major award and 2,800 to one or more minor awards. FETAC is working with FÁS, Fáilte Ireland and Teagasc with a view to including their respective programmes on the FETAC Register. The registration of programmes will continue until new programmes are developed for the new awards under the Common Awards System (see paragraph 2.4). These new programmes will be validated in accordance with the Council's policy of March 2006.
- 2.25 In March 2006, following consultation and a validation test phase, the FETAC Council agreed a policy on programme validation. This policy applies to programmes leading to FETAC awards developed within the Common Awards System. The policy is intended to ensure that all programmes offered by registered providers leading to FETAC awards will provide learners with appropriate opportunities to reach the standards for the award. FETAC will require providers to submit programmes for validation before commencement of programme delivery.

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- 2.26 The policy on programme validation provides for the establishment of Programme Approval Agreements with organisations such as higher education institutes, VECs, FÁS, Fáilte Ireland, Teagasc and BIM covering programme design, development, evaluation and approval. FETAC will ensure through Programme Approval Agreements that these organisations have structures, processes and procedures in place for the evaluation and approval of programmes in accordance with FETAC guidelines and criteria. It is intended to have these agreements in place by the end of 2007.
- 2.27 In the coming years, as new awards are introduced and as existing awards are replaced across levels 1 to 6, providers will be required to have their programmes leading to these new awards validated. FETAC will manage this process thus ensuring that future programmes will be developed and evaluated against a common set of standards and criteria. FETAC plans that programme validation will continue to be implemented on a phased basis, in parallel with the awards plan so as to ensure a smooth and gradual transition for providers.

Conclusions

- 2.28 FETAC relied on the processes of the former awarding bodies in this area (see also paragraph 2.2) which enabled a smooth transition and a continued service to learners, an approach for which the Panel **commends** the Council (see also paragraph 2.6). The registration of programmes established, for the first time, a central, national database for further education and training programmes which, given the diversity in provision and the number and range of programmes which existed across the five former awarding bodies, was a significant achievement.
- 2.29 It is acknowledged, however, that the validation process requires significant resources, including support and training. The community and voluntary sector, in particular, question the relevance of some of these processes for them. FETAC representatives confirmed to the Panel the Council's view that it is not responsible under the provisions of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999, nor does it have the resources to provide the support and training to which its policies and requirements can sometimes give rise. The Panel was, therefore, encouraged to hear that additional resources are being considered in connection with Level 5 and 6 awards which could have a bearing on FETAC's work, and that discussions are underway on this matter between the FE Support Service of the DES, IVEA and FETAC. Additional resources were also made available to FETAC by the NQAI during the 2006-2007 financial year to upgrade its IT systems to enable it to cope with the increasing demands being placed on it and to enable it to move away from reliance on the IT systems that it inherited from one of the former awarding bodies.

Assessment

- 2.30 The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 identifies providers as being responsible for the fair and consistent assessment of learners. FETAC's role in this is to ensure that providers establish procedures which ensure the fair and consistent assessment of learners. From the outset,

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FETAC adopted all the processes and procedures of the former awarding bodies in relation to assessment and intends that these processes and systems should continue until the full implementation of FETAC's own assessment policy in 2008.

- 2.31 FETAC's policy on quality assuring assessment was agreed by its Council in March 2006 following advice from an expert group established by FETAC on the development of a national policy on assessment and consultation on the document prepared by that Group. This policy identifies a framework for the quality assurance of assessment based on the following characteristics:
- internal assessment procedures;
 - standards based and criterion referenced assessment;
 - guidelines for assessors and verifiers;
 - internal monitoring/verification procedures; and
 - independent external verification/examining procedures.
- 2.32 FETAC guidelines to assist providers in the development and implementation of procedures for fair and consistent assessment were made available in May 2007. These guidelines set out the role and responsibility of the provider with regard to quality assuring all aspects of their assessment practice.
- 2.33 By 2008, all registered providers will be required to have in place quality assured assessment procedures to oversee, verify and authenticate their assessment procedures. FETAC will monitor providers' activities on an ongoing basis, including those relating to assessment, to ensure consistent application of the requirements and to safeguard the integrity of FETAC awards.
- 2.34 FETAC also contributed to a National Qualifications Authority of Ireland document, *National and International Practices and Trends in Classification or Grading of Awards in Further and Higher Education and Training*. This research contributed to FETAC's policy on grading which was agreed by its Council in December 2005.

Conclusions

- 2.35 Responses to FETAC's survey of providers suggest that a significant majority of providers (80%) believe that FETAC has ensured that providers have established procedures for assessment of learners, within existing processes, that are fair and consistent. As in other areas of FETAC's work, there continue to be concerns regarding the resource implications of FETAC's assessment policies.
- 2.36 Some stakeholders argued that the various assessment methodologies used are focused on traditional forms of provision and do not take sufficiently into account the learner in the workplace. The Panel **recommends** the further development of a system of assessment and certification that supports diverse modes of learning.

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Recognition of other awards

- 2.37 In November 2003, following a period of consultation, FETAC published a policy outlining the way in which it intended to discharge its responsibilities under Section 14 (1)c of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 consistent also with the obligations placed on all governments of the European Union by, inter alia, the general requirements of the Treaty of Rome (1958), by the Lisbon Convention (1997) covering the recognition of higher education qualifications and by the Copenhagen Declaration (2002) which covers vocational education and training.
- 2.38 The objective of FETAC's recognition policy is to enable learners to gain recognition for previous learning attested to by the award they hold. The policy established two processes for award recognition intended to enable:
- access to employment or learning opportunities; and
 - the transfer of previously certified learning to gain credit towards a FETAC award.

FETAC established the process relating to access in 2004 and the process relating to transfer in 2005.

- 2.39 The implementation of the two processes enables award holders to apply for formal recognition from FETAC of their award. Over 2,000 learners, who hold awards through other awarding systems, have their learning recognised by FETAC every year. FETAC also enables learners to transfer from one provider to another, usually by granting exemptions from the assessment process.
- 2.40 In addition, FETAC has a role in promoting the recognition of its own awards internationally. One of the means of achieving this is through the issue of EUROPASS certificate supplements for FETAC major awards. Certificate Supplements were initially targeted at high-uptake awards. At the time of the review, FETAC was developing further certificate supplements for the new level 1 and 2 awards and for awards at levels 3 to 6.
- 2.41 Although there was support from stakeholders for FETAC initiatives in this area, the recognition of 'vendor-specific' awards - i.e. awards made by organisations and/or companies to learners and/or employees who successfully complete company or job-specific training schemes - was raised.

Conclusions

- 2.42 FETAC itself acknowledges that, whilst progress has been made in this area, its own procedures need to be refined to ensure ease of use and to provide faster response times to meet the increasing demands from, inter alia, foreign nationals and international employees. The recognition and incorporation within the NFQ of UK-based qualifications, in particular those of City and Guilds, was raised by a number of those to whom the Panel spoke and the Panel welcomes the fact that, according to its SER, FETAC is in the process of finalising a policy aligning FETAC awards with those in Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales and is working with NQAI,

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HETAC and other national awarding bodies in progressing this. The Panel **recommends** that FETAC considers ways in which non-FETAC awards may be used more effectively to meet the demand for awards in the short-term and considers how it might bring such awards within the Framework to aid learner progression.

Access, transfer and progression

- 2.43 FETAC's Strategic Plan for 2003-2006 sought to embed access, transfer and progression features into its various functions and included particular objectives for meeting learner needs and promoting awards. This was reinforced by a policy on access, transfer and progression agreed by FETAC in June 2004. This policy considered both the consolidation of existing pathways, appropriate to the purpose of the existing legacy awards, and the development of an infrastructure that would support access, transfer and progression arrangements.
- 2.44 The introduction of new awards at levels 1 and 2 in 2006 provided access to the NFO for a range of learners who formerly had been excluded from having their learning recognised. These awards were designed specifically with transfer and progression opportunities in mind.
- 2.45 FETAC continues to co-ordinate the Higher Education Links Scheme ensuring progression to other programmes of education and training for holders of particular FETAC awards at levels 5 and 6. This scheme has continued to expand since its inception over a decade ago. The current number of participating institutions, including universities, is 36 compared with 21 in 2002. During 2005 FETAC and the Institutes of Technology initiated the Pilot Scheme intended to facilitate progression to courses leading to Higher Certificate (level 6), Ordinary Degree (level 7) and Honours Degree (level 8) for the holder of any FETAC (NCVA) level 5 or 6 award. Both of these schemes are operated through the Central Applications Office.

Conclusions

- 2.46 Stakeholder feedback quoted in the SER was positive with regard to the provision of access to awards at levels 1 and 2 in the framework, but suggested that much remains to be done to facilitate access, transfer and progression at higher levels, for example, access to and progression from a Craft Certificate at level 6 and the provision of progression opportunities from other awards which originated in FÁS. The Higher Education Links Scheme and the associated pilot scheme are viewed favourably by stakeholders, including the suggestion that it be extended to all FETAC awards.
- 2.47 The completion of the placement of legacy awards in 2004 (see paragraph 2.2) and the subsequent classification of awards in 2005 (see paragraph 2.3) undoubtedly provided a framework for improving transfer and progression routes in connection with existing awards. It supported one of the key objectives for establishing the NFO, namely to enable awards to be compared through the provision of information. The Common Awards System will in future ensure that major awards will facilitate the transfer of knowledge, skill and competence across major awards. By addressing this

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function FETAC has improved access for learners previously outside the NFQ; improved the mobility of learners between NFQ levels and, to an extent, at the boundaries between further and higher education and training; and made progress in embedding the principles of access, transfer and progression in providers' policies and procedures. FETAC acknowledges that there is, nevertheless, much work still to be done in this area.

- 2.48 In taking this forward, the Panel **recommends** that FETAC works with HETAC to resolve the continuing confusion and ambiguity around awards at Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications and in promoting greater understanding of the rationale underpinning the two award types, a point raised by a number of those to whom the Panel spoke.

The recognition of prior learning

- 2.49 In its SER FETAC acknowledges that the recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a significant mechanism to help improve access, transfer and progression for learners and promote lifelong learning. In late 2004, the NOAI convened an advisory group to devise a set of national principles for RPL in further and higher education and training in order to underpin the introduction of policy and procedures for RPL in Ireland. FETAC, HETAC and other stakeholders in further and higher education were represented on this advisory group. In June 2005, on the basis of its advice, NOAI agreed principles and operational guidelines for RPL in further and higher education and training.
- 2.50 Following consultation a policy on RPL was agreed by FETAC in 2005. The policy requires providers who register with FETAC to facilitate learners through RPL for access to programmes, credit or exemptions from requirements of a programme and access to full awards in so far as they can, subject to the availability of guidelines on RPL. Draft guidelines were devised and a project commenced in late 2005 with a group of providers with the objective of piloting the implementation of RPL in accordance with the FETAC policy and guidelines. An evaluation and review of the pilot was undertaken in March 2007.

Conclusions

- 2.51 Feedback quoted in the SER indicates that providers do not have a detailed understanding of how the process of RPL operates and that advice and support is required to raise the level of understanding. This finding was borne out in the Panel's discussions with a range of individuals and groups to whom it spoke. Sectors where RPL was thought to be likely to be of particular benefit included childcare, construction, hospitality and security where there is currently thought to be a particular focus on formal recognition for workers.
- 2.52 At present, a small number of providers only are equipped to implement effectively RPL procedures. What emerged from those to whom the Panel spoke was a perception that RPL was a speedier, 'fast-track' option for admitting learners onto programmes when, in fact, RPL is simply an alternative and possibly more resource-intensive and longer way of evaluating the suitability of a prospective learner for a particular programme or providing

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credit for learning completed. In the view of the Panel, much remains to be done on the part of FETAC in communicating the benefits of, and possible mechanisms for, RPL if it is to become an effective way of increasing opportunities for access to, and progression within further education and training for those without formal qualifications or for those with qualifications which could, if appropriately evaluated, provide exemptions for some elements of a programme leading to a FETAC award. This observation is not intended to conflict with FETAC's own view that, consistent with the general principle of subsidiarity adopted by it in its dealings with providers, the operation of RPL is the responsibility of providers.

Delegation of authority

- 2.53 The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 provides for the delegation by FETAC to make awards. Section 19 (1) states that '... An Foras, Cert or Teagasc may request the Council to delegate to it the authority to make further education and training awards ...'. The Panel was advised by FETAC that, to date, none of these bodies had formally requested the Council for delegated authority.
- 2.54 Whilst this may be the formal position, the Panel **recommends**, in the light of its discussions with representatives of the organisations referred to above, and more particularly in the light of the frequent references to the capacity of FETAC to respond speedily to the ever-increasing demands placed on it, that FETAC, in consultation with NQAI, takes the initiative in commencing discussions with relevant stakeholders to explore the options for, and implications of, delegation to make further education and training awards provided for under Section 19 of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999.

Summary and overall conclusions of Part Two

- 2.55 The first six years of FETAC's existence have been characterised by *continuity* with the procedures of the former awarding bodies; extensive *consultation* on the development of policies for, inter alia, the determination of standards, quality assurance, monitoring arrangements, programme validation, assessment, the recognition of awards and the recognition of prior learning; and concerns over FETAC's *capacity* to take on all the tasks for which it is responsible. Consistent with the first of its Strategic Objectives(see paragraph 1.14), FETAC's approach has been learner-centred and its relationships with providers have been based on the principles of partnership and subsidiarity.
- 2.56 It will be clear from the foregoing that much has been achieved by FETAC in the discharge of its statutory functions in the first six years of its existence; that there is widespread acknowledgment from a range of stakeholders, including learners and providers, of its achievements; and support for its future direction. In addition to those aspects already commended by the Panel, the Panel **commends** FETAC on:
- establishing a reputation as an organisation committed to promoting quality, securing and maintaining standards and setting appropriate

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national benchmarks, in line with the third of its Strategic Objectives (see paragraph 1.14);

- the consultative approach adopted by it in discharging its functions and objectives, consistent with the second of its Strategic Objectives; and
- its significant role in facilitating change within the further education and training sector in Ireland and in contributing to the wider process of national education and training development, the fourth of its Strategic Objectives.

2.57 It will also be clear, however, that much still remains to be done. FETAC itself acknowledges the view expressed by stakeholders that there is still a need for the full implementation of all FETAC functions and there continues to be the challenge of achieving this through partnership with others, a view with which the Panel concurs. In addition, and in the light of its own discussions with stakeholders, the Panel **recommends** that FETAC:

- speeds up the pace at which it implements its policies, consistent with the maintenance of appropriate standards; and
- pursues issues of common interest between itself, the Authority and HETAC in areas such as, for example, quality assurance, programme design, data collection and analysis, and research.

2.58 On the basis of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the Panel concluded that the Further Education and Training Awards Council has performed all its principal statutory functions satisfactorily in a complex environment taking into account the objectives established by the Council for performing these functions.

PART THREE
Internal processes

Introduction

3.1 FETAC's own evaluation of its organisational structures and processes focused on three main areas, namely:

- overarching principles and processes;
- governance and organisational processes; and
- business processes.

Part Three of the report will consider each in turn.

Overarching processes and principles

3.2 In its first Strategic Plan which covered the period 2003 to 2006, FETAC identified a number of principles and values which would underpin how it would approach its work. These involved:

- placing the learner at the centre of all developments;
- working in partnership with others; and
- promoting quality.

A learner-centred approach

3.3 In adopting a learner-centred approach FETAC undertook to underpin all its work with the needs of the learner. This has involved, for example, evaluating all proposed new policies against the needs of learners and has included learners in the process of policy development.

Working in partnership

3.4 This approach acknowledged the experience and expertise of others, especially that of the former awarding bodies, and involved stakeholders in policy development through, often extensive, consultation as noted in Part Two of this report. It was based on the principle of subsidiarity - i.e. locating responsibility for action with those best equipped to exercise that responsibility - and has involved, inter alia, drafting memoranda of agreement with key stakeholders to establish clear roles and responsibilities within each of the functional areas. Stakeholders to whom the Panel spoke confirmed the existence, purpose and usefulness of having the memoranda - some of which were still in draft form - which, the Panel clarified, built on rather than changed FETAC policies.

Promoting quality

3.5 As an organisation responsible for encouraging and evaluating a quality approach in others, FETAC acknowledged an obligation to demonstrate a similar approach in its own internal processes. To demonstrate this in a practical and public way FETAC developed an internal quality management

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system on the basis of which it sought and achieved the Quality Standard ISO9001 2000.

Conclusions

3.6 Stakeholders regard the learner-centred approach taken by FETAC, the first of its five Strategic Objectives (see paragraph 1.14) as a strength and the Panel **commends** FETAC on the way in which it has demonstrated its commitment to this key aspect of its functions and objectives both in this respect and in other ways noted in Part Two of this report. Stakeholders also praised the collaborative and consultative approach to its tasks adopted by FETAC, consistent with the second of its Strategic Objectives, although some were critical of the resource implications of implementing FETAC policies whilst, as already noted in Part Two of this report (see paragraph 2.57) others believed that during the next five-year period FETAC should speed up the pace of its consultation and implementation. Effective communication with stakeholders was seen as critical to successful partnership arrangements. In the light of comments from a number to whom the Panel spoke, it **commends**:

- the accessibility and approachability of FETAC staff; and
- FETAC's generally good relations with providers.

and **recommends** that FETAC produces documentation for public consumption in a more user-friendly language and format in general and for specific target groups where necessary and feasible.

Governance and organisational processes

The Council

3.7 Membership of the FETAC Council is prescribed in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 and includes representation from the social partners, the former awarding bodies, providers, learners and the two parent Departments (Education and Science, Enterprise, Trade and Employment). It is a corporate body and adopted the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies in November 2001. The first Council of FETAC held office from June 2001 to June 2006; a new Council was appointed in December 2006. The Council has established four Committees of Council to which authority is delegated on certain key policy and operational matters, and includes the Standards Advisory Board whose role is to quality assure FETAC's standards development process.

Staff

3.8 FETAC has 44 permanent members of staff who are responsible for delivering the processes of the Council. In order to meet specific skills needs and manage periods of peak operational activity, FETAC employs a number of staff on a temporary/contract basis. Staff are located in one of the eight sections listed below.

- Development
- Certification

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- Communications
- Corporate Services
- Human Resources
- Finance
- Quality Assurance Provider Registration (established in early 2005)
- IT

- 3.9 As more FETAC policies are implemented over the next few years, FETAC is planning to undertake an organisation review to ensure that it has an appropriate structure and skills. FETAC's current structure is shown at **Appendix 6**. The Senior Management Team meets each week; a cross-organisational group meets on a monthly basis; and there are regular meetings of the programme office steering group (project management) and meetings relating to FETAC's Quality Management System (QMS).
- 3.10 A Performance Management Development System (PMDS) was introduced in 2005 aimed at optimising each individual's contribution to the work of FETAC and it is through this System that the training and development needs of staff are identified. PMDS will be reviewed in November 2007 to ensure it is achieving its objectives. Staff to whom the Panel spoke confirmed and welcomed the availability of training and development opportunities within FETAC, particularly given its flat structure and, as a result, the relatively few opportunities for internal career progression or promotion available within FETAC. Staff were also positive about the organisation's flexible work arrangements and the initiatives undertaken by FETAC to implement a work/life balance.
- 3.11 FETAC introduced a project management approach in 2003 to help ensure the successful and timely implementation of its Strategic Plan 2003-2006. A portfolio of projects critical to the success of the plan was identified and project managers were nominated and trained and operated under the management of a Programme Office. A review of the Programme Office was undertaken in 2005. Amendments made to the process and documentation have improved the effectiveness of the Programme Office in supporting the implementation of the Strategic Plan. Some staff to whom the Panel spoke, however, seemed uncertain as to the composition and roles of some of these project groups. Others felt that there were still issues about competing resources.
- 3.12 Some stakeholders expressed concern with regard to FETAC's capacity to meet the challenges likely to be faced by FETAC in the next few years, a concern to which reference has been made already in this report.

Business Processes

- 3.13 Critical to the success of FETAC's establishment was its decision at the outset to take over the certification and results processing functions from the former awarding bodies and, on a gradual basis, to adapt them as appropriate. This has had implications not only for decisions on award standards and quality assurance arrangements, as noted in Part Two of this report, but also on FETAC's internal processing arrangements. These have involved a less than desirable mixture of paper-based and IT systems to

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deliver awards to learners reflecting the systems of certification and results processing used by the former awarding bodies.

- 3.14 The volume of awards made has increased from 30,000 in 2001 to approximately 130,000 in 2006. The frequency of certification has increased to meet the demand of key industry sectors, so that, for example, FETAC now issues over 2,000 certificates on a fortnightly basis to FÁS to meet the specific needs of the construction industry. This is in addition to the twice yearly major results processing requirements in June and December. A service desk was introduced in 2005 to provide dedicated support to providers for issues arising for providers particularly during the June and December assessments. Over 2,000 calls per month are handled by the service desk during these assessment periods.
- 3.15 The information and communications technology (ICT) environment is critical to FETAC's success, both in implementing its policies and providing the necessary services to the further education and training sector. Work has been undertaken since the establishment of FETAC to develop and enhance these systems to ensure the certification demands of the sector can be met. In addition to the certification processes, new business functions such as quality assurance, programme validation, standards development and related business requirements, including the provision of comprehensive statistical data, demand effective ICT systems. FETAC agreed an ICT Strategy and aligned it with its Strategic Plan in September 2004, the main priority of which is the development of a new Integrated ICT system. A feasibility study and detailed business requirements gathering has been completed and funding has recently been made available to enable the development of the integrated system to commence.
- 3.16 FETAC also provides a range of statistical information in relation to certification which is published on the FETAC website and made available to the NQAI and to the Department of Education and Science to meet reporting requirements in relation to the National Development Plan, UNESCO, OECD and EUROSTAT and data to Forfás for the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs.
- 3.17 The above developments, notwithstanding, a particular concern expressed by some learners and other stakeholders to whom the Panel spoke centred on delays in issuing FETAC certificates to learners. The Panel **recommends** that FETAC considers, as a matter of urgency, providing a certificate to each learner as soon as possible after successful completion of a programme leading to a Council award.
- 3.18 FETAC published a Customer Service Charter in September 2004. This included an action plan, staff training in customer service, surveys on the service requirements of stakeholders and the establishment of focus groups to provide detailed feedback on services. Stakeholder feedback obtained by FETAC has been positive and this was reinforced by the vast majority of those to whom the Panel spoke.

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Summary and overall conclusions of Part Three

- 3.19 FETAC's internal processes have placed the learner at the centre of all developments and emphasised working in partnership with others and promoting quality. These emphases have been favourably received by stakeholders. Its governance and organisational processes have been based on the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies and its organisational structure has evolved since its establishment. As more FETAC policies are implemented over the next few years, FETAC is planning to undertake an organisation review to ensure that it has an appropriate structure and skills. A Performance Management Development System (PMDS) was introduced in 2005 and its operation will be reviewed in November 2007. FETAC introduced a project management approach in 2003 and reviewed its operation in 2005. The significant increase in the volume of activity for which FETAC has been responsible has placed its ICT systems under pressure. It is hoped that the recent additional funding will alleviate this situation.
- 3.20 On the basis of its scrutiny of FETAC's SER, discussions with a range of external stakeholders and with a wide range of FETAC staff, the Panel concluded that the Council's internal processes reflect best practice, are considered and appropriate. The Panel also noted the planned reviews, to which reference has been made above, and the potential impact of the significant additional funding recently made available for ICT development.

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PART FOUR The Common Quality Assurance Framework

Introduction

4.1 As noted in paragraph 1.14, the Common Quality Assurance Framework (COAF) for European vocational education and training has four key elements. These are reproduced below.

- An appropriate model to facilitate planning, evaluation and review of systems at the appropriate levels in member states.
- An appropriate methodology for review of systems, for example self-assessment, to enable member states at the appropriate level to be self-critical and strive for continued improvements.
- Monitoring as appropriate at national or regional level possibly combined with voluntary peer review.
- Measurement tools developed at national or regional level to facilitate member states to monitor and evaluate their own systems.

4.2 FETAC's SER provided evidence of the way in which, and the extent to which, FETAC's general approach to, and procedures for, the quality assurance of vocational education and training complied with the Framework. What follows is a brief summary of the key points contained in the SER for each element of the COAF. A list of FETAC's key policies for quality assurance is given in Appendix 7. Much of the evidence of its compliance has been quoted in Parts Two and Three of this report covering, respectively, FETAC's discharge of its statutory functions and its own internal processes. Each element of the COAF involves FETAC's own internal processes and those required of providers.

Element 1: An appropriate model to facilitate planning, evaluation and review of systems

4.3 FETAC has in place formal quality assured processes to facilitate planning, implementation, evaluation and review (including feedback) of its own systems. This includes the following organisational structures: a Senior Management Team; a Strategic Planning Steering Group; a Cross Functional Planning Team; Cross Functional Groups; an IT Steering Committee; and project management through which strategic projects are managed and coordinated. It has a strategic planning process which involves internal and external stakeholders and which identifies and sets key objectives, actions, milestones and performance indicators for the duration of a plan period. Its implementation process is based on a formal project management system whereby strategic projects are identified, scoped, justified, planned in detail, resourced, financed and managed. In relation to policy development FETAC has a procedure in place which includes a number of stages as follows: pre-planning; planning; consultation with stakeholders; drafting; approval; and review. Each provider is required to develop its own detailed quality assurance system using guidelines set down by FETAC.

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Element 2: An appropriate methodology for review of systems, for example self-assessment, to enable member states at the appropriate level to be self-critical and strive for continued improvements

4.4 FETAC is required by the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 to undertake a self-evaluation of its own effectiveness and to publish a self-evaluation report and recommendations for improvement. To discharge this requirement FETAC has in place a number of self-assessment or self-evaluation processes and procedures to encourage continuous enhancement. These include: formal and published reviews of the implementation of its Strategic Plan identifying milestones achieved; partially achieved or not achieved; an internal quality management system; preventative/corrective action procedures; and internal audits. Providers are also required to self-evaluate and monitor their effectiveness on an ongoing basis, in a consistent and systematic manner. FETAC's role in this is to monitor the effectiveness of a provider's quality assurance policies including in relation to programme development, evaluation and review. This activity commenced in 2006 and, as already noted (see paragraphs 2.13 to 2.21) FETAC is currently processing and evaluating Self-Evaluation Reports from providers.

Element 3: Monitoring as appropriate at national or regional level possibly combined with voluntary peer review

4.5 FETAC is required by the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 to be reviewed formally by the NQAI. As part of this review, FETAC is required to undertake a self-evaluation of its effectiveness. FETAC is also subject to external monitoring by SGS Ireland and by the Comptroller and Auditor General. FETAC's monitoring policy was agreed by its Council in March 2006 and at the time of the review FETAC was testing monitoring tools with a range of providers to ensure their appropriateness and effectiveness. This involves collecting and disseminating qualitative and quantitative information about providers and programmes on an ongoing basis for the purpose of assuring quality and addresses the extent to which:

- a provider is implementing its procedures as agreed;
- its procedures, as implemented, are effective in maintaining and improving the quality of programme design and delivery; and
- there is consistency of implementation of procedures in the centres of a multi-centre provider.

4.6 FETAC's monitoring process involves the six steps listed below.

- Production of Annual Monitoring Plan
- Desk Monitoring
- On-Site Monitoring
- Production of Monitoring Reports
- Acting on Findings
- Review of Quality Assurance Agreements

The monitoring policy and the above activities were planned to become fully operational from autumn 2007.

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Element 4: Measurement tools developed at national or regional level to facilitate member states to monitor and evaluate their own systems.

- 4.7 FETAC identified a range of performance indicators in 2003 to measure and assess its own effectiveness. These indicators were published as part of the Strategic Plan 2003-2006 and covered:
- Learners
 - Providers
 - Providers Quality Assurance
 - Recognition
 - Quality service
 - Other internal measurement tools
- 4.8 FETAC uses a range of internal metrics to monitor its own system effectiveness as part of its Quality Management System. In 2005 FETAC set a target of 31 December 2006 for the receipt of quality assurance applications from existing providers. This target was reached within the timeframe scheduled. FETAC also engages external expertise to assess, analyse and evaluate data with regard to customer feedback. Responses are fed back into the review of policies and current projects. In addition, FETAC maintains a database of all learners' achievements and awards issued. This includes the number of awards made by level, award type and fields of learning. Data is available per annum and trends are identified.
- 4.9 FETAC is responsible for validating and approving providers' programmes. Providers are required to submit programme details to FETAC for approval. FETAC will review and evaluate a provider's effectiveness in the following ways:
- number of providers registered;
 - number and range of programmes;
 - programme duration;
 - participation rates i.e. number of learners;
 - completion rates;
 - awards (volume, award type, and fields of learning) achieved by learners and grades;
 - self-evaluation reports and action plans; and
 - monitoring reports including internal verification and external authentication reports

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Summary and overall conclusions of Part Four

- 4.10 FETAC's SER noted that its European partners agreed that FETAC interacts effectively with European bodies, plays a proactive role in a wide range of initiatives, including active involvement in conferences and in peer learning visits, and in relevant Europe-wide bodies. This was confirmed by those European stakeholders to whom some members of the Panel were able to speak by teleconference during the panel's on-site visit. The Panel concluded that, in the performance of its relevant functions, the Council complies with the Common Quality Assurance Framework for European vocational education and training. The Panel also **commends** FETAC on the commitment and leadership that it has demonstrated in relation to the development of vocational education and training in Europe, particularly in respect of the quality assurance arrangements underpinning such education and training, in line with the fourth of its five Strategic Objectives (see paragraph 1.14).

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PART FIVE Conclusion

- 5.1 The first six years of FETAC's existence have been characterised by continuity with the procedures of the former awarding bodies, extensive consultation on the development of policies, and concerns over FETAC's capacity to take on all the tasks for which it is responsible.
- 5.2 FETAC itself acknowledges that there is still a need for the full implementation of all its functions. In the view of the Panel the pace with which it now moves to full implementation should increase, building on the foundations established in the first six years of its existence, in partnership with stakeholders and, where there are issues of common interest between them, in collaboration with NQAI and HETAC.
- 5.3 FETAC's approach has been learner-centred and its relationships with providers have been based on the principles of partnership and subsidiarity. Its internal processes reflect best practice, are considered and appropriate, have placed the learner at the centre of all developments and emphasised working in partnership with others and promoting quality.
- 5.4 FETAC interacts effectively with European bodies, plays a proactive role in a wide range of initiatives, including active involvement in conferences and in peer learning visits, and in relevant Europe-wide bodies. It has demonstrated commitment and leadership in relation to the development of vocational education and training in Europe, particularly in respect of the quality assurance arrangements underpinning such education and training and the joint European effort towards a European Quality Framework.
- 5.5 Much has been achieved by FETAC in the discharge of its statutory functions in the first six years of its existence and there is widespread acknowledgment from a range of stakeholders, including learners and providers, of its achievements and support for its future direction. However, much still remains to be done.
- 5.6 As it plans for the future, in particular as it finalises its second Strategic Plan, FETAC will, no doubt, wish to take into account the conclusions of the Panel, in particular the recommendations which the Panel believes are of direct relevance to the issues and challenges identified by FETAC in the final chapter of its self evaluation report.

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Notes

1. This summary of the Irish education system is based on a report by FAS entitled, *Monitoring Ireland's Skill's Supply: Trends in Education/Training Outputs*, published in June 2007 (pages 10-11).
2. This represents an increase of almost 14% at the third level since 2000-2001
3. This summary of the National Framework of Qualifications is based on the FAS publication referred to in Note 1, page 12.
4. This summary of FET awards is based on the FAS publication referred to in Note 1, page 41.

Appendices

1. The Panel's full Terms of Reference and membership
2. Programme of the on-site visit 30 September to 3 October 2007
3. A selection of documentary evidence, in addition to FETAC publications, consulted by the Panel including:
 - Fundamentals of a common quality assurance framework for VET in Europe
 - *Monitoring Ireland's Skill's Supply: Trends in Education/Training Outputs*, a report by FAS published in June 2007
 - *Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy*, published by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs in 2007
4. Brief details of the activities and responsibilities of selected providers and stakeholders
5. Sections 12 to 20 of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999
6. FETAC's current organisation structure
7. FETAC's key policies for quality assurance including:
 - A Common Awards System
 - Determining Standards
 - Monitoring
 - Protection for learners
 - Provider Quality Assurance
 - Quality Assuring Assessment
 - Recognition of Other Awards
 - RPL: Policy and Guidelines
 - Validation of Programmes