

Assessment and Standards

December 2009

*Implementing the National Framework of Qualifications,
and applying the European Standards and Guidelines*

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26/27 Denzille Lane, Dublin 2
Telephone (01) 644 1500
Fax (01) 644 1577
www.hetac.ie

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Contents

1.	Introduction	4
2.	Foundations	6
	2.1 Principles 6	
	2.1.1 Introduction 6	
	2.2 Guidelines 8	
	2.2.1 Introduction 8	
	2.2.2 The Meaning of Fairness 8	
	2.2.3 The Meaning of Consistency 9	
	2.2.4 Student assessment procedures are expected to be designed to measure the achievement of the intended learning outcomes and other programme objectives (ESG). 9	
	2.2.5 Student assessment procedures are expected to be appropriate for their purpose, whether diagnostic, formative or summative (ESG). 11	
	2.2.6 Student assessment procedures are expected to have clear and published criteria for marking (ESG). 15	
	2.2.7 Student assessment procedures are expected to be undertaken by those who understand the role of assessment in the progression of students towards the achievement of the knowledge and skills associated with their intended qualification (ESG). 16	
	2.2.8 Student assessment procedures are expected to not, where possible, rely on the judgements of single examiners (ESG). 16	
	2.2.9 Student assessment procedures are expected to take account of all the possible consequences of examination regulations (ESG). 17	
	2.2.10 Student assessment procedures are expected to have clear regulations covering student absence, illness and other mitigating circumstances (ESG). 17	
	2.2.11 Student assessment procedures are expected to ensure that assessments are conducted securely in accordance with the [provider's] stated procedure (ESG). 17	
	2.2.12 Student assessment procedures are expected to be subject to administrative verification checks to ensure the accuracy of the procedures (ESG). 18	
	2.2.13 Records are maintained to facilitate monitoring and reviews. 18	
	2.2.14 There are procedures for the promulgation of assessment results. 18	
	2.2.15 There are procedures for appeals and complaints by learners. 18	
	2.2.16 The provider (or, in the case of new providers, the awarding body) appoints at least one independent expert external examiner for each award programme. 19	
	2.2.17 In addition, students should be clearly informed about the assessment strategy being used for their programme, what examinations or other assessment methods they will be subject to, what will be expected of them, and the criteria that will be applied to the assessment of their performance (ESG). 19	
3.	Sectoral Conventions for Assessment	20
	Sectoral Convention 1 on Award Classifications 20	
	Sectoral Convention 2 on Mixed Grading Systems 23	
	Sectoral Convention 3 on Determination of Award Classification 23	
	Sectoral Convention 4 on the Percentage and Alphabetic Grading Systems 23	
	Sectoral Convention 5 on Post-award Achievement required for an additional major award at the same level 24	
	Sectoral Convention 6 on ECTS Grade and Grade Interpretation Scheme (EGIS) 25	
	Sectoral Convention 7 on Exceptions 25	

4.	Protocols	26
	4.1 Introduction	26
	4.2 Assessment and Programme Structures	26
	4.3 Outline of Typical Structures for the Management and Conduct of Assessment	26
	4.4 Progression Eligibility	27
	4.4.1 Pass by compensation	28
	4.4.2 Exemption from Studying a Module	29
	4.4.3 Carrying a module to the next stage (progression with credit deficit)	30
	4.5 Top-level Management of Assessment	31
	4.5.1 External Examining	31
	4.5.2 Archiving Learner Assessment Data	31
	4.5.3 Administrative Infrastructure	32
	4.6 Programme-level Management of Assessment	32
	4.6.1 Individual Programme-level Processes	32
	4.6.2 Retention of Assessment Submissions	35
	4.7 Commentary on the Functions of Assessors	35
	4.8 Boards of Examiners	36
	4.8.1 Board of Examiners: Membership and Quorum	37
	4.8.2 HETAC Observer at the Board of Examiners	37
	4.8.3 Confidentiality	37
	4.8.4 Frequency of Meetings of Boards of Examiners	37
	4.8.5 Overview of Findings Noting Trends and Anomalies	37
	4.8.6 Preparing for Board of Examiners' Meeting	38
	4.8.7 Board of Examiners' Decision-making Process	39
	4.8.8 Matters to be Deliberated by the Board of Examiners	39
	4.8.9 Minutes of Board of Examiners' Meetings	40
	4.8.10 Notification of Results to HETAC	40
	4.8.11 Withholding Results from a Board of Examiners	40
	4.8.12 Notification of Results to Learners	40
	4.8.13 The Granting of Awards	40
	4.9 Discussing Scripts and Results with Learners	41
	4.10 Appeals, Complaints, Re-checks and Reviews	41
	4.10.1 Appeals Procedures	41
	4.10.2 Complaints Procedures	42
	4.10.3 Re-check and Review Procedures	42
	4.11 Dealing with Plagiarism and Other Types of Academic Misconduct	42
5.	Interpretations	44
6.	Appendix — Broadsheets of Results and Recording Results	57
7.	Sources and Resources	59

1. Introduction

The *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) has become the benchmark for quality assurance in Europe. It states that ‘*the assessment of students is one of the most important elements of higher education*’. The reasons for this importance are obvious. The *assessment* of learning measures the achievements of learners, and by extension, the effectiveness of *programmes*.¹ Assessment for *learning* is the core of reflective *teaching* and learning and their continual quality enhancement.

The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 gave prominence to the principle that education and training qualifications should be based on standards of *knowledge*, *skill* or *competence* to be acquired by learners. In addition, it recognised the establishment of procedures for the assessment of *learners* as the responsibility of the *provider*. The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) established the necessary generic standards.

The *award standards*, as determined by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) together with the *award* type descriptors of the NFQ, describe the standard to be achieved before an award can be made or recognised by HETAC, or made under delegated authority by a recognised institution.

The implementation of these standards, and the credibility of higher education and training qualifications, rely on the *validity* and *reliability* of the procedures for the assessment of learners.

Traditional approaches to assessment in higher education typically place heavy reliance on tacit understandings of standards and can be strained in new or rapidly changing contexts. Examples of changing contexts which have encouraged practitioners to look for innovative approaches include modularisation, plagiarism, concerns about completion rates, computer-aided assessment, new kinds of *intended learning outcomes*, availability of study time, and declining resources.²

This document about the assessment of learners is intended to be consistent with all types of programmes and providers. It is produced for the attention of and use by:

- Providers when reviewing their learner *assessment procedures* at the organisational level, at the programme level, and at modular and intra-modular levels.
- Those involved with the development of programmes.
- Those involved with external quality procedures, including programme *validation*, programmatic review and institutional review.
- Teachers (lecturers, academics) in their continuing work with learners.

1 Certain terms have a precise technical meaning in the context of this document and may have important nuances which differ from conventional meanings. These terms are set in *blue italics* typeface where they first appear and, except where a specific cross-reference is provided, are defined in Section 5, Interpretations.

2 Gibbs (2006).

The document is divided into four main parts.

- **Foundations** — Contains Principles and Guidelines which are the basis of the subsequent Conventions and Protocols.
- **Conventions** — These are agreed at the sectoral level and are to be observed by all providers.
- **Protocols** — Recognised institutions with delegated authority are encouraged to use these protocols. All other providers are required to use them.
- **Interpretations** — Selected glossary terms.

Unless explicitly stated otherwise, these four main parts apply to all types and modes of assessment, including continual assessment, recognition of *prior learning*, and assessment in research degree programmes. In summary, they apply to the assessment in any programme leading to any type of *award*, whether major, minor, special purpose or supplemental.

Bringing all current assessment practices fully into line with *learning outcomes* concepts is demanding. It is recognised that a concerted effort will be required to bring about the necessary enhancements and that it will take time for programmes and other processes to evolve.

From time to time, more focused guidelines on assessment-related issues will be published.

2. Foundations

This section provides the foundations for the subsequent Conventions and Protocols. It sets out the conceptual parameters and provides a philosophical and theoretical context for assessment. The Principles (2.1) contain the fundamental concepts. The Guidelines (2.2) elaborate upon these in the context of the ESG.

2.1 Principles

*'The assessment of students is one of the most important elements of higher education. The outcomes of assessment have a profound effect on students' future careers. It is therefore important that assessment is carried out professionally at all times and that it takes into account the extensive knowledge which exists about testing and examination processes. Assessment also provides valuable information for institutions about the effectiveness of teaching and learners' support.'*³

Learner assessment (specifically the assessment of learning) means inference (e.g. judgement or estimation or evaluation) of a learner's knowledge, skill or competence by comparison with a standard based on appropriate evidence.⁴ Self-assessment is included in this.

2.1.1 Introduction

The Principles are organised under six themes.

- 1. Learners are responsible for demonstrating their learning achievement.**
 - (a) A learner who is enrolled for a programme should submit himself or herself to assessment for the purpose of demonstrating attainment of the programme's intended learning outcomes.⁵
 - (b) With the support of the provider, each learner is expected to strive for academic integrity, and to undertake *assessment tasks* honestly and truthfully, shunning plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty or impropriety.
 - (c) The provider should ensure that there are learning opportunities for the programme's intended learning outcomes (except those which are satisfied by prior learning).
- 2. Assessment supports standards based on learning outcomes.**
 - (a) Awards (including those made under delegated authority) are made and classified exclusively on the basis of *criterion-referenced assessment* of learning outcomes (knowledge, skill and competence).
 - (b) The learning outcomes required to qualify for HETAC awards, or those made by a recognised institution of the Council, are specified by the *awards standards* issued by HETAC.

³ Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2005.

⁴ In the case of recognition of (uncertified) prior learning, it is conceivable that the subject's learning attainment may not be fully known (to the subject) in the first instance. In this case, a staged assessment process may be required which brings the learning attainment into focus in a step-by-step manner until the required level of detail is reached.

⁵ See Section 5, Interpretations, for the meanings of the terms in *blue italics* here and elsewhere.

- (c) The awards standards describe the standard to be acquired by learners: (i) before a higher education and training award may be made by HETAC or by a recognised institution to which authority to make awards has been delegated by HETAC; or (ii) who request from HETAC recognition of an award made by a body other than HETAC or a recognised institution to which authority to make awards has been delegated. Accordingly, the awards standards describe the learning required to pass.
- (d) The *minimum intended programme learning outcomes* define the minimum learning outcomes for a particular programme at the programme level. These must always be specified by the provider. If the programme allows substantial choice, there may need to be variant forms of the minimum intended programme outcomes — e.g. a programme might allow a person to choose from a number of specialisations.
- (e) A learner who completes a validated programme is eligible for the relevant award if he or she has demonstrated, through assessment (including by recognition of prior learning), attainment of the relevant minimum intended programme learning outcomes.
- (f) In addition to minimum intended programme learning outcomes, the programme provider may aspire to describing other 'intended programme learning outcomes' beyond the minimum. In this document, *intended learning outcomes* refers to all or any of the intended outcomes, including the minimum ones. *Minimum intended learning outcomes* refers exclusively to the minimum ones.
- (g) While not a proxy for attained learning outcomes, credit should normally be linked to achievement of *minimum intended module* or programme *learning outcomes*.

3. Assessment promotes and supports both effective learning and teaching.

- (a) Teaching, learning and assessment are linked activities that affect one another. Effective assessment is intrinsic both to effective teaching and learning.
- (b) Effective assessment is *consistent* with, supportive of, and derived from the intended programme and *module* learning outcomes.
- (c) Assessment should be planned and coordinated across modules and programmes. Both *module assessment strategies* (c.f. 2.2.5) and *programme assessment strategies* (c.f. 2.2.5) are necessary for effective assessment.
- (d) The effort required of a learner to complete an assessment task should be proportional to the associated educational benefit to him or her.
- (e) *Formative assessment* supports learning and should therefore involve *formative feedback*. It is an essential part of any programme of education and training.
- (f) Teachers and learners share in the responsibilities for effective learning. Learners' involvement in the construction of assessment tasks and criteria can enhance learning.
- (g) *Authentic* assessment supports effective learning.

4. Assessment procedures are credible.

- (a) Credible assessment is *fair* and *consistent*. More specifically, it is valid and reliable (i.e. fit-for-purpose).
- (b) *Fair assessment* is inclusive. It recognises that different people can have different learning needs, styles and approaches.
- (c) *Assessors* — along with any committees with a role in assessment — should have the necessary competence. This will likely require that they receive training from time to time.
- (d) Any person who would have a conflict of interest (actual or potential, real or apparent) if he or she were to act as an assessor in a particular situation should neither act nor be required to act as an assessor in that situation. Relevant interests should be declared.

- (e) Appropriate measures should be in place to ensure that learners are confident about the fairness and objectivity of their assessment procedures. Anonymous grading of *summative assessment*, where feasible, is an example of an effective confidence-building measure.
- (f) The intended programme and module learning outcomes and assessment strategies should be plainly written and communicated at the start of a programme, not only to learners but also to all those involved with teaching and assessment.
- (g) The processes for assessment *complaints* and *appeals* should meet the same standards of fairness, consistency and fitness for purpose as assessment in general. In particular, they should be straightforward, efficient, timely and transparent.

5. Assessment methods are reviewed and renewed as necessary to adapt to evolving requirements.

- (a) Developing and testing new assessment methods, strategies and tactics are necessary for continual enhancement and for coping with emerging challenges.

6. Learners are well informed about how and why they are assessed.

- (a) Learners need to be familiar with and understand the intended module and programme learning outcomes, and the relevant programme and module assessment strategies. They should be reminded of these and the assessment regulations on a regular basis.
- (b) Providers should inform learners appropriately (e.g. in a programme handbook and programme web page).
- (c) Learners should be involved in the periodic review of assessment procedures.

2.2 Guidelines

2.2.1 Introduction

The *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (abbreviated as 'ESG' in this document) state that '*students should be assessed using published criteria, regulations and procedures which are applied consistently*' (Standard 1.3 ESG).

This section elaborates upon and complements the corresponding ESG guidelines in the context of the Irish higher education and training system.

2.2.2 The Meaning of Fairness

The provider is responsible for establishing assessment procedures which are fair.

- In the context of assessment, fair⁶ is a complex concept. It means '*just, unbiased, equitable,⁷ impartial; legitimate, in accordance with the rules or standards*'⁸.
- Fairness requires consistency. To be fair, assessment procedures must be valid and reliable, among other things.

6 A useful analysis of test fairness in higher education is provided in Willingham, W.W. (1999). A systematic view of test fairness in Messick (1999) pp 213-242

7 Stobart, G. (2005).

8 *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Fairness requires that assessment should be used to determine learners' individual achievements of the intended learning outcomes. Assessment should not discriminate in any other way.
- Fairness requires that assessment (including tasks, criteria, procedures and inferences) should be unbiased. No particular person or group should be unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged by, for example: the conduct of assessment; the construction of the assessment tasks and criteria; the grading processes; the regulations; conflicts of interests; or prejudice etc.
- Fairness requires that assessment tasks and criteria should appropriately reflect the learning opportunities available to programme participants.
- Fairness is concerned not only with the assessment itself but also the use to which it is put. A test may be fair when used for one purpose but unfair when used for another.
- Fairness requires transparency of assessment processes and criteria at module, programme, provider and national (sectoral) levels. It is essential that learners are, at appropriate times, informed about the precise criteria that will be used to assess them. Learners must also understand these criteria.

2.2.3 The Meaning of Consistency

The provider is responsible for establishing assessment procedures which are consistent.

- As a concept, consistency means *'agreeing in substance or form; congruous, compatible (with, to), not contradictory; marked by uniformity or regularity'*. Consistent conduct means *'adhering to the same principles of thought or action'*⁹.
- The providers' assessment procedures should be consistent. This includes grading — comparable performance levels should be reflected in comparable *grades*. Consistency, however, does not require that particular outcomes must always be assessed in the same way from cohort to cohort, or from programme to programme etc.
- Consistency should apply within a programme, an institution, within a discipline or professional field. It should also apply between institutions, and be applicable nationally, across borders (where appropriate), across time and across the whole population of learners.
- Consistency should never be used to justify stagnation. Necessary change and evolution should be seen as compatible with consistency. If a practice becomes invalid or unreliable, it should be replaced.
- Consistency extends to the use of assessment findings in decision-making. It includes decisions by boards of examiners concerning awards, grades and (if applicable) entitlement to credit or access, transfer or progression.

2.2.4 Student assessment procedures are expected to be designed to measure the achievement of the intended learning outcomes and other programme objectives (ESG).

- **Assessment procedures are based on clearly expressed intended learning outcomes.**

Intended programme and module learning outcomes should be established by the provider. These should be reviewed periodically to ensure that they keep pace with evolving needs.

Individuals need to internalise (conceptualise) the intended learning outcomes before they can apply them effectively to teaching, learning or assessing. The textual expression of intended learning outcomes is internalised by a person through reading and understanding, then linking it to prior learning, including knowledge of the discipline and the tacit knowledge of a practitioner (expert, novice or beginner).

⁹ Quotations from *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Intended programme and module learning outcomes should be understood by learners and all those involved in teaching and assessment within the programme. People should be supported in developing their understanding/internalisation of the intended learning outcomes.

*'The learner has to (a) possess a concept of the standard (or goal or reference level) being aimed for, (b) compare the actual (or current) level of performance with the standard, and (c) engage in appropriate action which leads to closure of the gap.'*¹⁰

Their respective individual conceptualised intended learning outcomes are intended by the teacher, striven for by the learner, and used by the assessor. Inconsistencies can arise where these are not shared. While learners' and teachers' conceptualisations may be quite different at the start of a programme or module, it should be one aim of teaching that they converge during the programme or module or at least that each understands the other's conception.

- **Assessment supports the awards standards.**

*'An important issue is that, in order for learning to be credited for an award, it is necessary that there should be appropriate coherence to the award as a whole, or to a part of the award. This is particularly relevant for progression to further learning opportunities and for links to employment.'*¹¹

Assessment procedures should be valid and reliable. They should validly and reliably ensure that learners who are recommended for awards have attained the provider's minimum intended programme learning outcomes and, by implication, the relevant award standard.

Arbitrary combinations of piecemeal assessment *results* for elements of a programme are unlikely to be valid and reliable when assessing the attainment of the minimum intended programme learning outcomes. This underlines the importance of the programme assessment strategy.

This does not preclude programmes having a range of electives. It does, however, mean that the aggregation of electives must be regulated and consistent with the programme design and comprehended by the programme assessment strategy.

- **Progression decisions are informed by assessment designed for that purpose.**

Assessment of the attainment of intended learning outcomes should inform decisions that concern the learner's progression through the various *stages* of programmes.

- **Assessment may be used to demonstrate that professional, statutory and regulatory bodies' educational requirements have been met.**

Where a programme of education and training is intended to meet the educational requirements of a professional, statutory, funding (e.g. of learner grants) or regulatory body, this should be made clear to all concerned. The relevant assessments should also be fair, consistent and fit for that purpose. The intended programme learning outcomes should reflect these objectives.

¹⁰ Sadler (1989).

¹¹ National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (2003) *Policies and Criteria for the establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications*. [Internet]. Available from: <http://www.nqai.ie/docs/publications/11.pdf> [Accessed: 13th June 2008].

- **The validity and reliability of assessment procedures should be tested systematically from time to time.**

Providers are responsible for demonstrating that their *assessment instruments* are valid and reliable. While the current external examiner system provides some evidence of validity and reliability, practice varies. Providers need to look to complementary processes if they are to produce robust, dependable evidence that their assessment results accurately reflect their learners' true attainment.

2.2.5 Student¹² assessment procedures are expected to be appropriate for their purpose, whether *diagnostic*, formative or summative (ESG).

- **Assessment is regulated, professionally managed and coordinated.**

The development, approval, monitoring and evaluation of learner-assessment procedures at all levels and stages should be regulated by the provider and integrated within the provider's broader quality assurance and quality enhancement procedures.

Assessment and/or assessment management and coordination procedures should exist at all of the provider's organisational levels: top level (e.g. institutional level), faculty, school, department. These should also exist for every module in the programme and for each stage of the programme — award, progression and access.

Continuous assessment (of coursework) can have a positive impact on the learning experience and lends itself particularly well to authentic assessment. The foundations and conventions apply without derogation to continuous assessment. Where continuous assessment is used, it should be managed as an integral part of a programme's assessment procedures and should be addressed in the programme and module assessment strategies.

The provider should have dedicated regulations that govern the use of continuous assessment.¹³ At the beginning of each programme and module, learners should be made aware (and thereafter reminded from time to time) of the general and any special continuous assessment regulations, including the consequences of failing to comply with the requirements.

Continuous assessment can be significantly more challenging to manage, schedule and regulate than traditional written or *viva voce* examinations. Challenges may arise from the less controlled and structured environment, from the fact that continuous assessment is distributed over extended periods, and from the greater diversity of methods used. All of this means that it is particularly important for the provider to manage continuous assessment effectively.

- **Assessment procedures are regularly and systematically reviewed.**

The provider should monitor and periodically review its learner assessment procedures. Such reviews should consider the effectiveness of its module and programme assessment strategies.

Learner representatives should be included in panels coordinating such reviews.

- **Assessment supports effective learning.**

Assessment should be used to inform the continual adaptation of the *learning environment* to learners' individual and collective needs.

¹² The word student is used here because the headings labelled (ESG) are direct quotations from the ESG. The preferred term is learner—student means learner.

¹³ Nitko (1995).

Programmes and their constituent modules should include sufficient (but not excessive), timely, diverse and fit-for-purpose assessment tasks that: encourage effective learning; inform individualised *feedback* and support; and measure progress towards the attainment of the intended programme learning outcomes.

The formative potential of coursework is maximised when learners' performances are assessed and they receive timely and constructive feedback.

As far as possible, assessment should encourage effective learning strategies. Summative assessment tasks and criteria should be designed so that they recognise the regard given to them by learners. In order to optimise their performance in summative assessments, many learners take a strategic approach to learning. There is nothing wrong with this if — and only if — the assessment is valid, reliable and authentic. Valid summative assessment will differentiate true learning from the superficial appearances of learning and it will not reward poor learning strategies.

Learners can be involved in the design of some assessment tasks and criteria, where this would not lead to any conflicts of interest. Such involvement, along with self and peer assessment, may be used to help develop learning-to-learn competence and can be integrated formally into the assessment strategy.

- **Diagnostic assessment procedures are properly regulated.**

Diagnostic assessment is defined in Section 5, Interpretations. It can be seen as a special case of formative assessment. However, specific issues arise with diagnostic assessment that warrant independent attention.

Institutions should have guidelines on diagnostic assessment. These guidelines should establish: why and when diagnostic assessment may be necessary; who has access to the results of such assessment; whether or not they are recorded on transcripts etc.; and whether or not they may be used for institutional research purposes. For example, it should be made clear that diagnostic testing of specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia should be reserved to persons with prescribed qualifications.

- **Good academic conduct is encouraged and supported. Academic misconduct is discouraged through appropriate instruction, positive example and appropriate, clearly explained deterrents.**

The provider should encourage good academic conduct (e.g. through providing opportunities to develop good practice and the provision of appropriate feedback) and combat academic misconduct (such as plagiarism). This must be addressed at every level: through policy and procedures; through the design of programme and module assessment strategies; through the design of individual assessment tasks; through the training provided to learners about the learning process (*i.e.* how people learn), their responsibilities, and the need for perseverance in studies when difficulties arise. Training for teachers is also required. For example, the provider should arrange training for teachers on: the degrees of plagiarism; and their role in explaining what is considered to be plagiarism in an assessment.

Learners should regularly, and at key times, be reminded of the standard of conduct expected of them. They should also be warned of the penalties for detected misconduct.

The provider should have fair and consistent procedures for detecting academic misconduct, adjudicating on alleged academic misconduct and imposing appropriate sanctions.

- **Assessment accommodates the natural diversity of learners.**

The awards standards do not specify how learning outcomes are to be achieved, assessed or demonstrated. This means that providers can optimise assessment procedures for different scenarios. The only constraints are that the assessment procedures should accord with the Foundations, Conventions and Protocols where appropriate.

Section 2.2.10 on *reasonable accommodations* also applies here.

- **Programme assessment strategies should be produced for each programme, and module assessment strategies for each of its constituent modules.**

Curriculum and assessment are inseparable. The development and evaluation of programme and module assessment strategies should be substantial parts of programme design and programme validation (and review or revalidation).

A *programme assessment strategy* is a document aimed at those teachers, learners and assessors who are involved with the programme. It should be prepared for every programme during the programme's development and maintained thereafter. The programme assessment strategy should have a number of features. It should:

- Link a programme's assessment instruments (summative and formative, including continuous assessment and repeat assessment) to the minimum (and any other) intended programme learning outcomes as well as intended module and stage learning outcomes.
- Describe and provide a rationale for the choice of assessment tasks, criteria and procedures. It should also address their fairness and consistency, specifically their validity, reliability and authenticity.
- Describe any special regulations (e.g. learners may be required to pass some key modules outright and not rely on pass by *compensation*).
- Regulate, build upon and integrate the module assessment strategies and (where used) stage assessment strategies.
- Provide contingent strategy for cases where learners claim exemption from modules, including for recognition of prior learning.
- Match the programme's assessment instruments to the requirements of the institutional *grading system*, particularly concerning the recording and combination of module grades/marks (i.e. provide clear criteria for grading/markings).
- Ensure that the programme's continuous assessment workload is appropriately balanced.
- Relate to the programme's teaching and learning strategy.

Assessment strategies should be plainly written and communicated at the start of a programme to learners and all those involved with teaching and assessment. A clear assessment strategy can complement a statement of intended learning outcomes and aid its interpretation.

Most programmes are modular to some degree — i.e. they are divisible into parts. When designing programme assessment strategies, it is therefore important to remember that knowledge, skill and competence acquired in particular contexts may not necessarily transfer to a different context without additional learning.

A major award programme will normally require a specific process which, working to the programme assessment strategy, integrates constituent modules so that the intended programme learning outcomes are supported. This should promote overall coherence; consistency between module and programme intended learning outcomes; and establish the epistemological and cultural identity of the programme.

It should also coordinate alignment of activities (*i.e.* the learning opportunities including formative assessment and summative assessment) with the intended programme of learning outcomes and induct learners into the broader community practice in their discipline.

When developing programme assessment strategies, developers should consider the practicalities of offering repeat continuous assessment opportunities. For example, it may not be feasible for some continuous assessment tasks to be repeated in the same time-frame as written examinations.

Contradictory assessment findings can emerge when the same learning outcomes are assessed by continuous assessment and written examinations. This can create dilemmas unless the potential for such contradictions is foreseen and provided for in the programme and module assessment strategies.

- **The guidelines for programme assessment strategies apply, with obvious changes made, to module assessment strategies.**

- **Assessment tasks and criteria are clear.**

Assessment tasks and grading criteria should be clear and unambiguous.¹⁴

- **The design and scheduling of assessment tasks is coordinated.**

Where modules are designed for particular programmes, the design and scheduling of module-level assessment tasks and criteria should be directed by the programme assessment strategy.

Where a particular module is shared by a number of programmes, each programme needs to integrate the shared module. Particularly, each programme assessment strategy should integrate and adapt to the shared module's assessment strategy.

Providers should coordinate the scheduling of assessment tasks to ensure an appropriate workload balance for learners.

- **The language used in assessment is appropriate.**

The language used in teaching should be the language normally used in assessment unless there are exceptional circumstances, and then only where academic standards are not consequently jeopardised.

- **A grading scheme (*i.e.* marking scheme) is produced prior to the approval of high-stake assessment tasks.**

A *grading scheme* (*i.e.* marking scheme) which uses explicit criteria should be produced for each assessment task prior to assignment. This is good practice generally, but is particularly important for high-stake assessment tasks.

The use of learners' submissions to adjust the grading scheme after the assessment tasks have been completed should be avoided (except in the case of the discovery of *errors* in the scheme) because it runs the risk of introducing a normative bias.

Grading is an assessment process. Everything that applies to assessment applies to grading. Grading should be criterion-referenced (based on learning outcome criteria). Grades should be awarded on the individual's performance. They should never be norm-referenced (*e.g.* have quotas for each grade).

¹⁴ Stokking, K. van der Schaaf, M. Jaspers, J. and Erkens, G. (2004).

- **Individuals undertaking team-based assessment tasks are assessed as individuals.**

Not all learners may contribute equally to group work. Moreover, not all group members may derive the same standard of learning from the group work. Assessment of group work should therefore account for these possibilities. This does not preclude assessment of the outcome of a team's achievement, nor does it preclude formative assessment of a team and formative feedback to the team.

- **Assessment tasks and criteria, arrangements, model answers and grading schemes are reviewed internally (and externally where appropriate) prior to use.**

It is good practice for all assessment tasks to be reviewed internally where possible, and otherwise externally.

High-stake assessment tasks (e.g. examination papers), model responses and grading schemes should normally be reviewed independently of their authors, including by the *external examiners*. An assessment task taken out of context cannot be reviewed effectively. Therefore, external examiners should be familiar with the programme assessment strategy and other relevant assessment strategies.

- **The facilities and equipment for assessment are appropriate.**

Assessment should only be conducted in physical environments which are appropriate for that purpose. Where the nature of the assessment task requires special facilities or equipment, these should be provided.

- **The necessary flexibility of assessment procedures is subject to the need to be fair, consistent, valid, reliable and practical.**

Examples of procedural flexibility include *pass by compensation* and carrying a failed module from one stage to the next (progression with missing credit).

- **Repeat assessment¹⁵**

Subject to the *Sectoral Conventions* for Assessment, learners who fail a module should normally be offered at least three repeat attempts. There may be situations where external factors — e.g. statutory or regulatory requirements — impinge on the conditions for offering repeat attempts to learners. The programme assessment strategy should provide for the possibility of repeat attempts.

A different arrangement normally applies in the case of a research thesis submitted for a higher degree.

For an unseen examination (e.g. an examination paper which is not seen by learners until handed out at the time of examination), the repeat tasks should not be the same as the original tasks.

2.2.6 Student assessment procedures are expected to have clear and published criteria for marking (ESG).

Programme assessment strategies and module assessment strategies should be appropriately constructed and communicated to all relevant parties.

¹⁵ More detailed information (e.g. on the special problems that can arise with continuous assessment) is set out in the 'Managing continuous assessment' subsection of Section 4.6.1.

The provider should have fair and consistent systems and published criteria for grading assessment tasks. This is particularly important where grades contribute to award classification.

The provider's assessment policy and criteria should be published and integrated with the rest of its quality assurance policies and procedures.

2.2.7 Student assessment procedures are expected to be undertaken by those who understand the role of assessment in the progression of students towards the achievement of the knowledge and skills associated with their intended qualification (ESG).

Assessors should only be requested to assess learning outcomes which they are competent to assess.

Each assessor's contribution is part of a team effort that is designed to help learners, through assessment, to attain the intended learning outcomes and other objectives of the programme. Accordingly, assessors need to have a deep understanding of the programme assessment strategy, as well as the module assessment strategies for the modules directly involving them. Understanding the role of assessment in the learning process demands a certain expertise in the discipline of teaching and learning (theory and practice).¹⁶

The explicit professional competences, roles, responsibilities, ethical standards and accountability required of the persons and committees involved in making assessment decisions and recommendations should be described and communicated by the provider to those persons and committees.

There should be clear ethical guidelines governing a person's involvement in assessment-related processes. The guidelines should address ethical requirements that flow from the necessity for fairness and consistency, including objectivity, confidentiality, declaration of interests, and the avoidance of conflicts of interest.

Providers should offer appropriate development opportunities to their staff which allow them to demonstrate and enhance their expertise in assessment and in the design, maintenance and review of module and programme assessment strategies.

2.2.8 Student assessment procedures are expected to not, where possible, rely on the judgements of single examiners (ESG).

Assessors should reach their professional judgements and decide their recommendations independently. However, they should be accountable to the provider for the standards they use and for the fairness and consistency (including reliability and validity) of their methods.

In the case of small providers (or isolated niches within larger providers), independent *external* assessors (as distinct from external examiners) should be used (along with the *internal assessors*) to provide the necessary objectivity. This is the case for all providers in the context of assessing candidates for higher degrees by research.

- **Boards of Examiners¹⁷ (See Section 4 for additional information)**

The authority to make summative assessment decisions is always assigned by the provider to *boards of examiners* (c.f. Section 4.8).

¹⁶ Section 5, Interpretations, provides some pointers to the literature in this regard.

¹⁷ Some Recognised Institutions of the Council have Progression and Awards Boards.

Boards of examiners are deliberative committees which make summative assessment (and related) decisions based on the recommendations of assessors. The membership of the board of examiners normally includes all of the relevant assessors and external examiners. Except for appeals and complaints processes, the board of examiners should have the final decision concerning assessment results.

The provider's regulations should address the membership, quorum, procedures, powers (authority), decision-making policy, procedure and accountability (e.g. to an academic council or an equivalent committee) of boards of examiners. The roles and responsibilities of the members of boards of examiners should be clearly established.

The provider's regulations should ensure that the work of boards of examiners meets the standards of fairness, consistency, objectivity, confidentiality, credibility, transparency and ethics etc. that apply to direct assessment procedures.

2.2.9 Student assessment procedures are expected to take account of all the possible consequences of examination regulations (ESG).

Institutions should undertake a regulatory impact assessment of new assessment procedures prior to their introduction, and from time to time thereafter.

2.2.10 Student assessment procedures are expected to have clear regulations covering student absence, illness and other mitigating circumstances (ESG).

Necessary regulations covering mitigating circumstances should uphold the Principles and Guidelines for assessment.

- **Reasonable accommodations are made where appropriate.**

Some learners with disabilities may be unable to demonstrate their achievement of the intended learning outcomes through conventional assessment tasks. *Reasonable accommodations* will therefore need to be made to deal with issues that would otherwise prevent such learners from demonstrating their achievement.

Reasonable accommodations are concerned with adapting the assessment approach, not with diluting the standard of learning to be attained, interfering with it or amending the intended learning outcomes. Assessments which involve reasonable accommodations should be consistent with those which do not. Reasonable accommodations may apply to any assessment.

Reasonable accommodations are normally identified well in advance of the assessment event by a *needs assessment process*. The findings of this process should be communicated in writing to the appropriate academic and administrative units (e.g. the unit conducting the assessment or the examinations office or equivalent), which will in turn distribute the information as required to teachers, assessors and the board of examiners, and to the learner concerned.

The implications of reasonable accommodation for the various purposes of assessment should be addressed in the provider's regulations.

2.2.11 Student assessment procedures are expected to ensure that assessments are conducted securely in accordance with the [provider's] stated procedures (ESG).

Assessment procedures should be secure, confidential and compliant with Data Protection and applicable Freedom of Information legislation.

In unseen examinations, the assessment tasks should be handled with due regard for confidentiality.

The invigilation of examinations should be regulated; invigilators should be appropriately trained and monitored.

The introduction of new assessment methods and media (e.g. the medium of the internet) warrants special attention until experience and confidence are built up.

2.2.12 Student assessment procedures are expected to be subject to administrative verification checks to ensure the accuracy of the procedures (ESG).

2.2.13 Records are maintained to facilitate monitoring and reviews.

Procedures should be established for ensuring the secure and accurate maintenance of assessment-related records. Such records include, for example, minutes of examination board meetings, external examiners' reports, other committee minutes, *broadsheets of results* etc.

Appropriate record-keeping procedures and arrangements should be established and should include a standardised archiving schedule. Archived materials include the learner's assessment submissions (examination scripts, project reports etc.).

Assessment results through which a learner has earned academic credit should be permanently archived, along with sufficient information to allow their interpretation.

Learner assessment submissions should be retained by the provider for an appropriate time (e.g. to facilitate handling appeals). They should then be disposed of appropriately unless returned to learners.

Receipt of continuous assessment submissions (reports etc.) from learners should be formally acknowledged (e.g. by the issue of a written receipt).

2.2.14 There are procedures for the promulgation of assessment results.

Assessment results (or, where necessary, provisional results) should be communicated to learners as soon as possible after assessment.

- **Notification of results to HETAC in cases where it is the awarding body**
Learner registration details and recommendations/results of boards of examiners' meetings (broadsheet of results) should, as appropriate, be sent to HETAC in accordance with agreed protocols and in good time to facilitate the making of awards.

2.2.15 There are procedures for appeals and complaints by learners.

Appeal means a request to a higher authority for the alteration of the decision or judgement of a lower one. In the context of the assessment of learners, the lower authority could, for example, be a board of examiners and the higher one the provider's academic committee or one of its sub-committees.

In the context of the assessment of learners, a *complaint* is an expression of concern that a particular assessment procedure is either unfair, inconsistent or not fit-for-purpose.

Learners can reasonably expect that: the provider follows its published assessment procedures; those procedures are fair, consistent and fit-for-purpose; the provider complies with its legal obligations in the conduct of its assessment procedures. When a learner alleges that any of these expectations are not or have not been met, he or she may then appeal or complain.

Providers should inform learners about the complaints and appeals processes, including the acceptable grounds for complaint or appeal.

Providers should have procedures for conducting *re-checks* and *reviews* requested by learners.

2.2.16 The provider (or, in the case of new providers, the awarding body) appoints at least one independent expert external examiner for each award programme.

External examining — a traditional quality assurance mechanism employed by providers — supports public confidence in assessment for academic qualifications.

The provider should implement an external examining process for each of its programmes. The credibility of a particular external examining process rests heavily on the competence of the external examiner involved.

The relevant external examiner should normally be present at deliberative meetings of the board of examiners for the award stage of the programme for which he/she has been appointed.

Specific guidelines on external examining are provided in the HETAC document *Effective Practice Guidelines For External Examining*.

2.2.17 In addition, students should be clearly informed about the assessment strategy being used for their programme, what examinations or other assessment methods they will be subject to, what will be expected of them, and the criteria that will be applied to the assessment of their performance (ESG).

- **Assessment procedures are characterised by openness and simplicity.**
Learner assessment strategies, procedures and criteria should be as simple as possible and should be easily comprehensible by the relevant learners.
- **Informing learners at induction is not sufficient.**
Learners should be reminded of the relevant assessment regulations and their obligations and entitlements from time to time.

The required information should be publicly accessible (e.g. on the web and in a handbook).

3. Sectoral Conventions for Assessment

The Sectoral Conventions for Assessment comprise a set of regulations and benchmarks which, in the interest of fairness and consistency, are agreed at the sectoral level by HETAC and all associated providers.

Sectoral Convention 1 on Award Classifications

Classification of awards shall be criterion-referenced¹⁸ as distinct from norm-referenced.

The following tables describe the classifications available for major awards (made by HETAC or by recognised institutions under delegated authority) in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). They also specify the required boundary values for grade point average (GPA) and percentage point average (PPA) where the acronyms are defined by Sectoral Convention 4.

Classification of Higher Certificates (Level 6) and Ordinary Bachelor's Degrees (Level 7)	GPA boundary values	PPA boundary values	Description 2009-2010 and following
Distinction	3.25	70%	Indicative descriptor: Achievement includes that required for a Pass and in most respects is significantly and consistently beyond this
Merit Grade 1	3.0	60%	Indicative descriptor: Achievement includes that required for a Pass and in many respects is significantly beyond this
Merit Grade 2	2.5	50%	Indicative descriptor: Achievement includes that required for a Pass and in some respects is significantly beyond this
Pass	2.0	40%	Definitive descriptor: Attains all the minimum intended programme learning outcomes

¹⁸ See Section 5, Interpretations, for definitions of those terms.

Classification of Honours Bachelor's degrees (Level 8) and Higher Diplomas (Level 8)	GPA boundary values	PPA boundary values	Description 2009 - 2010 and following
First-class honours	3.25	70%	Indicative descriptor: Achievement includes that required for a Pass and in most respects is significantly and consistently beyond this
Second-class honours Grade 1	3.0	60%	Indicative descriptor: Achievement includes that required for a Pass and in many respects is significantly beyond this
Second-class honours Grade 2	2.5	50%	Indicative descriptor: Achievement includes that required for a Pass and in some respects is significantly beyond this
Pass	2.0	40%	Definitive descriptor: Attains all the minimum intended programme learning outcomes

Classification of Postgraduate Diploma (Level 9)	GPA boundary values	PPA boundary values	Description 2009 - 2010 and following
Distinction	3.25	70%	Indicative descriptor: Achievement includes that required for a Pass and in most respects is significantly and consistently beyond this
Merit	3.0	60%	Indicative descriptor: Achievement includes that required for a Pass and in many respects is significantly beyond this
Pass	2.0	40%	Definitive descriptor: Attains all the minimum intended programme learning outcomes

Classification of Taught Master's degrees (Level 9)	GPA boundary values	PPA boundary values	Description 2009 - 2010 and following
First-class honours	3.25	70%	Indicative descriptor: Achievement includes that required for a Pass and in most respects is significantly and consistently beyond this
Second-class honours	3.0	60%	Indicative descriptor: Achievement includes that required for a Pass and in many respects is significantly beyond this
Pass	2.0	40%	Definitive descriptor: Attains all the minimum intended programme learning outcomes

Classification of Research degrees	GPA boundary values	PPA boundary values	Description 2009 - 2010 and following
Unclassified (recognised as equivalent to an honour classification for progression and employment purposes)	N/A	N/A	Definitive descriptor: Attains all the minimum intended learning outcomes for the relevant research degree programme

Other unclassified awards	GPA boundary values	PPA boundary values	Description 2009 - 2010 and following
Unclassified	2.0	40%	Definitive descriptor: Attains all the minimum intended programme learning outcomes

A 'Pass' classification of an award is a positive statement of achievement.

All awards — other than research degrees, minor awards and supplemental awards — shall be classified. However, in exceptional cases, where classification is not feasible, an award may be issued as an unclassified award.

Special-purpose awards which have a volume of at least 60 credits and are comparable to a major award (at the same NFQ level) may be classified in accordance with the convention for the relevant major award. Otherwise, awards of this type shall be unclassified.

Providers shall furnish supplementary information about a person's attainment. They will also work with stakeholders to specify and maintain a reporting system that can be understood and used by stakeholders. The Europass Diploma Supplement (EDS) is the channel for this information.

Sectoral Convention 2 on Mixed Grading Systems

Each provider shall adopt either the percentage grading system or the alphabetic grading system (for all of its provision), in accordance with Sectoral Convention 4 (see below).

Programmes shall be validated with reference to the relevant provider's grading system.¹⁹

Sectoral Convention 3 on Determination of Award Classification

Calculation of the award classification shall be based on the credit-weighted mean value of the allowable grades (*i.e.* those that contribute to the classification) for modules of a specific programme which has been validated by HETAC or by a recognised institution for the purpose of making the award.

A learner may claim exemption from a module whose grade would otherwise contribute to the award classification, provided that he or she can demonstrate the attainment of the relevant knowledge, skill and competence. In cases where the attainment cannot be *graded* fairly and consistently, only an unclassified award shall be available.

Procedures for exemption and/or pass by compensation shall not compromise national standards for awards.

Honours classification, or any classification higher than 'Pass', shall be made based on first-attempt grades. Necessary procedures to allow consistent treatment of a repeat grade as a first-attempt grade, where exceptional mitigating circumstances exist, shall not compromise this principle.

Accordingly, the existing approach to repeat for honours (it is not to be offered) shall be maintained, pending discussions between other awarding bodies (including universities and Dublin Institute of Technology), with a view to finding an agreed national approach. This position shall be reviewed within 12 months of the commencement of the Conventions.

Sectoral Convention 4 on the Percentage and Alphabetic Grading Systems

Percentage marks (*p*) and percentage point values (*ppv*) are defined in the following table.

Description	Percentage mark (<i>p</i>)	Percentage point value (<i>ppv</i>) ²⁰
Passing marks	$40 \leq p \leq 100$	$40 \leq ppv \leq 100$
	$35 \leq p < 40$	$35 \leq ppv < 40$
Outright failing marks	$0 \leq p < 35$	0

The percentage point average (PPA) for a stage is the credit-weighted mean of the percentage point values for the constituent modules.

No credit is allocated to a learner in respect of modules which are failed outright.

¹⁹ Any change in a provider's grading system will necessarily require revisiting the assessment procedures for the affected programmes and, in some cases, revalidating the programmes.

²⁰ The percentage point value is the same as percentage except for marks below 35 where it is zero.

Alphabetic grades and grade point values are defined by the following table.

Description	Alphabetic grade	Grade point value
Passing grades	A	4.0
	B+	3.5
	B	3.0
	B-	2.75
	C+	2.5
	C	2.0
	D	1.5
Outright failing grade	F	0.0

The grade point average (GPA) for a stage is the credit-weighted mean of the grade point values for the constituent modules.

No credit is allocated to a learner in respect of modules which are failed outright.

To gain an overall pass in a stage where the alphabetic grading system is used, there are three requirements:

1. no F grades
2. a GPA of 2.0 or greater
3. the required credits for that stage must have been earned (*i.e.* the stage must be completed)

The two grading systems are significantly different. The interpretation of the alphabetic grades and grade point values, and the percentage²¹ marks and percentage point values and their relationship to one another, derives solely from **Sectoral Convention 1** (see above).

Sectoral Convention 5 on Post-award Achievement required for an additional major award at the same level

Subject to the following conditions, a graduate holding a higher education and training award may present for and, if successful, achieve a further major award at the same level within the same generic area of study. This must involve the attainment of new learning outcomes (*i.e.* post-award achievement).

If the area of specialisation of the post-award achievement is not substantially different, and/or if the associated credit is insufficient for granting a new major award, the applicant may be granted a minor, special-purpose or supplemental award or a Single Subject Certificate (issued by a recognised institution of the Council or by HETAC).

The following table sets out the minimum volume of newly certified learning required of a candidate who is seeking to qualify for an additional major award *at the same level* within the same generic area of study. Note that repeating learning that is substantially equivalent to previously certified learning is not included in the calculation of post-award credit in the following table.

²¹ Percentage means marks out of 100. The significance of particular percentage point values (for example 40%) derives from Sectoral Convention 1.

Award currently held	Additional award sought	Post-award credit for newly certified learning
Higher Certificate	Higher Certificate	A minimum of 60 credits at level 6
Ordinary Bachelor's Degree	Ordinary Bachelor's Degree	A minimum of 60 credits at level 7
Honours Bachelor's Degree	Honours Bachelor's Degree	A minimum of 120 credits, at least 60 of which are at level 8
Master's Degree	Master's Degree	A complete programme

Sectoral Convention 6 on ECTS Grade and Grade Interpretation Scheme (EGIS)²²

Whenever the ECTS Grade and (if appropriate) the ECTS Grade Interpretation Scheme are implemented, it shall be on the basis of a sectoral or national convention.

ECTS Grade is not yet implemented in Ireland. EGIS is described in a draft *ECTS User's Guide* and is not implemented yet.

Sectoral Convention 7 on Exceptions

In exceptional circumstances where, for a particular programme, the legitimate requirements of external authorities conflict with one or more of the **Sectoral Conventions** and *make their application impossible*, an alternative arrangement may be used for that programme. Such exceptional arrangements shall be identified on the Europass Diploma Supplement, described in the programme assessment strategy, and articulated during the programme validation process.

In the case of collaboration between providers using different grading systems, there shall be negotiation and agreement on a joint *programme assessment strategy*, as well as a joint grading system for the collaborative programme and on any necessary conversions of module grades. This shall be addressed during the validation of collaborative programmes and in the context of collaboration and joint awarding agreements etc.

Joint awards have a distinct identity and may use an alternative classification system where appropriate.

²² European Communities *ECTS [Draft] User's Guide 3*, Brussels September 2008.

4. Protocols

4.1 Introduction

The assessment Protocols are for use by providers when establishing or reviewing their assessment procedures. Recognised institutions of the Council are encouraged to use them; other providers are required to use them.

The topics addressed here are those in which a coordinated approach is desirable.

4.2 Assessment and Programme Structures

Programmes are normally divided into *stages* and *modules*. Stages and modules are sub-programmes within programmes.

Conceptually, a stage is a rung on a progression ladder. It may comprise a set of modules at a similar level. Typically, the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)²³ level of the intended learning outcomes of constituent modules increases as a learner progresses through successive stages of a programme. Even where modules are not taken in parallel, the stage concept is important for grouping modules with the same level (NFQ) of learning and requiring a similar level of maturity in the relevant discipline. Full-time learners study all the modules in a stage in parallel, while part-time learners may study as little as one module at a time.

Staged programmes are frequently organised in semesters. A *semester* is a period of time equal to half an academic year. Often, it corresponds to a 30-credit stage that extends to at least half an academic year.

Capstone modules and stages are designed to provide an opportunity for learners to integrate learning attained in other modules and stages. They are always necessary. An example of a capstone module is the process by which a learner produces a dissertation under supervision.

A programme can be constructed without semesters or modules or stages. The best example of this is the 'traditional' PhD programme, but even in this case, there is now a move towards more structured provision.

A module does not require direct teaching as such but always requires learning and assessment — a programme could, for example, be based entirely on a prescribed sequence of assessments, with no teaching in the direct sense.

In the case of full-time learners who take all the modules in a stage in parallel, the module assessments (other than coursework) are normally conducted during a *session* (or sitting) at the end of the stage (remember: a semester is a stage).

4.3 Outline of Typical Structures for the Management and Conduct of Assessment

The provider will generally find it necessary to distribute its assessment responsibility. Appropriate academic governance structures are required to facilitate this while ensuring the necessary accountability.

²³ Here NFQ level of the *minimum* ILO of a module means the level of the minor award for which the module could potentially be validated. There is a minimum volume of learning below which this concept becomes untenable.

The following subsections outline a typical set of arrangements for the distribution of this responsibility. The precise details will vary from one provider to another. Figure 1 illustrates the elements of a typical scenario.

The provider's overall procedures for the assessment of learners should regulate the authority, role, responsibility and accountability of all persons and committees involved with assessment procedures. Such persons might include: learners; internal and external assessors; external examiners; module coordinators; programme coordinators; programme boards/committees; department, school, faculty committees; department, school, faculty heads; boards of examiners; appeals boards; the *registrar* or equivalent officer; the academic committee (or equivalent); the head of provider (president/director/etc.); and the governing body or equivalent.

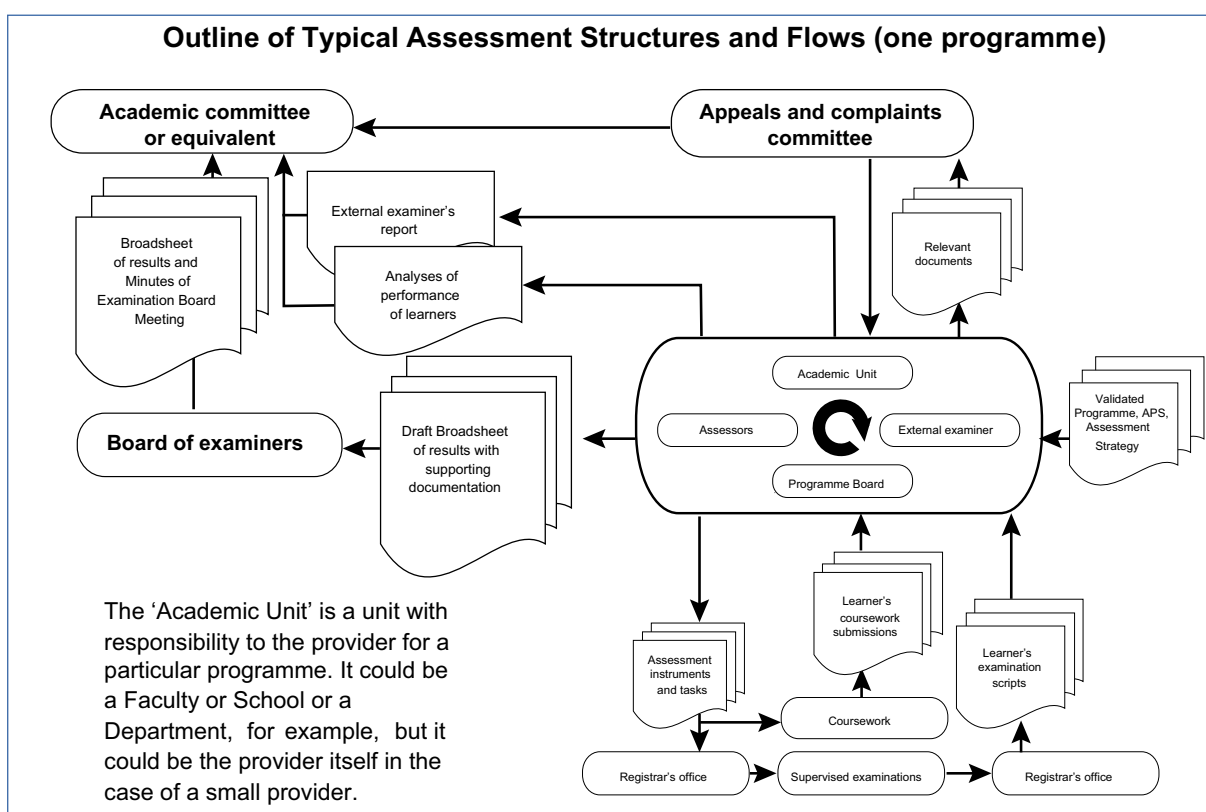


Figure 1

4.4 Progression Eligibility

Where programmes are organised in stages, a learner, to be eligible to progress to a particular stage, is normally required to demonstrate achievement of the minimum intended learning outcomes of all the preceding stages. This should be elaborated in the programme assessment strategy. The *approved programme schedule* summarises the allocation of credits and grades, as well as any special progression requirements.

Subject to any special conditions of the programme, there are three exceptions to the general requirement of passing all the required modules in order to progress to the next stage. These are:

1. pass by compensation
2. exemption from part of the programme (with or without the allocation of a grade and credit)
3. eligibility to progress carrying the failed modules to be passed during the subsequent stage

These conditions are addressed in Sections 4.4.1, 4.4.2 and 4.4.3.

4.4.1 Pass by compensation

Grades which are greater than or equal to 35% but less than 40% in the percentage system — or a 'D' grade in the alphabetic system — are awarded when a learner has nearly (but not quite) demonstrated attainment of the relevant minimum intended learning outcomes for a particular assessment task.

Performance at the first attempt in modules in a given stage (of at least 30 credits) may be used to compensate in the same stage, provided no module in the stage has been failed outright. A pass earned in this way is referred to as a pass by compensation and is credit bearing.

Where a candidate is just below pass in each of a string of independent modules in the same stage, the results are reinforced. Consequently, it is justifiable to limit the number of independent modules that may be passed by compensation in a stage. Because modules can have different sizes, it is reasonable to express such a limit as a proportion of the total available credit rather than the number of modules. This latter point assumes that the confidence in the grade is increased in larger volume modules owing to compensation processes operating within the module.

In a programme based on stages, subject to conditions 1 - 4 specified below, a module can be passed by compensation (using passes in other modules from the same stage) unless this is specifically precluded in the programme assessment strategy and approved programme schedule. Compensation can be applied automatically. Accordingly, the programme and module assessment strategies should take this into account. Specifically, they should further ensure that compensation is consistent with the requirement that minimum intended programme learning outcomes are achieved before an award is recommended.

In the programme assessment strategy and approved programme schedule, certain modules may be designated as not passable by compensation.

Compensation can only be applied in the following circumstances:

1. The learner has been assessed for all stage modules and no module in the stage has been failed outright (F or below 35%).
2. The results of all modules in the stage are from first attempts.
3. In the case of full-time learners, the results are from the same sitting (session).
4. The overall Alphabetic Grade Point Average is at least 2.0 or the stage-aggregate of credit-weighted excesses of percentage marks (over 40) is greater than or equal to twice the stage-aggregate of credit-weighted deficits of marks (under 40) and the potentially compensatable results account for no more than one-third of the credit for the stage: *i.e.* 20 credits in a 60-credit stage or 10 credits in a 30-credit stage.

Compensation may be applied only to enable a learner to pass a stage (at the award stage, a learner who passes by compensation remains eligible for honours etc.). Compensation does not change the result of the modules passed in that way. When reporting module passes by compensation (on the Europass Diploma Supplement), the actual result is returned, *e.g.* 37% or D, along with an indication that the module pass has been granted by compensation.

4.4.2 Exemption from Studying a Module

For the purpose of this section, *exemption* means exemption from parts of a programme. (Note that the term *exemption* is also used in a different sense to indicate satisfactory completion of a module.)

Exemption procedures must be consistent with the necessity for learners to demonstrate the learning outcomes required to qualify for an award. Exemption allows those learning outcomes to be achieved and/or demonstrated in alternative ways. It also recognises that the learning outcomes may have been achieved prior to enrolment in the programme.

In principle, exemptions are permitted at any stage of a programme, subject to the relevant programme and constituent module assessment strategies.

Where the result of the module is required for calculating an award classification, the provider should, where feasible, establish a fair, consistent and transparent process for grading the learner's achievements in respect of the exempted module's learning outcomes. Where this is not possible, the award can only be recommended without classification.

- **Recognition of Prior Learning — Uncertified Learning**

A learner may be exempted from participating in a module if he/she has already attained the minimum intended module learning outcomes. The demonstrable prior learning should be a sufficiently good match to the minimum intended module learning outcomes to justify exemption from the module in the context of the overall programme.

In the particular case where the relevant prior learning is uncertified (e.g. prior experiential learning), the provider should assess the learner using the regular module assessment instruments and/or by an alternative assessment arrangement. Learners who are assessed to have demonstrated the required learning are granted the available credit for the module and are exempt from the module. Furthermore, a grade (percentage mark or alphabetic grade) should be available in principle. However, providers may choose not to grade if the assessment arrangement might not provide grading which is consistent with the regular assessment instruments.

If the module is one which contributes to the award classification, prior learning achievement must be graded in order for the award to be classified. Otherwise, an unclassified award should be made.

Where the module does not contribute to the award classification, the prior learning achievement does not need to be graded.

When a grade is not assigned, the result for learners who demonstrate the required learning should be returned as *Exemption Granted*. Where a grade is awarded, it can be used in compensation etc., as with any regularly passed module.

Where grading is not feasible, there may be circumstances in which a learner might be advantaged by waiving a right to exemption to enable award classification. The provider should foresee and provide for such situations, and should also ensure that learners are aware of any such consequences.

- **Recognition of Prior Learning — Certified Learning**

There are two scenarios of prior certified learning.

Scenario 1

The learning is certified by an awarding body in the form of a major award (e.g. a higher certificate or bachelor's degree) or is included as part of such an award.

Subject to Sectoral Convention 5, an exemption may be granted for a module if the learner demonstrates the minimum intended module learning outcomes. For learners who demonstrate the required learning, the result should be returned as *Exemption Granted*. The learner should not be granted any ECTS credit because credit has already been granted in the prior qualification.

If the module is one that would normally contribute to the award classification, such exemption should only entitle a learner to an unclassified award unless it is feasible to recognise, or award, a grade. Any grade awarded/recognised should be consistent with the prior award classification and the module grades in the associated Europass Diploma Supplement.

Scenario 2

The learning is certified by an awarding body in the form of a minor, special-purpose or supplemental award or it is certified in respect of a period of study, and²⁴ the relevant credit has not already been used to meet the credit requirements for a major award.

This case of prior certified learning can be handled in the same way as prior uncertified learning with one exception: the provider should not require the learner to undergo assessment provided that the attainment of the minimum intended module learning outcomes can be demonstrated. However, where there is a need for a grade to be assigned — e.g. where it contributes to an award classification — assessment may be necessary. The learner may transfer his/her credit. A grade is available in principle, but providers may choose not to grade if consistency with the grading in regular assessment instruments cannot be assured.

For learners who demonstrate the required learning but are not graded, the result should be returned as *Exemption Granted*.

4.4.3 Carrying a module to the next stage (progression with credit deficit)

Before progressing to the next stage, learners are required to pass all modules identified as essential prerequisites for progression, as specified by the programme assessment strategy and approved programme schedule. The presumption here is that the stages are substantial, e.g. 30 or more credits, and the programme is for a major award.

A provider may, however, allow learners to be permitted, on a case-by-case basis and under exceptional circumstances, to carry a failed module while progressing to the next stage, provided the module is not a prerequisite for any module in this stage and provided this is consistent with the requirements of the relevant programme assessment strategy. Normally, learners are required to pass a carried module in the stage into which it is carried.

As a general guideline, the normal maximum missing credit should be 16% of the credit for the stage, e.g. 10 credits per 60-credit stage.

²⁴ If the credit has been used then Scenario 1 applies.

4.5 Top-level Management of Assessment

The provider should have a top-level deliberative committee with overall responsibility for academic affairs. For the purpose of this document, this entity is referred to as the *academic committee*.

Once established, the academic committee should have included in its remit the (provider's) formal responsibility for summative assessment; the academic committee should delegate this appropriately. Any individual or committee with authority to summatively assess learners enrolled on the provider's programmes receives that authority, either directly or indirectly, from the *academic committee*.

The overall composition of the academic committee should reflect the competences required for it to carry out its functions. Without attempting to define the academic committee here, its assessment-related functions require that it include the head of the provider (or, in the case of an organisation with other functions, the head of education programme provision). The person charged with overall executive responsibility for the management of academic affairs, in addition to other experts and stakeholders, should also be included. Moreover, there should be an appropriate balance between managers, teachers, assessors and learners.

One person should be charged with overall executive responsibility for the management of academic affairs. This includes responsibility for the management of assessment and for ensuring that it is conducted in accordance with the provider's policy and procedures as agreed with HETAC and outlined in its quality assurance policies and procedures. For the purpose of this document, this person will be referred to as the *registrar* (though other titles are used and indeed other definitions of the term can be found).

4.5.1 External Examining

External examining is a specific learner assessment quality assurance mechanism employed by providers that supports public confidence in academic qualifications.

External examiners should be approved by the provider's academic committee and appointed by the provider — except where, under the terms of HETAC's monitoring policy, they are appointed by HETAC for an initial period. The term of office is usually three years.

External examiners typically send their reports to the registrar, and to HETAC, where it has made the appointment.

The head of the academic unit responsible for a programme and the programme's assessors will typically act as a link with the programme's external examiner.

Specific guidelines on external examining are provided in HETAC's *Effective Practice Guideline for External Examining*.

4.5.2 Archiving Learner Assessment Data

The registrar (or an equivalent person) should have overall responsibility for maintaining records relating to learner assessment.

Records relating to summative assessment results should be permanently and securely retained — whether an award has been recommended or not. There are a number of reasons for retaining records:

- Providing information to learners
- Strategic planning
- Facilitating quality assurance
- Operating procedures for access, transfer and progression of learners in accordance with the policies and procedures associated with the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)

The level of detail of permanently retained data should be at least sufficient to facilitate the issue of a Europass Diploma Supplement. In the case of learners who have not received an award, the information to produce a similarly detailed transcript should be retained. This will require the retention of the relevant curricula. (It should be noted that HETAC does not normally hold data at this level of detail.)

4.5.3 Administrative Infrastructure

Many providers will find it appropriate to establish a specialised unit responsible for the following:

- Securely print and distribute examination papers.
- Coordinate and approve the venues for assessment.
- Organise invigilation.
- Collect scripts from venues and log them.
- Maintain records of attendance.
- Securely transfer the scripts to assessors.
- Make arrangements for learners requiring special accommodation.

4.6 Programme-level Management of Assessment

An *academic unit* is a division of the provider with devolved responsibility for providing one or more programmes. Large providers may have hierarchies of academic units — faculties, schools and departments — each with a defined level of devolved responsibility. Many of the provider's programme-level responsibilities detailed in this section can be usefully devolved to an academic unit.

The following general responsibilities apply (more specific ones are detailed in the subsequent sections):

- Ensure that assessment procedures accord with the Foundations (Principles and Guidelines, see Section 2).
- Ensure that programme boards (discussed in Section 4.6.1) and assessors discharge their assessment functions professionally.
- Monitor the programme assessment findings, making national and international comparisons and diagnosing problems. Take appropriate remedial action to address the causes of the problems (and not just the symptoms) and confirm that the actions have had their intended effect.
- Prepare the information required by boards of examiners.

The following sections elaborate on the details.

4.6.1 Individual Programme-level Processes

For each programme, it is good practice for the provider to establish a dedicated committee with overall responsibility for that programme, including the programme assessment strategy. For the purpose of this document, this committee will be referred to as the *programme board*.

Modules can also benefit from having a similar dedicated committee, particularly if they are shared by multiple programmes. Module boards should be transparent to the relevant programme board. If established, module boards are additional to programme boards and cannot replace the programme board.

The programme's teaching staff would normally be members of the programme board, as would the programme coordinator and other persons, in accordance with the provider's quality assurance procedures. Learners may also be involved in programme boards. The programme board may be accountable through the academic unit responsible for the programme. If not, a programme board should be accountable to some higher authority within the provider organisation.

The following subsections outline the necessary programme-level processes that could be managed by a programme board.

- **Designing the programme and preparing for validation**

When designing a programme, the major objectives should be to establish these and align them with each other:

1. Minimum (and any other) intended programme learning outcomes
2. Curriculum
3. Assessment

The programme assessment strategy should form a substantial part of the documentation to be considered by a programme validation panel and by review panels. It should be supported by a set of constituent module assessment strategies.

- **Monitoring the correspondence between learner results and actual learner performance**

In consultation with the external examiner, the provider should systematically monitor module and programme assessment findings, including trends, and should produce data and analyses which facilitate making national and international comparisons. The findings, along with actions taken and recommendations, should be reported upwards, as appropriate, through the provider's structures.

The academic committee should ensure that it has the evidence necessary for it to decide whether or not learners' results (grades and award classifications) correspond with actual learner performance (learning outcomes). This addresses the validity and reliability of the assessment instruments and is one of the main quality assurance functions of the academic committee. Its approach should be systematic and rigorous. In the event that systematic differences are discovered by this process, the academic committee should require that the relevant assessment procedures be reviewed (for future cohorts of learners).

- **Coordination of assessment functions**

Each programme should have a *programme assessment strategy* (c.f. 2.2.5) and *module assessment strategies* (c.f. 2.2.5) for its constituent modules. It is important that these are coordinated, interpreted consistently, and implemented by assessors. The maintenance and continual enhancement of the assessment strategies require a coordinated evidence-based approach.

Individual assessors (internal and external) involved with the programme are part of a team engaged in a collaborative venture. Accordingly, their work should be coordinated; this is facilitated by having structures such as academic units and programme boards.

- **Internal review of draft assessment tasks**

A criterion-referenced grading scheme should be produced for each assessment task.

Draft summative assessment tasks (such as draft examination papers and continuous assessment work and, where used, alternative assessment for the purpose of recognising prior learning etc.) and grading schemes for all stages of assessment should be internally reviewed by a committee such as a programme board before seeking and acting on the advice of the external examiner (where appropriate).

A person participating in the review of draft summative assessment tasks should be free of any conflict of interest (actual or potential, real or apparent). This would exclude learners involved in the programme and other persons who may have close ties to learners involved in the programme (e.g. relatives).

- **Managing continuous assessment**

When well planned and managed, the assignment of coursework and continuous assessment can impact positively on learning. Otherwise, it can have a negative impact.

Continuous assessment regulations (Section 2.2.5) should address issues such as the following:

- provision of effective and timely feedback to learners
- deadlines for learners
- penalties for late submission
- the possibility of resubmission
- requests for special arrangements on the grounds of mitigating circumstances (for example, in the event of absence or underperformance)
- the possibility of examination in lieu of continuous assessment
- arrangements for repeating

Where necessary, the general continuous assessment regulations should be supplemented by particular regulations for individual programmes or modules. Where continuous assessment is either failed or not attempted, the policy and procedures for dealing with affected learners should be efficient, explicit and made clear to learners (including any legitimate variations for specific programmes and modules).

- **Assessment of Group Projects**

See Section 2.2.5.

4.6.2 Retention of Assessment Submissions

All assessment submissions should be securely retained for as long as necessary, and always while there is the possibility of appeal. In so far as practical for the intended purpose, this material includes scripts, continuous assessment submissions, dissertations, recordings of performances etc. The intended purpose is to maintain an adequate trace of evidence of the learner's performance. The retention policy should not prevent students' work from being returned with feedback, but may require that some of it is collected again at the end of the module.

Research theses accepted for higher degrees should be permanently retained in the provider's library and/or in other suitable libraries. These should normally be made available in hard copy or electronically.

4.7 Commentary on the Functions of Assessors

Providers necessarily rely upon the expertise of competent persons in the design of assessment tasks, the assessment itself, and in the grading of learners.

Assessors are competent persons who exercise an assessment function on behalf of the provider. Internal assessors are members of the provider's staff. External assessors are not members of the provider's staff.

With one exception, external examiners are not assessors — they do not assess learners. The exception is the research degree external examiner who is an external assessor.

In respect of summative assessment, the provider should determine the functions and responsibilities of internal and external assessors. Such functions and responsibilities would normally include, but are not necessarily limited to, the following:

- Contribute to the design and development of the programme and module assessment strategies.
- Collegially (e.g. in programme boards) maintain and monitor the effectiveness of the programme assessment strategy and the module assessment strategies to ensure fairness, consistency and compliance with the intended learning outcomes.
- Prepare draft summative assessment tasks (including coursework assignments) in line with the module and programme assessment strategies, along with criterion-referenced grading schemes.
- Prepare equivalent but alternative draft summative assessment tasks (etc.) for learners who:
 - require an opportunity to make repeat attempts.
 - have special education and training needs.
 - request recognition of prior learning (for the purpose of exemption) and require assessment.
- Submit draft assessment tasks to collegial affirmation (e.g. by programme board) in good time to allow review, redraft and transmission to the external examiner.
- Be available when learners are undergoing assessment.

- Assess (jointly with others where required) submitted work fairly, consistently and in accordance with a collegially approved criterion-referenced grading scheme that is based on intended learning outcomes. Recommend grades in accordance with the provider's procedures.
- Maintain appropriate records.
- Submit findings and recommendations as required by the provider.
- Monitor learners' performances, and provide timely and effective feedback to learners.
- Participate at boards of examiners' meetings and associated preparatory meetings.
- Support the provider's assessment complaints and appeals processes.
- Act ethically and professionally.
- Declare (at the appropriate times) any relevant circumstances that might give rise to a conflict of interest (actual or potential, real or apparent).

4.8 Boards of Examiners

Section 2.2.8 defines the *board of examiners*.

Meetings of boards of examiners should be established to consider all assessment findings (including the findings of repeat/supplemental assessment) and to determine assessment results for each of the learners presented. These could include:

- grades for assessment tasks
- grades for modules
- eligibility to progress²⁵ from one stage in a programme to the next
- eligibility for higher education and training awards
- classifications of those awards, where applicable

The Guidelines (Section 2) advise that providers' regulations for boards of examiners should address the membership, quorum, procedures, powers (authority), decision-making policy (especially for the various scenarios where members are divided equally on a decision), procedure and accountability.

Boards of examiners should normally be accountable to the provider's academic committee or an equivalent committee. This means that the academic committee, or a sub-committee appointed for the purpose, would normally be responsible for overseeing appeals of decisions made by boards of examiners. It would receive the minutes of boards of examiners' meetings and external examiners' reports. The academic committee would periodically review the operations of boards of examiners.

The regulations should also set out the roles and responsibilities of the various members of boards of examiners, including the chairperson, secretary, external examiners and assessors.

²⁵ The provider makes the formal decision on the progression of learners who have been assessed as eligible. This is because additional factors such as pastoral care may be pertinent to that decision.

4.8.1 **Board of Examiners: Membership and Quorum**

A board of examiners normally comprises all assessors (internal and external) who have a role in the assessment of relevant module and programme stages, along with the relevant external examiners, programme coordinators and the relevant academic managers. (These may be the heads of relevant academic units and other specified persons, including those who may have relevant contributions to make in respect of decisions about learner eligibility to progress.)

The provider should specify the quorum for meetings of boards of examiners. *Subject to the following paragraph*, the quorum should include the programme's external examiners and a sufficient number of the programme's assessors to deliberate competently upon the assessment findings presented. This should normally be defined in a provider's general assessment policy. The relevant programme external examiners should be present at any meeting where recommendations for the granting of higher education and training awards are made. Otherwise, it is desirable (but not mandatory) for the external examiner to be present, provided he/she attends one examination board *per annum*.

There may be rare and exceptional circumstances in which an external examiner is unable to attend the meeting of the board of examiners, but has nevertheless visited the provider's premises, examined the assessment findings, agrees with the recommendations recorded on the draft broadsheet of results, and has provided a written report to be read out at the examination board meeting. The external examiner may then be represented at the meeting (of the board of examiners) by a suitable person. He/she must be independent of the provider and will report on the meeting directly to the external examiner.

Where an external examiner is incapacitated during his/her term of office, or is unable to attend the meeting of the board of examiners owing to unforeseen circumstances, a replacement external examiner should be appointed.

An inquorate board of examiners' meeting does not have the authority to make (legitimate) assessment decisions.

4.8.2 **HETAC Observer at the Board of Examiners**

In the case of new providers of programmes leading to HETAC awards, a HETAC representative may attend meetings of boards of examiners as an observer. The attending HETAC representative may neither participate nor be requested to participate in the deliberations concerning assessment results. However, he/she may assist in the interpretation of HETAC standards, policy, criteria and procedures.

4.8.3 **Confidentiality**

The proceedings and deliberations of meetings of boards of examiners are strictly confidential.

Excepting legitimate reporting requirements, no person who has attended or observed a meeting of a board of examiners may disclose to any other person a decision of the board or any document, information or opinion considered, conveyed or expressed at the meeting.

4.8.4 **Frequency of Meetings of Boards of Examiners**

Meetings of boards of examiners are held when necessary.

4.8.5 **Overview of Findings Noting Trends and Anomalies**

Before looking at individual findings, the board of examiners should normally consider overall findings and trends, noting any general issues that may require consideration.

4.8.6 Preparing for Board of Examiners' Meeting

The dates of boards of examiners' meetings should be arranged in good time and in consultation with external examiners. Dates should be notified to all involved, including HETAC where appropriate.

A board of examiners cannot base its decisions on incomplete results. Therefore, all preparatory work should be completed in good time for the meeting.

The following material should be available to the board of examiners' meeting:

- the programme assessment strategy and approved programme schedule
- the draft broadsheet of results
- any further information to be considered by the board of examiners

The broadsheet of results is described in the Appendix, page 57.

- **Scrutiny of assessment material by the external examiner**

The provider should retain all the learners' assessed submissions so that the external examiner can sample them. Recordings of performances can be used for this purpose.

In addition, the external examiner will typically require additional information, including:

- the minimum intended programme learning outcomes and programme assessment strategy (c.f. Section 2.2.5) and approved programme schedule.
 - further specific information about the assessment tasks and the assessment process and criteria at module and programme levels.
 - other relevant contextual information about the programme's teaching and learning.
 - analysis of the programme's assessment findings, including comparative analysis (e.g. correlation of findings with those of external assessment instruments) to aid in assessing trends and making national and international comparisons.²⁶
- **Meeting prior to the board of examiners' meeting for the consideration of results**
- It is reasonable for providers to arrange meetings that offer assessors an opportunity to review and discuss their findings, ensure that they are accurate and prepare the draft broadsheet of results for presentation to the board of examiners. External examiners can be involved in such meetings.

The authority at such meetings rests with the individual assessors and, for each, extends to the specific elements which he or she has assessed. Such a meeting may influence, but not compel, assessors to review their assessment findings. In contrast to the board of examiners' meeting, it would be inappropriate for a pre-board meeting to replace the recommendation of an individual assessor with that of its own.

The minutes of such meetings should be made available to the board of examiners where appropriate.

²⁶ For example, where learners take external professional examinations their performance in those examinations can be compared with that of learners in other institutions in Ireland and elsewhere.

While some modules may be more challenging than others — and this may be reflected in the grades assigned — any module having a grade distribution which is persistently and significantly inconsistent with others warrants investigation. If systematic anomalies are discovered (through routine analysis or following consideration of learners' complaints), these should be reported at the board of examiners' meeting and notified to the academic committee. Moreover, it is necessary that the provider should attempt to determine the causes of any anomalies and take steps²⁷ to ensure that they do not recur.

- **Producing evidence that assessment procedures are valid and reliable**

Boards of examiners should be appropriately informed about the reliability and validity of the programmes' assessment instruments. Determining the reliability or validity of an assessment instrument can be done theoretically or empirically or using a hybrid of the two. The empirical approach will normally involve the correlation of learners' results for the assessment instrument under consideration, with their results from an alternative assessment instrument.

4.8.7 Board of Examiners' Decision-making Process

The board of examiners' meeting is formal and deliberative.

Normally, decisions should be reached by consensus. However, should that consensus be impossible, an alternative decision-making mechanism may be employed. Whatever the mechanism, it should be clearly established in the provider's regulations.

In the event of a disagreement between the board of examiners and an individual assessor, the board of examiners may replace an assessor's recommendation with its own. It should, however, record this disagreement in the minutes of its meeting. Formalising a dissenting view in this way should not be done lightly.

In the event of an irresolvable disagreement between the board of examiners and the external examiner, the board of examiners' decision should be final. The disagreement should be recorded in the minutes of the meeting, in the external examiner's report, and in an attachment to the broadsheet of results.

Persistent and recurring disagreements at boards of examiners may suggest a systemic issue that requires investigation to identify the cause.

4.8.8 Matters to be Deliberated by the Board of Examiners

The board of examiners should satisfy itself that learners have been appropriately graded and classified. This information should be recorded on a broadsheet of results and signed by the members of the board.

Where systemic errors are discovered, any necessary adjustments to marks/grades should be applied to all learners affected. The decision to make such adjustments and the supporting rationale should be recorded in the minutes so that the academic committee is informed and for the purpose of follow-up. Boards of examiners should be vigilant against any tendency towards grade inflation and should base their decisions on the valid and reliable assessment of explicit learning outcomes.

²⁷ This may involve changing the teaching and learning and assessment arrangements and/or reviewing the programme.

This may require closer perusal of cases near the classification boundaries, *i.e.* within ± 1 percentage point of the percentage point average threshold, or ± 0.05 of the grade point average threshold.

When considering borderline cases, it is important to consider the learner's performance as a whole against the minimum intended learning outcomes. In the absence of bias, it is to be expected that as many borderline grades will be reduced as will be increased. It is important to stress that the preceding sentence does not imply that results should be adjusted to fit this expectation — only assessment against learning outcomes criteria should be used to determine results. If this balance is not maintained, it will probably affect the assessors' interpretations of pass standards and may lead to a diffusion of actual standards.

A board of examiners should only grant eligibility for progression, or recommend that an award be made, when it is satisfied, based on consideration of the necessary evidence, that the required learning outcomes have been attained. In the event that a board of examiners is not satisfied that it has the necessary evidence in a particular case, it may report the case as withheld (*i.e.* the result is undetermined). Such cases may be reconsidered at the next meeting of the board of examiners. Where the determination is conditional, it may be reconsidered by a special process recommended by the board of examiners, provided this practice is permitted by the academic committee.

4.8.9 Minutes of Board of Examiners' Meetings

The minutes of boards of examiners' meetings should be recorded in accordance with the provider's guidelines for recording formal meetings of deliberative committees.

4.8.10 Notification of Results to HETAC

Following a board of examiners' meeting, the original (signed) broadsheet of results should be sent to HETAC, notifying it of results and recommendations for awards to be made.

A broadsheet of results should be returned for each 60-credit stage of a programme. If the programme is staged into semesters, one broadsheet of results may cover two semester stages. If the total credit is not a multiple of 60, the final broadsheet may cover less than 60 credits.

Repeat supplemental assessment results should be returned on a separate broadsheet of results.

4.8.11 Withholding Results from a Board of Examiners

In accordance with its own regulations, and where it has a legitimate reason for doing so, a provider may decide to withhold a learner's results from the board of examiners. In this context, the provider must decide whether it will present such a learner for consideration for the award again. If it does so, the provider must have due regard to the Conventions (Section 3), and under what conditions (*e.g.* as a first attempt or otherwise) this may be done.

4.8.12 Notification of Results to Learners

Following the board of examiners' meeting, the provider may publish the list of results. It may also decide to withhold the results of learners who have not demonstrated fulfilment of its requirements, as notified to all learners at the start of their programme.

4.8.13 The Granting of Awards

When HETAC accepts the recommendations of a legitimately constituted board of examiners meeting, it will grant appropriate awards.

Acceptance of recommendations is automatic, assuming that the provider has followed agreed processes. Specifically, the recommendations should be consistent with the requirements of the provider's validated programme and HETAC's requirements concerning award titles and award classifications.

4.9 Discussing Scripts and Results with Learners

Following the issue of results, assessors involved in the specific assessment tasks should normally be available to meet individual learners to review their scripts etc.

Such consultations aim to:

- Give formative feedback to learners, especially to those who need to repeat.
- Explain the basis of the learner's grade/mark against the *assessment criteria*, especially where the learner believes that the assessor may have made an error in grading the work.

Such a consultation is distinct from a formal re-check or review of the results.

4.10 Appeals, Complaints, Re-checks and Reviews

An *appeal* is a request to a higher authority for the alteration of the decision or judgement of a lower one. In the context of the assessment of learners, the lower authority could be a board of examiners, and the higher authority the academic committee or one of its sub-committees. The QAA²⁸ code of practice 'defines an "appeal" as a request for a review of a decision of an academic body charged with decisions on student progression, assessment and awards'.²⁹

In the context of the assessment of learners, a *complaint* is an expression of a concern that a particular assessment procedure is unfair or inconsistent or not fit-for-purpose. The QAA code of practice 'defines a "complaint" as the expression of a specific concern about the provision of a course/module, or a programme of study, or a related academic service'.³⁰

4.10.1 Appeals Procedures

The provider should have procedures in place for the appeal of assessment decisions and judgements.

The appeals procedures should set out certain minimum grounds on which a learner may appeal the result.

All appeals procedures should be transparent. The timeline should be reasonable and made clear to learners (*i.e.* dates for appealing, dates for communication of the outcome of an appeal etc.).

HETAC does not have a role in a learner's appeal of the provider's assessment decisions.

²⁸ The QAA is the UK's higher education quality assurance agency.

²⁹ The Quality Assurance Agency (2007).

³⁰ The Quality Assurance Agency (2007).

4.10.2 Complaints Procedures

The provider should have processes for dealing promptly with any problems raised by learners concerning assessment. Because a learner's assessment complaint may be only one aspect of a broader complaint, this process should be integrated within the provider's broader complaints policy and procedures. Learners' complaints may concern, but are not necessarily limited to: the assessment process; the conduct of the process; the assessment criteria; and the relevance of the assessment tasks to the intended programme learning outcomes and learning opportunities.

4.10.3 Re-check and Review Procedures

Re-check means the administrative operation of checking (again) the recording and combination of component scores for a module and/or stage.

Review means the re-consideration of the assessment decision, either by the original assessor or by other competent persons. Learners are required to state the grounds for the requested review. The grounds for review will normally be that the learner suspects that the assessment was erroneous in some respect.

The provider should determine the procedures for dealing with requests for re-check or review. Any deadline should be no less than five working days following the issue of results. Any fee charged should be refunded in the event of a change in the results.

Re-checks and reviews should be completed in time for the appropriate HETAC grant of awards date.

Reviews should be overseen by the provider's academic committee or equivalent. The relevant external examiner should be notified and/or consulted if any change in classification is decided by the academic committee following review. Re-checks should be managed directly by the responsible academic unit.

4.11 Dealing with Plagiarism and Other Types of Academic Misconduct

Providers should build a culture which values and supports good academic conduct.

There are degrees of plagiarism, ranging from the unintentional and minor to the clearly intentional and extensive. While it can occur in a written examination, plagiarism arises more obviously in coursework and project work.

Tackling plagiarism effectively requires a multi-disciplinary and multi-layered approach. The provider should have effective policies and procedures in place to prevent, detect, combat and deter plagiarism at all levels and by all members in the provider's organisation. As part of this:

- Learners and assessors should receive training in fair dealing with other people's work (understood inclusively *i.e.* text, ideas, artefacts etc.), and in the general and discipline-specific norms for the citation of sources.
- Learners and assessors should receive training in what constitutes plagiarism and the degrees of plagiarism, in the context of total or partial rejection of an attempt at an assessment task.

- Learners and assessors should also receive guidance on the distinction between acceptable collaboration with other learners and collusion in plagiarism.
- Learners should be made aware of the consequences of plagiarism to them and to society.
- Assessors should be made aware of the protocols for investigating cases where plagiarism is suspected and the level of evidence required before an accusation can be considered — accusations should not be made lightly.
- Assessment strategies (including methods etc.) should be designed to minimise the possibility of plagiarism.
- Where necessary, assessors should receive training, guidance and support in the design of assessments to minimise susceptibility to plagiarism and in methods for its detection.
- Providers should have effective, published procedures for monitoring and detecting plagiarism, including appropriate warnings, sanctions and penalties.

Accepting unwarranted support from others (e.g. parents, professionals) in preparing continuous assessment elements which are submitted as one's own work is a form of plagiarism.

5. Interpretations

This section explains the usage of certain key terms in this document and elaborates on some areas that are closely linked to assessment, such as *feedback* and *learning theory*.

ACCS:	Accumulation of Credit by Certification of Subjects. An ACCS learner is a person who is working (perhaps part-time) towards a qualification by studying the component modules at his/her own pace.
Academic Committee:	A top-level deliberative committee with overall responsibility for academic affairs.
Appeal:	See Section 4.10.
Approved Programme Schedule:	<p>The approved programme schedule provides an overview of the programme. The details provided include: the name of the programme, the name of award, the NFO³¹ level of programme and the total number of credits. For each stage of the programme, the schedule lists the credit available for each of the modules and the contribution to the grade of each of the modules' components. It also specifies the requirements for learners to progress from one stage to another and to complete the programme successfully. The approved programme schedule is attached to the certificate of programme accreditation, and is deemed to form part of the assessment regulations applying to the programme. Without diminishing the importance of the approved programme schedule, it is but a summary of <i>some</i> of the information that should be in the programme assessment strategy.</p> <p>Any special assessment conditions (such as modules which cannot be <i>passed by compensation</i>) must be included in the approved programme schedule. Such conditions must not contravene the <i>Sectoral Conventions for Assessment</i> (Section 3).</p>
Assessment:	Learner assessment (specifically assessment of learning) means inference (e.g. judgement or estimation or evaluation) of a learner's knowledge, skill or competence by comparison with a standard based on appropriate evidence. Self-assessment is included in this.
Assessment criteria:	Assessment criteria are the standards or tests by which a learner's performance in an assessment task is judged. See also <i>grading scheme</i> .
Assessment grade:	A label which quantifies the learner's level of performance of an assessment task. Communication of the grade to the learner may be accompanied by qualitative <i>feedback</i> .
Assessment instrument:	Any assessment task and criteria, along with procedures for its conduct, together with the explicit <i>grading scheme</i> (i.e. <i>grading rubrics</i>).

31 NFO is the National Framework of Qualifications

Assessment procedures:	All assessment-related activity and the ways in which it is conducted and undertaken.
Assessment task:	An assessment task could be a written or oral examination, coursework, project work, the writing of a thesis, dissertation or similar work, or other such forms of performance as may have been approved in relation to a validated programme of higher education and training.
Assessor:	A person who assesses a learner.
(External) Assessor:	An external assessor is an assessor who is external to the provider. An independent external assessor of a research thesis is traditionally called an <i>external examiner</i> . His/her role is different from the <i>external examiner</i> for a taught programme.
(Internal) Assessor:	An internal assessor is a member of the provider's staff who is an assessor.
Authenticity:	Authenticity is related to <i>validity</i> . Authentic assessment involves using assessment tasks that resemble the kinds of professional tasks that arise in the relevant community of practice. The assessment task must appear authentic to the learner. Examples include the use of a poster presentation or the writing of a short research article as part of the assessment task for a final-year investigative project. These are authentic because they are typical communication channels for researchers.
Award:	An award which is conferred, granted or given by an awarding body and which records that a learner has acquired a standard of knowledge, skill or competence.
Award Standard:	<p>Award standards are the expected prior learning required to qualify for an award. See Section 2.1, page 7 for the formal definition.</p> <p>Awards standards and award type descriptors are structured and presented under the three main strands: Knowledge, Know-how, and Skill and Competence; these are further divided into eight sub-strands. The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) defines these terms.</p> <p>Awards standards describe the required learning for awards at specified levels in the NFQ³² in specified fields of learning. Awards standards³³ are concise texts that normally cover broad-fields of learning. However, professional qualification-specific award standards may also be determined where appropriate.</p> <p>Together with the award type descriptors of the NFQ, the awards standards describe the learning, in terms of knowledge, skill and/or competence, that is to be acquired by learners before particular higher education and training awards may be made. The awards standards describe the learning required to pass.</p>

32 Please refer to the foreword of the HETAC standards documents for a complete description.

33 'Named awards' is a term used: National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (2003) *Policies and Criteria for the establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications*. p.33. [Internet]. Available from: <http://www.nqai.ie/docs/publications/11.pdf> [Accessed: 13th June 2008].

Broadsheet of results:	See Section 6, Appendix.
Capstone:	<p>A capstone module is one that provides an opportunity for a learner to integrate accumulated learning and make the necessary connections in the context of a particular discipline. An example of an award-stage capstone module is a dissertation or project.</p> <p>Capstone assessment aims to measure cumulative learning at a particular stage, including at the award stage. It is particularly important for award-stage capstone assessment tasks to be <i>authentic</i>.</p>
Compensation:	<p>In certain conditions, a learner who has not failed outright a particular assessment task in a particular stage may be granted a pass by compensation for that task. The marginal result is compensated by a satisfactory performance in another assessment task or tasks in the same stage. A justification for compensation is that there is always the possibility of an assessment error in modules that are not failed outright. The likelihood of a false negative result is highest near grade boundaries.</p> <p>Compensation does not change the original result. Instead, it enables progression and allows the allocation of credit.</p>
Competence (NFQ):	<p>'Competence is the effective and creative demonstration and deployment of knowledge and skill in human situations. Such situations could comprise general social and civic ones, as well as specific occupational ones. Competence draws on attitudes, emotions, values and sense of self-efficacy, as well as on declarative and procedural knowledge. Competence outcomes can thus be stated in the form, "In a specified range of circumstances, a learner will be able to ...".'</p>
Complaint:	<p>See Section 4.10. In the context of the assessment of learners, a complaint is an expression of a concern that a particular assessment procedure is unfair or inconsistent or not fit-for-purpose.</p> <p>The QAA code of practice <i>'defines a "complaint" as the expression of a specific concern about the provision of a course/module, or a programme of study, or a related academic service'</i>.³⁴</p>
Consistent assessment:	The meaning of consistent assessment is set out in Section 2.2.3.
Criterion-referenced assessment:	<p>A criterion-referenced assessment is one 'that allows its users to make grade interpretations in relation to a functional performance level, as distinguished from those interpretations that are made in relation to the performance of others' (SEPT, 1985). Note that 'assessment user' is distinct from 'the person sitting the test' and is normally the provider in the present context.</p>

34 The Quality Assurance Agency (2007).

Criterion-referenced assessment based on learning outcomes is inconsistent with *norm-referenced assessment*.

Diagnostic assessment: The ERIC Digest (its URL follows) defines diagnostic assessment as ‘an intensive, in-depth evaluation process with a relatively detailed and narrow coverage of a specific area. The purpose of this is to determine the specific learning needs of individual students and to be able to meet those needs through regular or remedial classroom instruction’. Diagnostic assessment is a special case of *formative assessment*. (<http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-9213/terms.htm>)

ECTS: European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System.

Error (Assessment): Assessment errors arise, for example, when a learner who has actually achieved the minimum intended learning outcomes is failed or *vice versa*.

External examiner: An external examiner is an independent expert who is a member of the broader community of practice within the programme’s field of learning and whose accomplishments attest to his/her likelihood of having the authority necessary to fulfil the responsibilities of the role.

In research degree programmes, the term ‘external examiner’ is used to refer to an ‘external assessor’. The functions of the research degree external examiner are different from those of the external examiner for other types of programmes.

Fair: See Section 2.2.2.

Fair assessment: See Section 2.2.2.

Feedback: Feedback is a term that has been borrowed from engineering; there it means that a function of the output of a system is returned back to the input to be processed. A critique on coursework delivered by a teacher (or assessor) to a learner is an example of feedback. Personal reflection on the outcome of some action also involves feedback.

Feedback is a response of the learning environment to the learner and is essential for learning. It can come from a teacher, from other learners, or from other sources. Feedback may affect a person’s emotions and motivation as well as his or her knowledge, all of which affect learning. Receptivity to a particular piece of feedback depends on prior learning, among other factors.

A learner’s perception of feedback can be ‘*meaningfully understood in terms of three dimensions: developmental, encouraging, and fair feedback*’ (Lizzio and Wilson, 2008). Developmental feedback is most strongly associated with that which learners perceive to be effective. Assessors ‘seeking to provide developmental feedback should seek to balance “assignment-specific” comments with more “transferable” feedback’. (This paragraph derives from Lizzio and Wilson [2008] which presents additional evidence-based implications for practice.³⁵)

³⁵ Lizzio and Wilson, 2008, Feedback on assessment: students’ perception of quality and effectiveness. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* Vol. 33, No. 3, June 2008, pp 263-275.

Communicating feedback to learners should be regular, timely, beneficial, and matched to their assessed learning needs.

Bandura (1986) concludes that the importance of formative feedback is that it 'connects directly to the emotional and attitudinal factors relating to students' self esteem, beliefs about self-efficacy, motivation and engagement'.

McKeachie (1999)³⁶ suggests five feedback conditions that result in improvement.

1. *'Feedback needs to convey information that is understood by the recipient.'*
2. *'Feedback is not helpful if one does not know what to do to improve.'*
3. *'Feedback is more likely to be helpful if it can be generalised.'*
4. *'Feedback is more helpful if it not only facilitates learning a helpful concept, theory, or strategy but also helps the individual develop skills or strategies that will facilitate further learning.'*
5. *'Feedback may help if we are motivated to improve.'*

Hounsell (2003) identified three specific areas for improving feedback to students. These are:

1. *'More specific criteria and the use of assignment proformas.'*
2. *'Greater student involvement using self and peer assessment.'*
3. *'Greater use of collaborative assignments, presentations, posters etc. bringing assessment and feedback into a more public domain.'*

Knight (2002) suggests the feedback needs to be 'interactive, purposeful, relative to criteria, developmentally useful, understood, timely and appropriate to students' conceptions'.

There may be a trade-off between feedback-delay and feedback-detail (*i.e.* early feedback based on a cursory analysis may be more effective than delayed feedback based on profound analysis).

Formative feedback is any feedback that is relevant to learning needs and which furthers the progress towards attainment of the intended programme learning outcomes. A teacher's formative feedback is based on his/her inference through assessment of a learner's learning needs: hence the term formative assessment.

36 McKeachie, W.J. (1999) Commentary Feedback and reflection in facilitating further learning in Messick (1999) pp57-61

Formative assessment: Supports the learner in attaining specified learning outcomes. It does not normally penalise error. *'Formative assessment is concerned with how judgements about the quality of student responses (performances, pieces, or works) can be used to shape and improve the student's competence by short-circuiting the randomness and inefficiency of trial and error learning'* (Sadler, 1989).³⁷

Nitko (1996)³⁸ identifies four basic uses to which formative continuous assessment is put:

1. *'Sizing-up a group.'*
2. *'Diagnosing individual students' learning needs.'*
3. *'Diagnosing the group's learning needs.'*
4. *'Planning instruction.'*

Formative feedback: See *feedback*.

Grade (v): This means the same as to mark — to award percentage marks to or to assign an alphabetic grade (to an assessment response or a learner).

Grade (n): This means the same as a mark. A grade may be a number in the percentage scheme or an alphabetic grade symbol in the alphabetic system.

Grading rubric: The same as a *grading scheme*.

Grading scheme: A written specification of how to grade a response to an attempted assessment task. For an essay, this might take the form of a matrix describing different performance thresholds for each of the criteria being used to assess the essay.³⁹

Grading system: A grading system is an *a priori* set of rules for reporting and combining grades for assessed modules. Because the grading system provides rules for how module results may be combined, it may impact on how a programme may be partitioned into modules.

Intended Learning Outcomes: The intended learning outcomes represent the educational goals. They describe the learning outcomes that the teacher *intends* that learners will attain as a result of teaching and *learning activities*. (See *minimum intended programme learning outcomes*.)

Intended learning outcomes must always include the *minimum intended learning outcomes*.

37 Sadler, D. R. (1989) Formative assessment and the design of instructional systems *Instructional Science*, 18 (1989):119-144. (in Harlen W. (2008) *Student Assessment and Testing Volume 2* Sage Library of Educational Thought and Practice London: Sage pp3-28)

38 Nitko, A.J. (1995) Curriculum-based continuous assessment: a framework for concepts procedures and policy *Assessment in Education*, 2(3), 321-337 (in Harlen W. (2008) *Student Assessment and Testing Volume 2* Sage Library of Educational Thought and Practice London: Sage 289-306)

39 For a constructive critique of rubrics consider Popham, W.J. (1997) What's wrong—and what's right—with rubrics, *Educational Leadership*, October 1997, 72-75. (in Harlen W. (2008) *Student Assessment and Testing Volume 2* Sage Library of Educational Thought and Practice London: Sage 207-313)

Actual learning outcomes achieved by a learner should include at least the minimum intended learning outcomes; they will typically include additional outcomes.

Taxonomies, for example, Bloom's revised taxonomy and the Structured Observed Learning Outcomes (SOLO) taxonomy can help to express intended learning outcomes. However, while taxonomies may help in finding the words to express outcomes, they do not help in determining what those outcomes should be. The NFQ and awards standards provide this help.

Popham (1987) provides five experience-derived guidelines on writing learning outcomes.⁴⁰

1. *'Educational evaluators should formulate or recommend educational objectives so that the degree to which an objective has been achieved can be objectively determined.'*
2. *'Educational evaluators should eschew numerous narrow-scope educational objectives and, instead, focus on a manageable number of broad-scope objectives.'*
3. *'Educational evaluators should employ the Taxonomies of Educational Objectives only as gross heuristics, not fine-grained analytic tools.'*
4. *'If measurement devices are required to ascertain an educational objective's attainment, educational evaluators should employ criterion-referenced rather than norm-referenced measures.'*
5. *'Educational evaluators should keep separate the behavioural focus of educational objectives from the performance levels expected of students.'*

Programme designers will find it useful to keep the intended learning outcomes under review, not only to keep the programme up-to-date but also to obtain greater clarity.

Know-how and Skill (NFQ): 'The exercise of a skill is the performance of a task that in some way responds to or manipulates the physical, informational or social environment of the person. Know-how underpins the skill but is not identical to skill. Know-how, or *savoir faire*, is the procedural knowledge required to carry out a task.'

Knowledge: 'Knowledge is the cognitive representation of ideas, events or happenings. It can be derived from practical or professional experience, as well as from formal instruction or study. It can comprise description, memory, understanding, thinking, analysis, synthesis, debate and research' (NFQ definition). More information about the meaning of knowledge, skill and competence is contained in *Policies and Criteria for the Establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications (2003)* (NFQ).

40 Popham, W.P. (1987) Two-plus decades of educational objectives *International Journal of Educational Research*, 11(1), 31-41. (in Harlen W. (2008) *Student Assessment and Testing Volume 4* Sage Library of Educational Thought and Practice London: Sage 319-331)

Learner: See *learning*.

Learning: Learning refers to the processes by which a sustainable change in someone's knowledge, skill or competence occurs as a result of experience (of phenomena). Experience includes everything that affects the learner.

Knowledge that is neither innate nor inferred from existing knowledge derives from phenomena. Phenomena are the objects of observation — for example, a lecture, images on the pages of a book etc. A learner constructs a 'cognitive representation' from phenomena by a process which involves, links and modifies existing knowledge, skills and competences, each of which influences the interpretation of phenomena. Mere observation of phenomena will not necessarily result in learning.

Learning is an activity that involves not only the brain but also the rest of the body; it changes one or both. The physical characteristics of the learning environment are instrumental.

Learning actively involves the learner: '*we learn in and through our interactions with others and the world*'.⁴¹

A 'learner has to be seen as an active processor and modifier of information, from which follows that personal motivations and attributions, beliefs and expectations, perceptions of efficacy and effect as person-related control processes will play a crucial mediating or monitoring role in learning'.⁴²

Learning activities: Learning activities are diverse. Examples include study, writing, practise, discussion, enquiry, experience, group work, problem-solving, performing, game-playing, designing, composing etc. Both learners and teachers can set learning activities.

Effective learning activities are purposefully directed towards attainment of the programme's educational goals⁴³ (minimum intended programme learning outcomes) and build on (connect with) prior learning.

The learner's engagement with any assessment process, including the reception of *feedback*, is a learning activity.

Learning environment: Learning environments are diverse. Teachers and other learners are part of a learner's learning environment. Learning environments have both physical and social structures. Learners interact with the learning environment; the environment responds to the learner, and the learner to the environment.

41 Brown, J. S. (2006), *Relearning Learning—Applying the Long Tail to Learning* [Internet]. Available from: <http://mitworld.mit.edu/video/419/> [Accessed: 15th March 2008].

42 Note: the quotations are examples rather than definitions. Their use here should not be taken as indicating any special endorsement of the text from which they have been copied. Steiner, G. (1997), *Educational Learning Theory* in Tennyson, R.D., Schott, N.M., Seel, N. and Dijkstra, S. (eds.), "Instructional Design International Perspective" (Chapter 6), Vol 1, pp. 89, 90. Theory, Research and Models. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah.

43 Constructive alignment (Biggs and Tsang 2007) is one example of an approach that tries to achieve this.

Learning outcome:	<p>A learner's knowledge, skill and competence change as a result of learning.</p> <p>In principle, learning outcomes may describe the change in knowledge, skill or⁴⁴ competence in an individual (differential form). They may also mean the cumulative result of all learning, including prior learning at the time of entry to the programme (integral form). <i>Award standards</i> and award-type descriptors are generally cumulative. The outcomes expected at level N are those specified at that level in addition to the sum of those at lower levels.</p>
Learning theory:	<p>Every teacher and learner uses a learning theory but not always consciously — it may be tacit, informal or eclectic. Some might think of this as their educational philosophy. Formal learning theories (and learning models) can contribute to the understanding of learning and the design of effective learning environments.⁴⁵ Epistemologies (theories of knowledge) may vary with the field of learning.</p>
Mark (v):	<p>This means the same as grade — <i>i.e.</i> to award marks to or to grade (an assessment response, a learner etc.).</p>
Minimum Intended Programme Learning Outcomes:	<p>The minimum achievement (in terms of knowledge, skill and competence) that the learner is certified to have attained if he/she successfully completes a particular programme (<i>i.e.</i> passes all the required assessments). The minimum intended programme learning outcomes define the minimum learning outcomes for a particular programme at the programme level. These must always be specified by the provider. If the programme allows substantial choice, there may need to be variant forms of the minimum intended programme outcomes — <i>e.g.</i> a programme might allow a person to choose from a number of specialisations.</p> <p>A learner who completes a validated programme is eligible for the relevant award if he or she has demonstrated, through assessment (including by recognition of prior learning), attainment of the relevant minimum intended programme learning outcomes.</p> <p>In addition to minimum intended programme learning outcomes, the programme provider may aspire to describing other 'intended programme learning outcomes' beyond the minimum. In this document, 'intended learning outcomes' refers to all or any of the intended outcomes, including the minimum ones. 'Minimum intended learning outcomes' refers exclusively to the minimum ones. The minimum intended programme learning outcomes identify the principal educational goal of the programme — effective assessment helps learners to attain that goal. Minimum intended programme learning outcomes are developed and maintained by providers. Programmes are designed to enable learners to achieve minimum intended programme learning outcomes. Minimum intended learning outcomes are specified for each of a programme's constituent modules.</p>

44 "Or" should be interpreted to mean and/or.

45 Information about learning theories (reviews, critiques, comparisons, summaries, categorisations) is widely available (much of it online). The various theories that exist can be regarded as approximations to some, as yet unknown if knowable, grand theory (*i.e.* a pattern that relates all relevant observations).

The number of learning outcomes in a statement of intended learning outcomes is variable (depending, for example, on the semantics and the level of explicitness used). This is not a proxy for credit.

Teachers and learners may strive for additional learning outcomes that are beyond the minimum. In addition to 'minimum intended programme learning outcomes', providers may describe other levels of intended programme learning outcomes beyond the minimum.

See also *intended learning outcomes*.

Module:

A programme of education and training of small volume. It is designed to be capable of being integrated with other modules into larger programmes. A module can be shared by different programmes.

In describing the educational formation provided by an independent module, it is sufficient to specify: (i) the learning outcome; and (ii) the assumed (*i.e.* minimum) prior learning (prerequisite learning). Assumed prior learning is sometimes specified by listing prerequisite modules.

Certain parameters are often used in the description of a module. These include an indication of the level (*e.g.* of the outcome on the NFQ of the module) and of the average (entry qualified) learner effort required to complete the module successfully (normally represented using ECTS compatible credit).

To validate a programme, all of its modules must be considered together. Piecemeal validation (in isolation) of constituent modules within a larger programme cannot validate the larger programme. This is because the piecemeal process is blind to the joint effect of the modules, as well as to the 'integration of learning and teaching' that may be required.

Note also that learning acquired through a sequence of modules depends on the order of the sequence.

Named Awards:

Within an award type (*e.g.* honours bachelor's degree), the particular awards that are named with respect to a field of learning (*e.g.* honours bachelor of science degree). Standards for named awards include reference to knowledge, skill and competence within a specific field of learning.

Norm-referenced:

A norm-referenced test is '*an instrument for which interpretation is based in the comparison of the test-taker's performance to the performance of other people in a specified group*' (SEPT,⁴⁶ 1985).

Pass by compensation:

See *compensation*.

Programme Board:

A dedicated committee established by the provider with overall responsibility for that programme, including the programme assessment strategy.

46 American Psychological Association (APA) (1985) *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*. Washington DC: Author.

- Prior learning:** The totality of a person's learning at a particular time. It may also be referred to as prior knowledge. It is time dependent.⁴⁷
- Programme:** A programme of education and training refers to any process by which learners may acquire knowledge, skill or competence. It includes courses of study or instruction, apprenticeships, training and employment.
- A programme offers learners the learning opportunities by which they may attain particular educational goals (expressed as the intended programme learning outcome) by learning activities in a learning environment.⁴⁸
- A programme is normally comprised of *modules*.
- A major award programme will normally require some kind of 'cohesion generating' process which integrates constituent modules so that the *minimum intended programme learning outcomes* are supported. The cohesion generating process should establish the epistemological and cultural identity of the programme. It should also coordinate alignment of activities with the *minimum intended programme learning outcomes* and introduce learners to the broader community of practice to which they aspire.
- Provider:** A 'provider of a programme of education and training' is a person who, or body which, provides, organises or procures a programme of education and training.
- Reasonable accommodation:** Reasonable accommodation is defined by the Equal Status Act 2000-2004. A reasonable accommodation is any means of providing special treatment or facilities if, without such accommodations, it would be impossible or unduly difficult for the person to avail of the service provided by the educational establishment.
- A reasonable accommodation is a support provided to a candidate with a disability or specific learning difficulty. It acknowledges that a particular assessment instrument may place barriers in the way of a candidate seeking to demonstrate his/her learning. (For example, a visually impaired candidate may need to use specialist technology to complete his/her examination.) Reasonable accommodation recognises the impact of a disability in an examination or assessment situation. It enables the candidate to use an alternative assessment method (where necessary) to demonstrate his/her attainment of the required standards.
- Re-check:** Re-check means the administrative operation of checking the recording and the combination of component scores for a module and/or stage.

47 See for example Dochy, J.R.C., Moerkerke, G. and Martens, R. (1996) Integrating Assessment Learning and Instruction: Assessment of Domain-Specific and Domain Transcending Prior Knowledge and Progress *Studies in Educational Evaluation* 22(4) 309-338. (in Harlen W. (2008) *Student Assessment and Testing Volume 1 Sage Library of Educational Thought and Practice* London: Sage 209-238)

48 *Ibid.* This is based on the idea that 'Instruction involves offering certain persons a learning opportunity to reach certain educational goals by RLTs delivered by a RLE'. [RLE, RLT mean reconstructed learning environment, task,.]

Recognised Institution:	The institutions specified in section 24 of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999.
Registrar:	Used in Section 4 and defined in Section 4.5.
Reliability:	An assessment's reliability is the confidence one can have in the result or how informative it is. Inference in the assessment of learning may be inductive, in the sense that observing particular instances of a trait or quality may be used to infer the presence of that trait or quality. Inference may be deductive, in the sense that the existence of a particular trait may be deduced if associated traits are observed. Inference is subject to error. If a fully reliable assessment were possible, it would return a result with complete certainty. A simple measure to increase reliability is, for example, the double grading of essays (<i>i.e.</i> two examiners grading each essay independently). This is likely to reduce the variability in grading that is due to the examiners. The choice of assessment task, given the intended outcome and the learner, is another important source of variability. Using a diversity of assessment tasks to measure an outcome can increase reliability but at the expense of learner and assessor effort.
Results:	A set of <i>grades</i> (or <i>marks</i>), normally for a stage of a programme. In the singular, the <i>grade</i> for a particular assessment task.
Review:	The re-consideration of the assessment decision, either by the original assessor or by other competent persons.
Rubric:	The same as a <i>grading scheme</i> .
Sector:	In the context of Assessment and Standards, sector refers to that part of the higher education and training system where awards are made by HETAC, or by recognised institutions by the authority delegated to them by HETAC.
Sectoral conventions:	A very small set of regulations and benchmarks which, in the interest of fairness and consistency, are agreed at the sectoral level by HETAC and by all associated providers, and where any right to unilateral deviation is waived.
Skill:	See <i>know-how and skill</i> .
Stage (in a programme):	Conceptually, a stage is a rung on a progression ladder. Many programmes are organised in either semester-based or year-based stages. However, it should be stressed that other kinds of stages may be established. Even in cases where there is no temporal structure to the programme (<i>i.e.</i> a learner is only required to pass modules to progress), the stage concept may be used by the programme assessment strategy to group modules, taking the NFQ level and the pre- and co-requisites into account. Typically, the NFQ level of a module increases as a learner progresses through successive stages of a programme.

- Summative assessment:** Aims to determine if (or sometimes the extent to which) a set of specified learning outcomes has been attained by a person and (typically) their entitlement to academic credit.
- It normally contributes to learner's results for a module or a programme. It includes results from continuous assessment, project work, oral assessment, written examinations etc.
- Teaching:** The endeavour to provide an opportunity for learning — *i.e.* for acquiring knowledge, skill and competence — in a planned, arranged setting. Teaching also implies that the teacher intends to teach a certain individual with the aim that this person attains certain *intended learning outcomes*. Self-teaching means that the teacher and learner are the same person.⁴⁹
- Threshold:** *Minimum intended programme learning outcomes* are an example of a pass threshold. Other thresholds can be defined.
- Validation of a Programme:** Validation means the process by which an awarding body shall satisfy itself that a learner may attain knowledge, skill or competence for the purpose of an award made by the awarding body.
- Providers of validated programmes are responsible for, among other things, establishing fair, consistent and fit-for-purpose assessment procedures.
- Validity:** Validity essentially means fitness-for-purpose. A valid assessment: (i) allows inference of the attainment of the learning outcomes it purports to address; (ii) assesses the person it purports to assess; and (iii) is appropriate for informing the decisions that it purports to inform. Condition (iii) is required because an assessment may be valid for informing one decision but invalid for another.

⁴⁹ This point paraphrases text in Schott, F. and Driscoll, M. P. (1997) "On the Architectonics of Instructional Theory", in Tennyson, R. D., Schott, F., Seel, N., and Dijkstra, S. (eds.), *Instructional Design: International Perspective*, Vol. 1, p. 143. Theory, Research, and Models. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah.

6. Appendix

Broadsheets of Results and Recording Results

A broadsheet of results (broadsheet) is a formatted Microsoft Excel spreadsheet produced by HETAC for each programme to facilitate the recording of results by the provider. Broadsheets will be produced for each session (summer and autumn) by HETAC, listing all learners registered with HETAC as presented by the provider in the registration files.

One Excel file per programme, with multiple worksheets, will be provided by HETAC. Each worksheet contains a broadsheet. Broadsheets are produced for each programme stage and learner type — e.g. a three-stage programme with regular and ACCS learners on all stages, will have six broadsheets each on a separate worksheet. Each worksheet contains a signature page to be completed at the meeting of the Board of Examiners.

Summer broadsheets are usually issued late in April, while autumn broadsheets are issued in August. There must be an overall result (pass, exempt, withheld etc.) for every learner whose name is included on the broadsheet.

Alternative broadsheets/special request

To accommodate diverse needs, HETAC offers the special broadsheets on receipt of a written request. One example of this is the provision of broadsheets to facilitate repeating learners following an earlier version of a programme.

Completing broadsheets

Providers have the option of completing broadsheets by keying in results or uploading learner results from their own information system. Detailed operating instructions are available from HETAC and should be consulted.

Withholding a result

Should a provider wish to withhold a learner's result, it should use the result code *Withheld* (WHLD) on the broadsheet. This may be done for discipline, personal, health, or any other legitimate reasons. It is a matter for the provider whether it will present such a learner again and, if it does so, under what circumstances, e.g. as a first attempt or otherwise.

A provider may have legitimate reason to exclude a learner's name from the broadsheet. In this case, of course, there is no result code.

Changes in learners' results after the meeting of the Board of Examiners

Notification of any legitimate changes of results (e.g. arising from a formal appeal process) should be sent to HETAC on the date on which broadsheets are returned or within two weeks of that date, and always well in advance of the relevant conferring date to ensure the correct result appears on the award parchment.

Result Code	Result	Effect on Number of Exam Attempts	Recorded on Broadsheet
EXE	Exemption(s) Granted	<i>Counted as an Attempt</i>	<i>Overall EXE – note the number of the exemptions in space provided (boxes)</i>
EXE module repeat	EXE in module/subject result box to indicate modules passed in previous session		<i>Applicable to the overall result – normally further EXE or PASS or FAIL etc.</i>
Absent	Absent from Examination	<i>Counted as an Attempt</i>	<i>ABS</i>
Fail	Fail	<i>Counted as an Attempt</i>	<i>Fail is only recorded in the overall result when a learner has achieved no exemptions</i>
Deferral	Deferral of Result(s) A Board of Examiners may, in the case of illness or bereavement, recommend that a final decision on a candidate's result be deferred to enable the candidate to complete specific outstanding requirements of the course or examination	<i>Not Counted as an Attempt</i>	<i>DEF in overall result</i>
Withdrew	Withdrew from Course. The provider normally has evidence stipulated in its procedures that the learner has withdrawn from the programme	<i>Counted as an Attempt</i>	<i>WDRW</i>
Withheld	Learner's Result(s) Withheld	<i>Provider to determine – attempt or otherwise</i>	<i>WHLD</i>

Table 1

7. Sources and Resources

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Higher Education and Training
Awards Council, Ireland
Comhairle na nDámhachtainí
Ardoideachais agus Oiliúna, Éire

HETAC
26/27 Denzille Lane
Dublin 2
t. +353 (0)1 644 1500
f. +353 (0)1 644 1577
email. info@hetac.ie
www.hetac.ie

26/27 Lána Deinsil
Baile Átha Cliath 2
t. +353 (0)1 644 1500
f. +353 (0)1 644 1577
ríomphost. info@hetac.ie
www.hetac.ie