

## **IPA RESPONSE TO INSTITUTIONAL QUALITY ASSURANCE EFFECTIVENESS REVIEW REPORT**

The Institute of Public Administration thanks the chairman, coordinating reviewer and members of the Review Team for their committed work in reviewing the implementation and effectiveness of the IPA's Quality Assurance systems. The Institute welcomes such independent external appraisal as an important element in the continuous cycle of quality assurance and enhancement.

The review had three objectives, namely to assess and conclude on 1) the implementation of QA policies and procedures; 2) the enhancement of quality; 3) the effectiveness and implementation of procedures for access, transfer and progression.

The Institute is pleased that the Review Team concluded that we meet all three objectives.

Specifically relating to the objectives, it is noteworthy that the Review Team concluded that there are 'comprehensive' policies and procedures in place as well as an 'embedded, coherent and comprehensive quality regime'; that there is clear demonstration of how the IPA enhances quality; and that effective processes and procedures are in place for student access, transfer, and progression.

We note the Review Team was impressed with the quality of the Institutional Self-Evaluation Report (ISER), commending it as 'very comprehensive and analytical' and as being supported both by case-studies of good practice and by detailed appendices. We are gratified that the Review Team acknowledged our collegial approach to the exercise, and that they considered the ISER to be 'very open' and 'self-reflective'.

The successful outcome of the Review is important recognition for IPA staff and students. Within the cycle of quality assurance monitoring, it complements the successful outcomes of recent programmatic reviews. Not least, it is an important mark of reassurance for public sector employers who both contribute to the development of IPA programmes and place students on them.

A critical aspect of a Quality Assurance effectiveness review is the appropriateness and efficacy of those approved QA systems and processes that we have in place. It is gratifying that the Review Team has recognised the 'transformational work' we have done in this area in recent years. We welcome the Review Team's commendations of the comprehensive nature of the IPA's QA framework and its QA regime and also of the 'extensive policy management framework' and supporting processes and procedures that form the 'basis of a management system to ensure high-quality service provision'. We are pleased with the commendations both of the comprehensive module review mechanism and the breadth of survey data that supports the continuous process of enhancing academic standards and the quality of the learning experience.

Our QA systems, policies and processes underpin our teaching and assessment. They support our development of responsive and innovative programmes in collaboration with public sector bodies. They provide the frameworks, as the Review Team has noted, for us to blend 'academic principles, scholarship, critical enquiry and practical application – an education that serves practising public servants and their parent agencies and departments.' They support the monitoring of standards in

teaching and assessment to ensure our graduates achieve the requisite learning outcomes and make meaningful contributions in a professional environment that is complex and fast-evolving.

In this respect, we are pleased that the Review Team commended the teaching provided by IPA Faculty. We particularly note the comment that 'Student survey results would indicate a high satisfaction rate from a discerning market. Course design, validation, examinations, marking and appeal processes are well-documented and have been finely honed over the years. Full-time Faculty and Associates deserve praise in delivering such a wide portfolio of courses.'

Elsewhere, the Review Team point to the significant contribution made by the IPA's 'motivated and dedicated staff', who are very customer and student-focused. They comment: 'the students we spoke with offered appreciation not only to the teaching staff but also support services: registry, library, admissions and examinations. It is clear the IPA is a student-centred organisation.' The Institute is pleased to see that the administrative, library and operational members of staff are commended for their ongoing work in enhancing learner supports that meet the needs of our specific cohort of professional learners.

In this context, also, we are pleased with the Review Team's commendation that the Institute places a priority on ensuring the accuracy and relevance of student-facing public information, provided in accordance with QQI guidelines and European Standards and Guidelines (ESG).

The IPA has significantly developed its services in recent years. It has introduced new programmes and, particularly in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, made significant advances in online/blended learning approaches. Such developments have been made in the context of governance arrangements and established policies and procedures. As the Review Team state, 'the IPA's governance structure was tested in a crisis situation when the Covid-19 pandemic began. The governance structure, information flow between the key actors, key processes, and the decision-making capability enabled the transition to the online mode of operation. The validation process was performed effectively. Students' feedback on the online experience was very positive.'

Also throughout this period, we have worked hard to respond to the evolving requirements of public service stakeholders. We are pleased to see the IPA commended on 'maintaining goodwill and a strong and mutually reinforcing network across the public service.' The Institute is identified as 'a first port of call' for some public sector bodies. Public sector bodies interviewed by the Review Team highlighted the 'full suite of IPA services, the IPA's innate understanding of their business needs, bespoke sector-specific programmes, coverage of staff development and education for all career stages and all levels of responsibility ... and the flexibility to develop and adjust programmes to meet emerging requirements'. The stakeholder satisfaction is corroborated by the student numbers, strong student and graduate feedback, as highlighted in the Review Team's report.

In addition to commendations, the Institute is pleased to receive also the Review Team's recommendations. Indeed, several of these are aligned with issues that the Institute has identified in the ISER and in some cases has begun to address. In responding to the recommendations, the Institute will be mindful of its mission, its relative size and its statutory and governance obligations as a public sector body.

We accept the encouragement that we continue to enhance the quality of assessment feedback and support structures available to part-time students. The ISER documentation outlined that we are already advanced on this journey. Also, our Teaching, Learning & Assessment Group and wider Faculty are currently developing appropriate delivery models to blend face-to-face classroom contact and online learning. Our use of bespoke distance education texts will feed into this review.

The IPA agrees with the recommendation to develop further its associate lecturing staff. As noted in the ISER, we are intent on building upon existing induction and training processes that take account of the needs of individual lecturers.

The importance of post-pandemic staff readiness is a key component in our transition to new delivery methods and evolving public sector requirements. In this respect, as we develop our new strategic goals, we see value in the Review Team's comments on the development of agile staff competences and on initiatives for staff retention, succession planning and staff well-being. The Institute's embarkation on the process of defining a new strategy is a good opportunity to address the comments about adopting a more agile strategy development process and conducting stakeholder analysis; the agility demonstrated in response to the pandemic, which the Review Team commends, is an important indicator of our approach to such key issues of a strategic nature.

The Review Team recommends that the IPA completes a strategic review of its current mission including the changing public sector context in which it operates. Such a review will indeed form part of the strategic planning process, which is underway. We will bear in mind, as we proceed, the Review Team's commendation of the IPA's programmes for 'meeting the needs of the cohort of professional learners' and 'the provision of flexible learning opportunities that enhance access and academic progression for professionals in the Irish public sector'. The Review Team also comments on a possible strategic choice between training, short courses and professional development on the one hand, and teaching and research at masters and professional doctorate level on the other. For the IPA, and as acknowledged in the National Framework of Qualifications, professional development includes master's qualifications and *professional* doctorates. These programmes are naturally a part of the IPA's mission. We believe the public sector's identification of the Institute as the preferred location for these programmes addresses the recommendation to focus on its competitive advantage in professional development.

It is clearly important that the delivery of these programmes is sustainable in future and the Institute concurs with the need to develop staff research capacity, which we will be undertaking both through staff development and, as indicated to the Review Team, through recruitment. We have begun the process of adding to our lecturing and administrative support staff. This work, combined with a streamlining of some offerings, will also help strike a practical balance between full-time and associate staff.

We thank the Review Team once again for their report and look forward to working with the NUI in implementing a quality improvement plan.

**DECEMBER 2021**

**Dr Marian O'Sullivan, Director General**

**Dr Michael Mulreany, Assistant Director General**

**Dr Denis O'Brien, IPA Institutional Review Co-ordinator**