

SUBMISSION BY: Irish Council for International Students (ICOS)

ICOS welcomes the opportunity to comment on the White Paper. This response complements ICOS' earlier responses to QQI on the IEM Green Paper and more recently on the Draft Code of Practice.

Protection of Learners and Definition of International Learner

The policy defines an international learner (in keeping with the 2012 Act) as a *“person who is not an Irish citizen but is lawfully in the State primarily to receive education and training”*.

Protection of Learner (PEL) arrangements are understood to apply only to courses of more than 3 months duration.

Given these limitations ICOS is concerned about the protection available to students who:

- Have enrolled on courses and paid fees but not yet travelled to Ireland
- Students who enrol on courses of under 90 days duration
- Students in colleges which close due to suspension for visa purposes

Students in all of the above situations suffered losses and disruption to their studies during the recent college closure crisis and it is to be expected that more closures will follow as regulation is tightened. Therefore:

- Adequate risk management and transition planning must be in built to the authorisation process for the IEM in order to avoid further losses to students and further damage to Ireland's image as an educational destination.
- Institutions seeking authorisation to use the IEM should have fee protection/ PEL arrangements in place which will protect the tuition fees of all students once any money is handed over whether or not a student has yet travelled to the State.
- Any Irish institutions involved in transnational education whether through flexible learning or international branch campuses should also be required to show how the fees of their enrolled students are protected.

Pre-Conditions for Providers

It is not clear from the White Paper how Study Abroad providers who do not have formal links with recognised Irish educational providers will be able to seek authorisation to use the IEM.

- Study Abroad providers should be capable of pre qualification to use the IEM on the basis of validation through their home university provided this validation is capable of being verified through UK Naric or alternative system (ref UK system).

It is understood that the IEM will be a pre-condition for providers who enrol visa required students.

- The link between the IEM and visas is not explicit in the document and should be clear.

The White Paper, Section 9, p16 notes that applicants for the IEM should have “appropriate national diversity among student cohorts” and that providers seeking authorisation to use the IEM will be required to demonstrate “a minimum of five years experience in the delivery of high quality education or training outcomes to domestic, including European students”. While, English language and foundation programmes are specifically mentioned as not been able to achieve these conditions because of their exclusive nature, other programmes which might be considered niche or exclusive to international students are not mentioned. Stand alone study abroad programmes for example would be excluded from the IEM if these criteria were applied. The 5-year rule might also need to be reconsidered to take account of the different contexts in which providers may be operating.

Code of Practice and Compliance with the Code of Practice

ICOS has previously commented on the draft Code of Practice which was released in April and will continue to engage with QQI and other stakeholders during the consultation phase.

ICOS welcomes the reference in the White Paper (p9-10) to the role of international students in terms of measuring the effective implementation of the Code by providers.

- Mechanisms for capturing student feedback and analysis of results should be a Code requirement.

Withdrawal of Authorisation to use the IEM

QQI will need to have a robust inspection scheme in place to ensure confidence in the integrity of the IEM.

One of the lessons from the recent college closure crisis is that early warnings were not acted upon. Complaints from students especially where patterns of complaint were emerging would highlight compliance issues and should trigger inspections.

- ICOS has previously suggested that students in private sector colleges should have an Ombudsman service.

Public Information on Providers authorised to use the IEM

The consumer information and public information aspects of the IEM should be comprehensively articulated and adequately resourced. Consumers will not be sufficiently served by the maintenance of a directory of providers alone ref Section 8, p 15 in the White Paper. The most important consumers in this respect are potential international students and they need to understand what the IEM means in the context of Ireland's overall qualifications and quality framework.