HEA | An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas
The Higher Education Authority

# HEA Quality Customer Service Charter and Action Plan 2025-2028

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# Introduction

## Overview

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) leads the strategic development of the Irish higher education and research system with the objective of creating a coherent system of diverse institutions with distinct missions, which is responsive to the social, cultural and economic development of Ireland and its people and supports the achievement of national objectives. The HEA has a statutory responsibility to support the effective governance and regulation of higher education institutions and the higher education system.

In exercising its mandate, the HEA works to ensure that it has due regard to institutional autonomy and academic freedom, that institutional strategies are aligned with national strategic objectives, and that agreed objectives are achieved through effective performance management at institutional and system-levels.

Objectives include, but are not limited to, the enhancement of teaching and learning, the promotion of equity of access to higher education, research capacity-building, the internationalisation of Irish higher education and the enhancement of institutions' responsiveness to the needs of wider society. Objectives from the HEA Act also include to advance equality of opportunity, diversity, and inclusion in higher education. Furthermore, the HEA aims to hold designated institutions of higher education to account for their performance and for securing value for money.

In support of its statutory mandate the HEA exercises functions in respect of –

- Funding
- Accountability
- The quality of outcomes
- Policy research and advice to the Minister
- Data analytics and knowledge management
- Advocacy and communicating higher education
- Co-ordination of interaction between public bodies and the higher education system.

The HEA works to continually improve the higher education system, requiring higher levels of performance while demonstrating an appropriate level of accountability, consistent with institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

# Customers of the HEA and the services provided to them

Under relevant legislation which assigns powers, functions and responsibilities to the HEA including but not limited to the Higher Education Authority Act 2022, the Institutes of Technology Acts 1992 – 2006 (as amended), the Universities Act 1997 (as amended) and the Technological Universities Act 2018 (as amended), the HEA has a broad remit and interacts with many different stakeholders. The following are examples of some of the services we provide to different stakeholders:

***Rialtas na hÉireann***
The HEA is accountable to the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Education and Science, through the Department, for the achievement of national outcomes for the higher education sector. The HEA also has a Performance Delivery Agreement with the Department.

**Higher Education Institutions**
As laid down in the Higher Education Authority Act 2022, the HEA allocates moneys provided by the Oireachtas to publicly funded institutions. In alignment with this legislation, a core objective of the organisation is to further the development of Higher Education.

**Students**
The needs of the student in higher education are a primary consideration for the HEA and is central to our mission and vision. Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn president is a Member of the HEA Board.

**Members of the Public**
The HEA often receives queries from individuals on a wide range of matters.

**Other Public Bodies**
While fulfilling its principal functions, the HEA often interacts with SOLAS (the State agency that oversees the building of a world class Further Education & Training (FET) sector in Ireland), national and international accrediting bodies such as Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and research funding bodies such as Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland and Enterprise Ireland.

**Internal Customers**
This customer service plan also provides an overview of the internal customers of the HEA which mainly relates to both current and former employees of the organisation.

**Contractors and Suppliers**

The HEA is committed to fostering and maintaining strong, collaborative relationships with our contractors and suppliers to ensure ongoing success to our mutual benefit.

# HEA customer service charter 2025 – 2028

## The purpose of the Customer Service Charter

This document outlines the standard of service the HEA aims to provide to its customers. The HEA is committed to providing services to its customers in accordance with the 12 Guiding Principles of Quality Customer Service and the *Our Public Service Initiative 2020* (OPS2020) as outlined by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

## Our Service Standards

### Written Correspondence

We will seek to ensure that queries are responded in a timely, relevant and accurate manner. A response to all general queries will be issued within 15 working days. If this is not possible, the HEA will send an interim reply explaining the position before the 15 days expires. Contact names and details including an e-mail address for the appropriate section will be provided with all HEA communications.

### Telephone

Where voicemail is in use by Reception, we will return your call within one working day of receipt of your message. If we are unable to deal with your query, we will try to put you in contact with someone who can assist you.

### Complaints

If a person is dissatisfied with the standard of service received, they may submit a complaint using the relevant webform on the HEA website. The Head of Corporate Affairs will review the submission and then pass the complaint on to the Head of the relevant section who will investigate the matter further. The outcome of the investigation will be reviewed by the Head of Corporate Affairs who will issue a written response to the person who made the complaint. In handling complaints from the public, the HEA will adhere to the principles set down by the Office of the Ombudsman in relation to an internal complaints system.

The HEA will endeavour to acknowledge receipt of complaints within 5 working days from date of receipt. The HEA will work to issue a full response to the complaint within 30 working days of receipt. If additional time is required, the complainant will be informed of the following:

(i) The reason(s) why the investigation is taking longer than usual;
(ii) When the investigation is expected to conclude;
(iii) Regular updates on any progress made (every 20 working days at the maximum).

When an investigation has concluded a response will be issued and will include the following:

(i) A summary of the investigation;
(ii) Any corrective actions taken (if applicable);
(iii) Information on further escalation options if the complainant is not satisfied.

# Feedback, compliments, comments, or suggestions

A webform is available on the HEA website for customers to leave feedback, compliments, comments, or suggestions.

# Unreasonable Conduct Policy

In communicating with complainants, we require our staff to engage, respond and treat every complaint fairly and with respect. We also require our staff to be professional and courteous. However, there will be no toleration of unreasonable conduct towards our staff at any time. For further information please you can refer to our Unreasonable Conduct Policy.

# Quality Customer Service Action Plan

## Development of the Quality Customer Service Action Plan

The service standards set out in the Customer Service Charter were developed with regard to:

- The experiences of HEA staff following consultations with the various sections of the organisation.
- Feedback received from customers through an online public survey conducted in August 2024.
- The guiding principles from the Quality Customer Service Initiative issued by the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform.

## 12 Guiding Principles of Quality Customer Service

The Quality Customer Service Initiative (QCSI) was established in 1997, setting out 9 Guiding Principles of Quality Customer Service – expanded to 12 in 2000. These guiding principles outline the development and implementation of best practice guidelines for public service organisations. The HEA sets out its Customer Service Charter in accordance with these QCSI guidelines.

### 1. Quality Service Standards

***Publish a statement that outlines the nature and quality of service which customer can expect, and display it prominently at the point of service delivery.***

The HEA's Customer Service Charter sets out the standard of service delivery to which it is committed to providing to its customers.

**Action Points**

- Publish Customer Service Charter and Quality Customer Service Action Plan on the HEA website.
- Circulate Customer Service Charter and Quality Customer Service Action Plan to all staff and provide appropriate staff training.
- Refer to the Customer Service Charter in any future Customer Surveys or feedback exercises on service delivery.
- Encourage and consider all customer feedback on a continuous basis.

**Outcome**

- The availability of our Customer Service Charter to external and internal customers.

## 2. Equality/Diversity

***Ensure the rights to equal treatment established by equality legislation, and accommodate diversity, so as to contribute to equality for the groups covered by the equality legislation (under the grounds of gender, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, religious belief, age, disability, race and membership of the Traveller Community). Identify and work to eliminate barriers to access to services for people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, and for those facing geographic barriers to services.***

The HEA will seek to ensure that the rights established under equality legislation are reflected both in terms of service delivery and reviews of policy. In particular, the HEA is committed to fulfilling its obligations under the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty as laid down in Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act 2014. This commitment is described in detail in the HEA's Public Sector Equality & Human Rights Duty Implementation Plan.

Through the National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028, the HEA will work in tandem with Higher Education Institutions to identify and work to eliminate barriers to access to Higher Education.

The HEA will continue to be an equal opportunities employer. It will seek to ensure that its staff are fully aware of its commitment to equality and diversity and ensure that its Dignity at Work Policy is adhered to in respect of all staff.

Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion underpins the work of the organisation. The HEA established the outward facing Centre of Excellence for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) which focuses on a number of vital initiatives to further and protect equality, diversity and inclusion in the Irish Higher Education sector.

**Action Points**

- Respect the principles of equality and diversity when dealing with all customers.
- Continue to maintain compliance with all relevant legislation.
- Providing Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training to staff.
- Provide any required support to staff with disabilities or specific needs.
- Ensure that all materials published, online or print, are in-line with good practice guidelines regarding accessibility.

**Outcomes**

- The nature of the feedback received from customers.
- Responses received from representative groups on service standards.
- Ongoing reviews of the accessibility of the services provided by the HEA and obtaining assurances from the various initiatives it funds.
- Review of the effectiveness and appropriateness of responses to requests for special assistance.

## 3. Physical Access

***Provide clean, secure, healthy, accessible public offices that ensure privacy, comply with occupational and safety standards and, as part of this, facilitate access for people with disabilities and others with specific needs.***

The offices of the HEA are not open to the public. HEA staff can meet with members of the public in exceptional circumstances and by prior appointment only. Where such exceptional circumstances arise, the HEA will provide clean, accessible offices that ensure privacy, comply with occupational health and safety standards and facilitate access for people with disabilities and other specific needs (as audited by the Health and Safety Authority). We will continue to work with staff to ensure that office facilities meet their requirements.
Queries from the public regarding accessibility issues can be sent to accessibility@hea.ie.
Staff with disability queries should contact dlo@hea.ie.

**Action Points**

- Continue to provide a clean, safe, and comfortable environment for staff and visitors.
- Provide access and facilities to meet the needs of all customers, including those who require reasonable accommodation(s).
- Ensure that the organisation's policies and procedures on Equality/Diversity take full account of physical environment factors.

**Outcomes**

- The nature of the feedback received from customers.
- Responses received from representative groups on service standards.
- Effective resolution of all requests for special assistance.

- Effective implementation of compliance measures in relation to Health and Safety Legislation

## 4. Information

***Take a proactive approach in providing information that is clear, timely and accurate, is available at all points of contact, and meets the requirements of people with specific needs. Ensure that the potential offered by Information Technology is fully availed of and that the information available on public service websites follows the guidelines on web publication. Continue the drive for simplification of rules, regulations, forms, information leaflets and procedures.***

The HEA recognises the importance of ensuring that its website is accessible to everyone. We are committed to achieving a minimum of conformance level Double-A with the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI), Web Content Accessibility Guidelines and complying with the National Disability Authority IT Accessibility Guidelines. The HEA will always seek to ensure compliance with European Union (Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications of Public Sector Bodies) Regulations 2020 (S.I. No. 358/2020). For further information on please refer to HEA's Accessibility Statement.

**Action Points**

- Web Accessibility training provided to necessary staff.
- Annual audit carried out by UX designers, through vendor who hosts the HEA suite of webpages, to ensure compliance with the aforementioned IT guidelines through

**Outcome**

- Improvements to web accessibility will be made on an ongoing basis based on the audit reports and feedback received from the public through the accessibility mailbox

## 5. Timeliness and Courtesy

***Deliver quality services with courtesy, sensitivity and the minimum delay, fostering a climate of mutual respect between provider and customer. Give contact names in all communications to ensure ease of ongoing transactions.***

The HEA sets out in its Customer Service Charter its commitments regarding the delivery of its services within defined timelines. The HEA believes in treating everyone with respect and courtesy.

**Action Points**

- Customer service training provided to necessary staff.

- Monitor, audit, and evaluate our performance against the standards of quality service we are committed to providing.
- Monitor customer satisfaction and review and improve standards of delivery continuously and in line with survey findings.

**Outcomes**

- Adherence to customer service standards as laid down in Customer Service Charter and Plan.

## 6. Complaints

***Maintain a well-publicised, accessible, transparent and simple-to-use system of dealing with complaints about the quality of service provided.***

If a person is dissatisfied with the standard of service received, they may submit a complaint using the HEA Customer Complaints Webform.

The Head of Corporate Affairs will review the submission and then pass the complaint on to the Head of the relevant section who will investigate the matter further. The outcome of the investigation will be reviewed by the Head of Corporate Affairs who will issue a written response to the person who made the complaint. In handling complaints from the public, the Authority will adhere to the principles set down by the Office of the Ombudsman in relation to an internal complaints system.

## 7. Appeals

***Similarly, maintain a formalised, well-publicised, accessible, transparent and simple-to-use system of appeal/review for customers who are dissatisfied with decisions in relation to services.***

The HEA will endeavour to resolve all relevant complaints submitted to it where appropriate. The HEA in its Complaints Procedure outlines the process of what an individual should do if they are unhappy with the response to their complaint. Complaints in relation to HEIs should be directed to the HEIs in the first instance.

If upon completion of the HEA's internal complaints process, an individual is still unhappy, they may contact the Office of the Ombudsman. They can submit a complaint through its website, ombudsman.ie , or in writing to the following address: Office of the Ombudsman, 6 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 W772.

**Action Points**

- Ensure Complaints procedure is up to date and publicly available.

- Review all appeals with the necessary due diligence.

**Outcome**

- Clear communication of the appeals process to customers when appropriate.

## 8. Consultation and Evaluation

***Provide a structured approach to meaningful consultation with, and participation by, the customer in relation to the development, delivery and review of services. Ensure meaningful evaluation of service delivery.***

**Action Points**

- Work with all of the HEA's stakeholders to encourage feedback on our customer service and how it might be improved.
- Build internal and external consultation into process improvement for new programmes and awards when the opportunity arises.

**Outcome**

- Evidence of feedback from our customers and stakeholders in our decisions and policies.

## 9. Choice

***Provide choice, where feasible, in service delivery including payment methods, location of contact points, opening hours and delivery times. Use available and emerging technologies to ensure maximum access and choice, and quality of delivery.***

The HEA's Customer Service Charter outlines several ways its stakeholders and customers can engage with the HEA. Additionally, the HEA's Accessibility Officer may be contacted by customers who require accommodations that are not outlined in the Customer Service Charter. The HEA's Disability Liaison Officer can also be contacted at dlo@hea.ie.

**Action Points**

- Ensure that every means of contact outlined in the Customer Service Charter is responded to in an appropriate manner.
- Ensure that the HEA website is designed and maintained in a manner to be accessible to customers.
- Ensure our publications are available, upon request, in a format appropriate to the customer.

**Outcomes**

- Increase ability of the HEA to respond appropriately to customers through all means outlined in the Customer Service Charter.

## 10. Official Languages Equality

***Provide quality services through Irish and/or bilingually and inform customers of their right to choose to be dealt with through one or other of the official languages.***

The HEA has an Irish-language Officer who will take calls, or where not possible, return calls, from customers who wish to conduct their business in Irish. The HEA's key documents are available on its website in Irish and English.

**Action Points**

- Ensure that the HEA has Irish speaking staff available to take or return calls from customers who wish to engage in Irish.
- Ensure Irish courses are available to staff.
- Ensure translation and interpretation services are available for correspondence with Irish-speaking customers.
- Ensure that HEA is compliant with the Official Languages Act legislation.

**Outcome**

- Compliance with Official Languages Acts 2003 and 2021.

## 11. Better Coordination

***Foster a more coordinated and integrated approach to delivery of public services.***

The HEA is committed to a high level of coordination with relevant partners and stakeholders, including our parent Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Department of Education.

**Action Points**

- Ensure appropriate coordination with relevant bodies

**Outcome**

- Effective and successful cooperation with relevant bodies, for example, if another body is better placed to resolve an individual's query, the HEA will attempt to transfer that query to that body, or refer the individual to an institution or public body for resolution.

## 12. Internal Customers

We value the dedication of staff and will actively engage with them in relation to the delivery of services. In particular we will focus on the following;

**Internal Communications**

We will undertake to ensure that staff receive timely and accurate briefings through the staff intranet and staff briefing seminars.

**Consultation and Evaluation**
Staff will be fully consulted in relation to the development of the HEA's strategy statement, associated business plans, customer service plan and ongoing developments relating to the modernisation of the public services.

**Staff Training and Development**
Through staff development plans, we will ensure that staff are provided with the necessary skills to carry out their work. We have put in place a Performance Management Development System that assists staff in understanding their role in the organisation and identifies development and training opportunities pertinent to their roles.

**Equality, Diversity and Inclusion**
We will ensure that the processes and services involving staff comply with the provisions of the equality legislation. We will promote a culture of respect for diversity among all staff.
**Dignity and Respect**

The HEA is committed to fostering a workplace culture where all employees are treated with dignity and respect and promoting fairness. This commitment aims to ensure a safe and supportive environment free from discrimination and bias.

**Facilities**
We will seek to ensure that staff work in a pleasant and safe environment and that staff are provided with the facilities necessary to carry out their duties.

# Contact Details

Email: Info@hea.ie
Telephone: +353 1 231 7100
Webform: https://hea.ie/about-us/customer-service-and-complaints/complaints-form/
Opening Hours: Monday to Friday (excluding Public Holidays) 9.00am to 5.00pm