

phexcel

*Principles and  
Guidelines for  
Assessing and  
Recognising PHE  
Excellence*





PHExcel Report

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PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES FOR ASSESSING AND  
RECOGNISING PHE EXCELLENCE

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## Introduction

Over the past months the PHExcel project has developed a *Draft Quality Framework for Professional Higher Education Excellence*. The framework is meant to be a basis to test the feasibility of a label to be awarded to institutions and programmes that prove their excellence in delivering professional higher education. We have developed an approach to test the claim of an institution or programme about their excellence that is set out in this document. It embraces a few basic principles, such as:

- Participating units<sup>1</sup> have been accredited and are able to submit their recent self-evaluation report that has formed the basis for the latest awarded accreditation – in countries where accreditation is not carried out or is still in the process of being implemented, units legally operating and recognised as such by their authorities may take part in a PHExcel assessment;
- A unit will use a case study to demonstrate how it is excellent. The case study (see section 3) is described with reference to the *Quality Framework for Professional Higher Education Excellence* and shows how this case is exemplary for the processes applied throughout the institution, faculty, department or programme in focus. Units can choose one or all three domains of excellence of the quality framework. These areas are the topics of special focus but it is still expected that all domains should be referred to in a review. The case study will form the initial self-assessment part of the process;
- The case study will be subject to scrutiny of a one-day site-visit of a team of international peers that enter into a conversation with staff in which the unit, by presenting their case study, can demonstrate their excellence, explaining their claim in an open and conversational manner with the visiting team;
- The case study and the conversations will relate to the quality framework and aim at a group-self-assessment in which the international peers will take the role of a coach or facilitator rather than evaluator;
- Together with the institutional staff they will arrive at a shared view on the case study and its value as a showcase for the continuous enhancement of the unit's professional excellence profile – including a view on the areas which may be targeted for quality enhancement;
- The participating unit will receive a comprehensive confidential written report by the visiting team. It will conclude with a section of commendations and recommendations.

Four pilot visits will be organised in April-May 2015, as part of the validation process of the quality framework and the present principles and guidelines. The units taking part in the piloting will be able to advertise their participation and will be offered to benefit from a 'fast-track' scheme when the project concludes with the creation of a label for professional higher education excellence.

A list of participating units will be published on the PHExcel website, as well as a selection of best practices from the PHExcel assessment in order to support the further enhancement of the entire higher education provision.

This document aims to give an overview of the whole process for both the team of international peers and the participating units. It reflects current discussion within the partnership and will be reviewed after the pilot visits.

The PHExcel consortium, January 2015

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<sup>1</sup> An institution, a programme or a smaller unit of education which has a responsibility for its own delivery and consequently its evaluation or assessment.

# 1. Principles for a Review of Excellence

In carrying out reviews the team of international peers (TIP):

- Acts as a critical friend;
- Involves student participation;
- Involves participation of professional bodies, practitioners and/or employers;
- Uses transparent explicit criteria (PHExcel quality framework) and processes (PHExcel principles and guidelines);
- Will be transparent in all aspects of the assessment process: during preparation, on site and in the follow-up;
- Uses the validating interviews technique;
- Has formal status and will ensure that outcomes are publicly available;<sup>2</sup>
- Puts a major emphasis on collaboration, support and enhancement.

The overall objectives of the process are to:

- Consolidate, test and further develop a shared body of knowledge within the European higher education community around professional higher education excellence;
- Contribute to the on-going process of convergence and transparency in higher education by establishing a European reference point for professional higher education excellence which can move across disciplinary boundaries;
- Capitalise on, and transfer best practice and excellence initiatives in the field of professional practice in the higher education community.

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<sup>2</sup> During the piloting phase the outcomes of the visits will remain confidential. A list of participating units will however be published and units may use the outcomes of the pilots as they wish. In the future, the executive summaries of the visits' reports will be publically available on the PHExcel website.

## 2. Roles and Responsibilities of the Team of International Peers

The team of international peers (TIP) consists of a minimum of 3 persons. The team will include representation by an academic expert in the discipline reviewed, a representative of the world of work and a student.

Additionally during the piloting phase, a liaison person from the PHEExcel partnership will overview the process and will facilitate preparation and follow-up. One of the peers will be assigned the role of rapporteur and one the role of chair.

### *Roles of the TIP*

The PHEExcel process is an external, supportive assessment of the entity's claim for excellence. The TIP will use the self-evaluation report from a recent accreditation of the institution/programme, the case study report drawn up especially for this process and the site visit as main sources of information. The TIP will act as a 'critical friend'. This will enable them to act as:

- A mirror, to facilitate self-reflection about current practices regarding excellence and professional practice;
- A reviewer, to assess and recognise excellent practices;
- An adviser, to suggest alternatives and enhancement;
- A peer, to support the unit in implementing future continuous improvement.

Each TIP must find the appropriate balance among these roles.

In addition, the TIP must feel collective ownership of the assessment. All TIP members are responsible for taking notes during the meetings, discussing the main findings and contributing to the final report. The TIP members are expected to follow the instructions of the team chair.

While the TIP is collectively responsible for the assessment, the chair takes the ultimate responsibility for the final report. In addition, the team chair and rapporteur each have special duties as outlined below.

### *Specific responsibilities of the TIP chair*

The specific responsibilities of the TIP chair are to:

- Lead the site visit;
- Assign responsibilities to TIP members during the visit according to individual skills and experience;
- Ensure that the TIP remains focused and manages the process of the visit in a timely way;
- Create and maintain a team spirit and encourage everyone to participate in all phases of the assessment;

- Take the lead in the preparation of the oral report at the end of the day;
- Oversee the final report writing in collaboration with the rapporteur, who is part of the review team;

Additionally, during the piloting phase, the TIP chair will prepare the visit in close collaboration with the liaison person.

### *Specific responsibilities of the liaison person*

The liaison person communicates, on behalf of the TIP, with the unit, and their responsibilities are to:

- Directly liaise with the host in pre-planning the visit, including the preparation of necessary documentation;
- Prepare documentation (agenda, case study report) for the TIP;
- Support the TIP chair in producing the final report;
- Support the TIP by taking notes, collecting information and contributing to discussions;
- Liaise with the unit to consult for the drafting of the case study document;
- Draft the evaluation report, using the template provided by PHExcel, after the site visit and circulate it within the team for comments;
- Send the final draft report to the team chair and once it is validated by the chair, forward it to the unit.

### *Liaison with the host*

The host will identify a member of staff to act as a unit liaison person to work closely with the TIP. The unit liaison person will have right of attendance at all formal meetings of the TIP and will play a key role in the summary translation of any internal documentation that is pertinent to the assessment process.

The unit liaison person's responsibilities are to:

- Liaise with the TIP liaison in the organisation of, and preparation for, the site visit;
- Liaise with the TIP liaison on the arrangement of a schedule for the site visit, ensuring the availability of staff and students of the host unit in accordance with the pre-agreed schedule;
- Co-ordinate the drafting of the Case Study Report (CSR) on behalf of the host;
- Provide both oral and (when occasionally required) written summary translation of any documentation necessary to expedite the purpose and process of the visit.

### 3. Case Study Report

The Case Study Report (CSR) is the main document attesting to the claim for excellence of the participating unit. A unit can also submit more than one case study of excellence.

The CSR should accompany the self-evaluation report of the unit's last accreditation with their professional and/or academic accrediting bodies as appropriate. These documents should be sent to the review team at least 3 weeks ahead of the site visit. The CSR should contain:

- Short introductory rationale of the case study that shows why the entity thinks it illustrates excellence and why it is a showcase of the institutional attitude and culture towards professional higher education excellence – 1 page max;
- Short summary of what the entity is intending to present – 3 pages max;
- Objectives, case study issues and presentation of the topic under study; this should address the core features of the PHExcel quality framework. The case should also explain how the unit intends to move forward in the future (enhancement) – 5 pages max;
- A summary at the end of the document mapping the case study to the PHExcel quality framework – 2 pages max (5-10 lines per sub-domain of excellence);
- Index of evidence; hyperlinked – 1 page max.

The case study can be an institutional strategy development project, a concrete learning module showcasing the relationship with the world of work or it could come from the area of professional innovation, development or research, etc. – each of these must demonstrate the relationship with the PHExcel quality framework and with other activities in the organisation. Impact is an important feature. It is vital that the unit chooses whatever format suits it best to underpin its claim for excellence.

## 4. Site Visit

The primary objective of the one-day site visit is to share and discuss the Case Study Report (CSR) and the respective conclusions towards the excellence of a unit based on the PHExcel quality framework with a number of staff members as well as external stakeholders, e.g. institutional leadership, administrative staff, academic staff, students, the self-evaluation (case study) group and external partners. The site visit aims at allowing the entity to share their best practice with the visiting team. This can be done in a variety of ways, it is however important that it demonstrates the relationship to the PHExcel quality framework.

The purpose of the meetings is, first and foremost, to allow the TIP to collect additional information from all participants to more broadly understand the claim for excellence and to come to a collective view about the unit's excellence.

Good practices during a site visit can be summarised as follows:

- Each meeting should be opened with a brief introduction of the TIP and the participants in a collaborative manner. The assessment process should be discussed in order to set the context for the participants and the TIP. In addition, at the beginning of each meeting the participants should be asked to participate in an active manner and answer to the point;
- It is important to ask open rather than leading questions in order to avoid influencing the answers;
- It is important to listen carefully to the presentation and to the open questions that follow. In this context, it is important to be sensitive to the need of teammates in letting them pursue to the end their line of questioning;
- It is critical to avoid to speak of one's own experience and rather encourage dialogue based on empathy;
- The site visit should not be used as an opportunity to present personal views on the unit or its context.

When planning the schedule it should be considered that:

- The schedule includes meetings with all groups relevant for the entity to present and discuss their contribution to the case study(ies);
- Meetings are not back-to-back. Each meeting should be followed (or prefaced) by short breaks to discuss the findings of the previous meeting and prepare for the following meeting;
- Names and positions or roles of participants should be known beforehand in order to prepare specific questions.

## 5. Assessment Grid

The reporting assessment grid is reserved for the TIP and the applicant should not fill it out but may consider it as useful information, on which basis the assessment will be carried out.

Written Report Chapters	Content, areas to discuss	Relevant indicators	Published / Written Evidence	Commendations / Recommendation
<b>0 Executive summary</b>	All major findings of the TIP phrased as either recommendations or commendations. It cannot include any recommendation that has not been addressed during the site visit.	-		
<b>1 Introduction</b>	Standardised text about PHEExcel Review Methodology (based on chapter 1 of this document). Objectives of the institution for review: written by the participating unit or agreed upon in writing when review is planned. Team: Title, Name, Function, Organisation.	-		
<b>2 About the unit</b>	Brief history, academic context, mission statement. Will be heavily based on material and information published and supplied by unit. Reiterative, usually involves very little evaluation from the team. Note anything outstanding, distinctive, and noteworthy.			
<b>3 Policy and Strategy</b>	Policy and strategy integration			
	Objectives and outcomes			
<b>4 Teaching and Learning</b>	Learning and teaching strategy			
	Approaches to curriculum development			
	Content for teaching and learning			
	Learning environment			
	Programme team(s)			
<b>5 Research, Development and Innovation (RDI)</b>	RDI agenda			
	RDI process			
	RDI outputs and outcomes			
<b>6 Findings</b>				

## 6. Guidelines for Reports

### *The Oral Report*

The site visit is concluded by an oral report that is given to the unit who has invited the team. The unit decides who takes part in the meeting on their behalf. All members of the team attend this meeting. The oral report is presented by the chair. The oral report can be delivered as a presentation or by reading from a manuscript; it is not handed out to the institution. The oral report ends with a timeline for the written report. An oral report usually takes between 10-15 minutes.

The oral feedback is based on a group assessment that is the last joint session of the TIP and the unit during a site visit. It should contain no surprises for the participating unit.

The TIP chair prefaces the oral feedback by thanking the unit for inviting the team, its hospitality and their cooperation during the visit. The unit should be commended for undergoing the review, which is a sign of the unit's commitment to further enhance its excellence profile.

The main part of the oral report contains all the major findings of the TIP, which are phrased as either commendations or recommendations. Not every chapter heading of the written report needs to be addressed.

In order to prepare for the report it is important that the team has had sufficient time to prepare the oral report and the planning of the writing after the visit. Before the oral report is delivered the team may take one hour or more for internal consultation.

The TIP can decide to appoint any individual team member to contribute to different sections in written form, yet the overall style and wording should be consistent.

**Note:** the written report cannot include any recommendation that has not been addressed in the oral report. It is important that the added value of proposed actions is made clear and phrased in a way that will be understood by its recipients.

### *The Written Report*

#### **Format, template**

There is no prescribed style sheet for a report. Whatever format is used (e.g. numbered paragraphs, sections with bullet points) it should be used consistently throughout the document. There must be a title page carrying the PHExcel logo, page numbering and a table of content. There are no appendices. A report is usually between 5-10 pages long. The report should be structured along the same headings as the CSR and the assessment sheet used by TIP members so that it can be mapped against the PHExcel quality framework.

#### **Table of content**

0. Executive summary
1. Introduction
2. About the unit
3. Policy and Strategy

4. Teaching and Learning
5. Research, Development and Innovation (RDI)
6. Findings

The table of content lists the sections that should be addressed in the written report. It starts with an executive summary (chapter 0) that is based on the oral feedback given to the unit at the end of the site visit. The summary contains all the major findings of the TIP, they are phrased as either recommendations or commendations. It cannot include any recommendation that has not been addressed in the oral report.

The following chapters should each start with a short description of the key features of the respective area. The focus should be on the findings of the TIP and resulting recommendations or commendations.

### **Commendations and Recommendations**

Commendations must be supported by evidence and be agreed upon by the team. Commendations should be at least equal in number to recommendations.

Even an excellent unit must have plans on how to maintain and further develop excellence. The final meeting and recommendations should serve to share the insights of the unit and the TIP and to conclude the day. It is not intended that this meeting alone would serve to indicate the outcome, which is based on both the submitted material and the meetings.

Recommendations are referred to as either 'enhancement area' or 'recommendation'. It refers to an area or process that is handled by the unit or parts thereof (faculties, departments, study programmes, courses) in a way that is either:

- Not adequate in regards to the PHExcel quality framework;
- Not adequate in regards to what the unit itself has defined as its aims and goals of excellence.

Recommendations must:

- Be supported by different sources of evidence (references to CSR, material published by the unit, information given in meetings);
- Be agreed upon by the TIP members;
- Not contain prescriptive actions.

The team can agree to phrase some recommendations as 'essential' in instances in which practices are in contradiction with the PHExcel quality framework. (It is expected, however, that this should be a rare occurrence if the entity is proposing excellence).

### **Further notes**

The tone of the report should be factual. It does not need to cover each section extensively but should focus on key points. Negative consequences arising out of existing practices should not be detailed – rather the focus should be on the added value of recommendations. The TIP should give thought to the scope of its recommendations and limit them to actions that could realistically be achieved within the next years given the unit's abilities. The team should respect the unit's priorities in (further) developing and enhancing its professional higher education excellence.

### **Timetable, logistics**

Upon leaving the institution the team will have agreed upon a timeline for assembling the written report, including a period for review by all TIP members. The TIP chair sends the written report to the PHEExcel co-ordinator no later than 3 weeks after the main visit. The PHEExcel co-ordinating group (at present these are the project partners, in the future this may be a board) has the right to ask the chair for changes if it feels the present guidelines and principles are not adhered to. After approval by the PHEExcel co-ordinating group (usually within 7 working days upon receipt) the chair sends the report to the head of the participating unit who has invited the team. The unit has the right to correct factual errors (usually within 15 working days upon receipt). The chair includes these corrections and sends the final report to the head of the participating unit, the team members and the PHEExcel co-ordinating group. This concludes the review. The report and all findings by the team during the visits are subject to the rules for confidentiality set out above.

### **Label**

In the future PHEExcel intends to further develop the process with the award of a label if the standards for excellence are achieved. The units undergoing the pilot visits in 2015 will be able to claim publicly that they have served as pilot participants and will be offered a 'fast-track' scheme to obtain the label when this will be implemented in the future.







