



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

QUALITY WITHIN THE UNIVERSITIES, RCSI AND DIT 2016

A SUMMARY REPORT

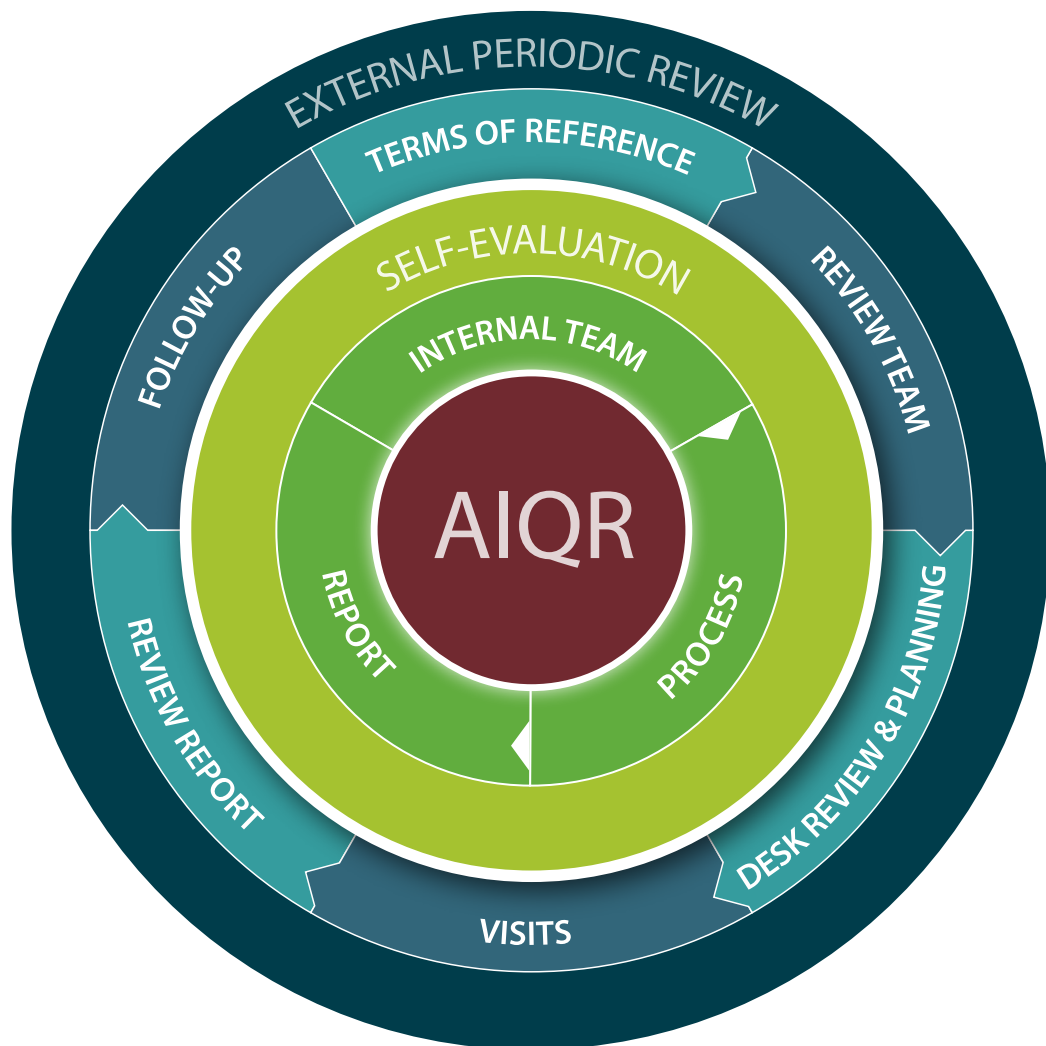


Quality Assurance and Enhancement within Dublin City University (DCU), Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT); Maynooth University (MU); National University of Ireland (NUI); National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG); Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI); Trinity College Dublin (TCD); University College Cork (UCC); University College Dublin (UCD); University of Limerick (UL)

Source Documents: Annual Institutional Quality Assurance Reports (AIQRs) of Designated Awarding Bodies (DABs) for the Reporting Period 1 September 2014 – 31 August 2015

Acknowledgement

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The AIQR (Annual Institutional Quality Assurance Report) is a report about quality assurance and enhancement that institutions provide to QAI every year.

Key Findings

The wider context for higher education of reduced funding, the employment control framework and a revised landscape of mergers and alliances continued to have a significant impact on the effectiveness of Quality Assurance (hereafter referred to as QA).

Reduced funding and the employment control framework have had an impact on both the implementation of recommendations arising out of quality reviews and the ability to maintain and develop facilities and equipment.

Despite cutbacks, work continued in many institutions to improve the student experience, with a particular focus on the first-year experience in order to increase retention rates.

Institutions reported that they were making greater use of data in their QA procedures, particularly in internal school/departmental reviews and programme reviews.

Overarching procedures and initiatives were being put in place to bring together different sources of data and qualitative information to improve quality and in particular the student experience within institutions.

The scope of reporting on QA, if not the scope of QA itself, has expanded to include research, the use of data, strategic alignment and partnerships and collaborations.

Research reviews made up an increasing proportion of the internal review schedule, however few enhancements in the research area were identified in the reporting period. It may be that these enhancements will be more apparent in this area in forthcoming AIQRs as post-review quality improvement plans are implemented.

Review 'fatigue' was a very real phenomenon throughout the sector.

The depth and breadth of the impact of QA policies and procedures varied across institutions, but it was clear that recommendations from external examiner reports and internal quality reviews were very helpful to the development and implementation of quality enhancements affecting a wide range of stakeholders and departments.

1. Summary Report Background and Objectives

Each year QQI, as the external Quality Assurance (QA) body for higher education, requests the ten Irish Designated Awarding Bodies (DABs) – universities, Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) – to complete an Annual Institutional Quality Assurance Report (AIQR) based on the preceding academic year. AIQRs are integrated into a broader framework of engagement between QQI and institutions regarding QA. This broader framework is comprised of: QQI Statutory QA Guidelines; the QA procedures of the institutions themselves; the National Framework of Qualifications; dialogue meetings; and periodic external peer review by QQI.

QQI prepares an annual summary of these reports to bring together data provided, to identify themes occurring across the institutions and to highlight quality activities undertaken during the reporting period. For QQI, and the wider public, this publication demonstrates the many QA activities being undertaken and resulting improvements implemented, and the adherence of DABs to national and international QA guidelines and procedures. The focus of the report is on improving the student experience and teaching & learning activities.

There are benefits for institutions too as it provides them with a place to highlight and publicise common themes across the sector. For instance, this report highlights the effect of reduced funding and merger activities. The report also provides new examples of QA activities being undertaken to give ideas to institutions about improvements that can be made without waiting for a quality review to highlight strengths or deficiencies.

The process leading to this report commenced in May 2016, when the CEO of QQI wrote to the chief officer of each DAB requesting the submission of their Annual Institutional Report for the academic year 2014/15. The reports were submitted to QQI in July 2016. Accordingly, this is the AIQR 2016 Summary Report based on the information submitted by the institutions in their 2016 AIQRs and pertaining to the academic year 2014/15.

In 2016, QQI introduced a new website for the submission of AIQRs and submissions are now made online using a significantly revised template for the report. There are two main sections to the AIQR:

- Part 1 consists of an overview of institutional QA governance, policies, procedures and schedules.
- Parts 2-6 provide an overview of QA activities, themes, changes, enhancements and impacts for the reporting year.

This report is a synopsis of the information communicated by DABs in Parts 2-6 only and is presented under four headings:

- Quality Assurance and Enhancement Developments;
- Factors influencing Quality Assurance;
- Quality Enhancement; and
- Objectives for the Coming Year.

The next series of reports (to be completed by institutions early in 2017) will cover the period September 2015 to August 2016. The revised AIQR template will be kept under review in order to continually improve the clarity of the questions and related content based on feedback from the institutions and QQI staff. This ongoing quality process will assist the institutions in providing information and data to meet all QQI's statutory requirements, as well as encouraging a focus in the AIQRs on meeting all information requirements for future internal and external quality reviews.

2. Quality Assurance and Enhancement Developments

HIGHLIGHTS

Findings from QA activities (mainly internal reviews) were used in strategic planning and tracking of strategic objectives.

Separate external review of research activities was gaining traction in a number of institutions.

Wider sources of data were becoming available to institutions, particularly data about students, and institutions were making use of these to inform QA decisions.

There was increased activity in the QA of linked providers and international providers.

Periodic programme review was either strengthened or added to the internal reviews suite.

Institutions were improving their external examiner processes through review and follow-up activities.

QA processes and procedures were being kept under constant review and were being changed and updated regularly by institutions.

Good use was made of external reviewers, for instance 60% of review Chairs were from outside of the state.

A wide variety of reviews took place across all institutions in the reporting period. Significant numbers of internal reviews were undertaken which resulted in positive impacts as levers for change and improvement within institutions.

Research reviews made up an increasing proportion of the internal review schedule.

2.1 The ways in which QA and strategic objectives work together

Many QA and enhancement activities, indicated by institutions as being supportive of strategic objectives, were initiated or completed by institutions throughout the reporting period.

Some specific examples from individual institutions include:

- The QA and enhancement framework is kept under continuous review, leading to year-on-year improvements;
- The development of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to measure progress against strategic objectives and initiatives;
- Alignment of operational plans with the institutional strategic plan;

- An Academic Council quality sub-committee worked on a curriculum review and enhancement project;
- An initiative was introduced to support a strategic objective in relation to increasing agility and effectiveness;
- A handbook for linked providers was developed to manage and oversee the QA and enhancement of the provision delivered by partner institutions;
- An analysis of the commendations and recommendations included in peer review reports provided a valuable overview of quality issues which aligned very clearly to the current strategic plan; and
- The remit of the quality committee in one institution was extended to include the monitoring of QA and enhancement processes and outcomes, through consideration of reports arising from quality reviews and student evaluations. Also, the committee membership was expanded to include Faculty Deans who are responsible for QA and enhancements, in parallel with the development of an annual Faculty quality report.

Student engagement was a recurring theme. One institution reported a redesign of the student feedback process and in another a module satisfaction survey was introduced. Student engagement in QA and enhancement procedures was reported in more than one institution and training for these activities was provided in at least one.

At School, Department or Support unit level initiatives included:

- Streamlining of academic processes for students and staff;
- Provision of staff leadership training and mentoring; and
- Establishment of a quality team leaders' forum in support units to promote the sharing of good practice and foster a culture of continual improvement.

In relation to review processes, it was clear that institutions were engaging in improving and developing QA processes and procedures as well as implementing reviews and working on follow-up activities. For example:

- Periodic programme review, aligned with Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), continued in most institutions;
- A new periodic programme review process and associated annual monitoring was introduced in a number of institutions in order to strengthen ESG compliance; and
- An internal review of the quality office was undertaken in one institution.

One institution was preparing follow up on a research assessment, and a research quality review exercise was undertaken in another. This latter exercise had a number of objectives, including the desire to obtain an independent assessment of the quality and level of research activity at Department / School / Research Institute level, benchmarked on a disciplinary basis; and also to inform strategic planning.

2.2 Significant changes to QA

There were many changes to QA across the institutions over the reporting period, reflecting both the desire for continuous improvement in this area as well as the requirement to adhere to the revised ESG. Three institutions noted changes to Directors of Quality.

Procedures were developed for linked providers to (i) approve linked provider QA procedures; and (ii) undertake institutional review of the effectiveness of linked provider QA procedures. In one institution, the procedures around the approval of agreements with international providers were subject to an internal audit resulting in an improved process.

In relation to specific changes in procedures, the following were reported:

- A review of external examiner procedures and policies took place in a number of institutions with corresponding improvements in process implemented;
- Review procedures for one institution's research institutes were approved and a schedule of reviews was developed;
- A review of policies and procedures was undertaken as part of one quality office's internal review. A significant resulting development was that quality committee business would become a standing agenda item on all of the institution's governance committees;
- A review of two alternative annual monitoring processes took place to determine the best one for a particular institution. More than 50 programme chairs participated in the evaluation of the forms and the subsequent development of the new 'pilot' annual monitoring form;
- Internal review processes were modified to include the following improvements: early reviewer engagement; evidence-based self-assessment; a focus on operational plans and performance; benchmarking; enhancement over compliance; facilitated review team; prioritised recommendations and actions and process improvements; and
- QA and enhancement policy was updated to reflect the revised ESG and the guidelines for the preparation and implementation of the quality improvement plan were updated.

Examples of the development of new QA related guidelines and policies over the reporting period include:

- In one institution, new guidelines were prepared for reviews of administrative units;
- In one institution a policy for the protection of enrolled learners was developed, though challenges remain; and
- An annual Faculty quality report was implemented for the first time in one institution during the reporting period.

2.3 The use of data within QA to improve the student experience

There is clear evidence that data is used to support and inform many QA activities across institutions using a variety of methodologies and at least one institution intended to benchmark data obtained against other institutions. Student evaluation of teaching is taking place in most institutions.

Examples from specific institutions include:

- The use of module satisfaction surveys and student exit surveys;
- The use of progression and retention data for new entrants at Programme, School and Faculty levels to assess achievement of targets for first-year student retention;
- A Registry enhancement programme was introduced to ensure that accurate information and services required to support the student lifecycle in terms of student data are easily accessible;
- KPIs were reported to also play a role in supporting QA, and in one institution were developed to measure progress against strategic objectives during the reporting period. In another, a second implementation of KPIs took place, yielding significant data to assist in monitoring and evaluating operations; and
- One institution also reported that academic and support units are encouraged and supported by the institutional research function within the university to collect and use both quantitative and qualitative information, on an ongoing basis, to support self-assessment in preparation for internal review.

The Irish Survey of the Student Experience (ISSE), was used by many of the institutions to provide information on the student experience and to inform the development of potential improvements in communications and other areas. In one institution, programmatic level results of ISSE were used for the first time by programme Chairs as part of the annual programme review process. In another, the reporting of ISSE results was extended to Faculty level, to create School and Programmatic level results to be shared with colleagues.

As well as the reports generated by formal institutional research, other examples of data sets generated across the institutions to support QA and the student experience included:

- Survey of international students;
- First destination of graduates;
- Post co-operative education survey;
- First year orientation week survey;
- End of year module survey;
- External examiner reports;

- Annual research postgraduate progression reports; and
- Research statement report.

A number of reports mentioned the phenomenon of student ‘survey fatigue’ and institutions were actively looking at ways to address this.

2.4 Internal reviews in the reporting period

A wide variety of reviews took place across all institutions in the reporting period, these are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Reviews in Reporting Period

Category of Internal Approval/Evaluations and Reviews	No. of Reviews 2014-2015	% total
Programme approval	98	32
Programme review	100	32
Internal research review	68	22
Internal School/Department/Faculty review	21	7
Internal Service Unit review	20	6
Review of arrangements with a partner organisation	3	1
Total	310	100

In relation to internal reviews (Academic, Support and Research), these are currently scheduled across all institutions within a seven-year cycle. A total of 41 internal quality reviews of academic and support units were completed in the reporting period. Compared to previous years, an increased number of internal research reviews were undertaken. Though concentrated in a small number of institutions (2), the scale of these reviews was significant.

In relation to the reviewer profile within internal reviews, the breakdown of membership is provided in Table 2. It is helpful to the process that 27% of members were internal to the institution. There was evidence of international membership to the extent of 42%, but these were mostly limited to panel members from the UK and to a much lesser extent, the wider European Union.

Table 2: Composition of Review Panels

Profile of Panel members	Number
Internal	27
National	32
UK	37
EU	6
Student	4
Other	5

In Table 3, a breakdown of the profile of panel Chairs is provided. Twenty-one percent were internal to the institution and overall, 68% were international members.

Table 3: Review Chair Profiles

Profile of Chairpersons	%
Internal	21
Similar institution	29
Different institution	14
International	68

3. Factors influencing quality assurance

HIGHLIGHTS

The reform of the HE landscape, in relation to mergers, alliances and clusters, had an impact on the QA frameworks of institutions.

Funding cuts and the employment control framework continued to have a significant impact on QA and quality across institutions. The desirability and sustainability of contingencies due to funding cuts is a recurring theme, with some actions viewed as only achieving a short-term gain whilst others were perceived as more sustainable and useful in the long run.

QA within institutions was seen as being effective and impactful. Whilst the depth and breadth of the impact of QA policies and procedures varied across institutions, it was clear that recommendations from external examiner reports and internal quality reviews were helpful to the development and implementation of quality enhancements affecting a wide range of stakeholders and subject areas.

3.1 Factors impacting on QA implementation

Factors that impacted upon the implementation of QA during the reporting period were noted under two main themes.

1. Reform of the HE Landscape.
2. Funding cuts and employment control.

The first of these was the continuing reform of the HE landscape which is being worked out through mergers, alliances and incorporations. Several institutions noted that these will continue to impact on the timing, format and outcomes of quality reviews and associated QA activities in the coming years.

Specific impacts were:

- For one institution currently in the process of merging with two others, the overall quality framework was under constant discussion and review;
- A major incorporation process resulted in the commencement of a process to bring all incoming organisations under the same QA requirements, which will be an ongoing project;
- A strategic alliance involving a detailed programme of enhanced collaboration, cooperation and development between the three higher education institutions was underway. The reporting period saw the extension of further collaborative initiatives between the partner institutions in both teaching and research activities; and

- One institution approved the establishment of a centre for teacher education with two other higher level institutions. An academic strategy with one of the institutions was also approved, with a focus on the provision of high-quality innovative programmes in education and the development of research partnerships.

The second theme under this heading is the impact of funding cuts within higher education. A related issue is the employment control framework. Both of these have continued to impact on institutions' capabilities to deliver high quality education and research during the reporting period. Review reports regularly mention the impact of funding restrictions and the subsequent strain on resources. During the reporting period, one institution has attempted to manage funding and resource restraints by consolidating teaching into larger groups, and reducing the number of specialist paths of study. The desirability and sustainability of contingencies due to funding cuts was a recurring theme. One institution took the opportunity in its report to note many factors that are impacting on the quality of the academic experience provided to students. These included: ongoing reductions in state funding via the core grant per student; rapid growth in undergraduate enrolments; and the reprioritisation of research funding which may impact unevenly across disciplines.

3.2 Effectiveness of QA policies and procedures

The effectiveness of QA policies and procedures were reported on by institutions in a variety of ways, with mainly positive experiences and outcomes.

Items highlighted by specific institutions were:

- A retrospective analysis of the effectiveness of internal QA review processes was carried out during the reporting period. Surveys of staff within units that were subject to review (in the wider period 2011–2014) demonstrated a high level of satisfaction with the review process overall, and a consensus provided that the process of self-assessment and external validation by the peer review group had yielded significant benefits for the units and their staff;
- A revision of QA guidelines during the reporting period afforded an opportunity for reflection on effective practices;
- The inclusion of the continued roll-out and embedding of the annual and periodic programme review schedule within the HEA Compact placed the ongoing review of quality of teaching and learning as a significant priority and performance indicator for the institution; and
- Funding of some quality improvement projects outside of the quality review process could not be continued due to lack of resources.

In most institutions, planned process enhancements took place following the implementation of recommendations arising from internal quality reviews. Approaches by individual institutions included:

- enhancements determined by means of a survey of those that had undertaken quality reviews; and
- an annual self-review of the Quality Committee resulted in specific actions and improvements including the approval of a new effectiveness of external examiner policy; and the introduction of an exit presentation by PRGs to the internal quality review process.

3.3 Impact of QA policies and procedures

The depth and breadth of the impact of QA policies and procedures varied across institutions, but it was clear that recommendations from external examiner reports and internal quality reviews were helpful to the development and implementation of quality enhancements affecting a wide range of stakeholders and subject areas.

Individual institutions identified the following impacts:

- Student feedback via exit survey, module satisfaction and other surveys had the greatest local impact on individual programmes;
- A student engagement dashboard was developed to provide alerts in five areas to identify students who might be struggling;
- A number of human resource initiatives were undertaken, including a new Head of School development programme and a new aspiring leaders' programme;
- The introduction of cashless trading for staff and students;
- The implementation of an integrated Student Records Management system and Registry function that captures all students and postgraduate trainees;
- The development of comprehensive systems for staff professional development and career progression;
- The ongoing review of internal governance and reporting structures;
- Intra-departmental academic workload management;
- Strengthening international links and encouraging higher levels of student mobility;
- Best practice in supervising dissertations on taught programmes. The production of these guidelines led to an increased focus on the supervision processes, the supports available and the sharing of good practice across Schools and Colleges;
- A sustained focus on the first-year experience; reform of the first-year curriculum, how students are supported in first year and how they are assessed. This has led to sustained incremental increases in first-year student retention and progression rates;

- The sharing of examples of teaching innovations across the institution has encouraged a culture of sharing good practice and experimentation, which has improved the delivery of programme content. It was hard to measure the impact of this in terms of student satisfaction, as student expectations tend to increase in line with enhancements to teaching, but there has been a sustained increase in the institution's overall retention rates over the past five years; and
- An updated institutional budgeting process resulting in increased transparency at both institution and Faculty levels.

One institution noted that the vast bulk of the recommendations involved cost-neutral actions such as internal restructuring, rebalancing of workloads and the optimisation of internal processes.

4. Quality Enhancement

HIGHLIGHTS

Key quality enhancement themes were:

- The use of workload modelling in staff development
- Communications, especially with key stakeholders
- Strategic planning at unit level within institutions

A wide variety of individual quality enhancements were also highlighted across institutions including:

- Work commenced on the redesign of the student feedback process
- QA guidelines revised to align institutional, national, and international good practice
- Launch of an engaged learning initiative and module satisfaction survey
- Mapping of QA provision against ESG
- Review and revision of external examiner system
- Review of quality assurance as a unit
- Work commenced on the preparation of an institutional quality framework
- Outside of the quality review process, 19 enhancement projects were funded
- Approval of research action plan with a four-year investment programme
- Review of significant collaborative programme

4.1 Key themes arising from implementation of QA policies and procedures

Key themes recurring in a number of institutions were:

- Addressing staff planning and workloads linked to the need for ongoing improvement of staff development policies and procedures and the requirement to optimise operations through workload modelling and the development of outcome measures.
- Communications in general, and specifically the development of plans to ensure effective communication with all stakeholders as an important objective in order to develop more effective relationships within and external to institutions.

- The importance of strategic planning and management for both academic and support units, particularly in relation to the development of unit plans consistent with the institution's strategic objectives and which promote the contribution of the unit to the institution.

Themes arising from academic reviews are listed in Table 4.

Table 4: Academic Review Themes

Resource utilisation	Information systems
Internationalisation	Administrative support
Provision of timely feedback to students	Induction, leadership, support and training programmes for staff
Support and training for new research students	Leveraging alumni links as a resource
Learning and teaching	External engagement
Revenue generation	

Themes arising from support unit reviews are listed in Table 5.

Table 5: Support Review Themes

Improving processes and procedures
Planned, consistent and regular monitoring of the quality of services provided
External benchmarking
Internal reporting relationships and lines of accountability

One institution noted that some recommendations highlighted by reviews cannot be implemented due to lack of funding. A strategic priority in some units was, therefore, to focus on obtaining increases in revenue from non-exchequer sources.

4.2 Improvements or enhancements impacting on QA or quality

Improvements and enhancements impacting on QA or quality, as noted by the institutions, are provided below under a number of headings. Some of these initiatives have already been mentioned in previous sections, but providing a summary here demonstrates key activities in seven major areas across the institutions during the reporting period:

1. Teaching and Learning

- Curriculum review and enhancement
- Adoption of graduate attributes as a methodology
- Appointment of a Dean of Teaching and Learning
- Appointment of a lecturer responsible for the provision of first year critical skill modules
- A working group on the first-year experience with a focus on the transition into higher education
- A first-year experience framework working group
- Launch or review of teaching, learning and assessment strategies
- The establishment of units for continuing and professional education
- A new award with a linked provider to strengthen ESG compliance and support quality enhancement
- The pilot development of a revised student advisory system to enhance student support and strengthen ESG compliance
- Deeper consideration of issues highlighted by data emerging from the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE)
- Revision of programme approval procedures to include teaching and learning inputs
- Updates to recognition of prior learning procedures
- New module descriptor template

2. Research

- Introduction of a research supervisor development programme
- Specific supports in relation to staff applications for EU research funding and to assist students and postdoctoral researchers in the preparation of applications for research grants
- A pilot research quality assessment project

3. QA guidelines and review processes

- QA guidelines were revised in order to align international, national and institutional good practice and processes including ESG
- A new policy and procedure for annual and periodic academic review
- Development of handbooks for linked providers

- A technical writer as an additional member of PRGs for internal review processes
- Enhancements for collaborative and transnational taught programmes.

4. Institutional Strategy

- New institutional strategies were launched with related quality assurance and enhancement initiatives
- Development of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)
- An initiative for community support in response to a strategic objective
- New education-related projects were initiated relating to changing access requirements and the completion of an independent project or dissertation for all undergraduate students
- Strategies to manage and embrace the organisational potential of an amalgamation merger with other institutions and its future impact

5. Institutional Governance and Structures

- A review of management and governance to ensure structures are fit for purpose, including a review of Academic Council and revision of its terms of reference
- An academic organisational restructuring to achieve efficiency and ensure the management of governance of academic units is fit for purpose
- A performance framework was refined with special attention to metrics on the numbers and academic achievements of new entrants, progression and completion rates, and first destinations of graduates
- Work to refine and further develop strategies within units that are clearly aligned to the overall institutional strategy, and its constituent strategies

6. Student Recruitment, Retention and Support

- A conference about helping students to adjust to higher education, and to understand what helped or hindered students in successfully making the transition to higher education
- A review of student/staff ratios based on HEA returns
- The establishment of specific, targeted, non-presence rates for each programme with clear action plans in order to address issues related to student progression
- A comprehensive review of a widening participation strategy
- Improvements and expansion of academic support services available to students including a mathematics support centre, an academic writing centre, and a programme designed to assist first-year students in the transition to higher education

- A strategy for 'employability', to ensure that all students are well-prepared for national and international employment opportunities

7. Recruitment and Staffing

- A review of the academic mentoring programme was undertaken
- A new human resources centre to provide a dedicated service to deal with all employment-related queries from prospective and former staff
- Succession planning in both academic and non-academic areas

5. Objectives for the Coming Year

A total of 63 internal reviews are planned for 2015/16, and some linked provider reviews are also at the planning stages along with a continuation of annual and periodic programme reviews. One institution reported plans to review and revise all QA policies and procedures and another planned to conduct an internal review and revision of the quality review processes as applied to both support and academic units.

One institution was turning its focus to a second institutional review of research performance, planned over a three-year period, with the review of all academic units by approximately 100 independent peer reviewers. Due to this major QA process, reviews of support services for the coming academic year were deferred. The key motivation of the research review was to identify strengths and best practice and areas where the institution can enhance research performance.

In the coming year, other activities in three main areas, under the headings below, are reported to be planned by institutions:

Students and Academic Programmes

Quality Assurance and Reviews

Management and Governance

Examples of proposed activities in these areas include:

5.1 Students and Academic Programmes

- Analysis of campus-wide student surveys to determine survey fatigue;
- Centralised database of programmes accredited by external/professional bodies;
- Procedures for periodic review and annual monitoring of academic units;
- Review of the examinations process; and
- Academic policies to support existing regulations and practices.

5.2 Quality Assurance and Reviews

- A process for systematically assessing compliance with statutory and related quality requirements;
- An assessment of compliance with the code of practice for provision of programmes of education and training to international learners;
- Joint training and development with the Students Union for student reviewers;
- Opportunities for institutional learning based on monitoring and review outcomes;

- Ensure that the ongoing development and embedding of QA and enhancement activities take account of national policies, guidelines and initiatives for quality;
- Analysis of research quality review outcomes and quality improvement plans;
- Linked provider QA procedures and memoranda;
- Review of partnerships and collaborative provision; and
- Overseas review.

5.3 Management and Governance

- QA processes and procedures for mergers / alliances / amalgamations;
- Risk management policy and risk assessment exercises;
- Devolved planning process for academic and support units;
- Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to measure progress;
- Institutional human resources strategy;
- Research to monitor the impacts, including quality impacts, of the new institutional curriculum;
- Enhancement of assessment practices; and
- Alignment of the quality office with institutional analysis and institutional strategic objectives.

6. Conclusions

During the reporting period, institutions continued to implement and act on recommendations arising from internal QA within an environment of reducing funding. Many enhancement activities, for example, were reported within teaching and learning.

Funding cuts continued to have an impact on the effectiveness of QA in relation to both the implementation of recommendations arising out of quality reviews and the ability to maintain and develop facilities and equipment. Despite cutbacks, work continued in many institutions to improve the student experience, in particular to focus on the first-year experience in order to increase retention rates. The revised QA landscape and the impact of the implementation of mergers / amalgamations / alliances throughout the sector was a recurrent theme and has affected QA from a number of perspectives in several institutions.

Recommendations arising out of internal reviews and other QA processes were being used to inform QA themes and other areas within institutional strategic plans. There is also clear evidence that data was being used to support and inform many QA activities across institutions using a variety of methodologies, and at least one institution intends to benchmark data obtained from other institutions.

In relation to review processes, institutions focused, during the reporting period, on improving and developing QA processes and procedures as well as implementing reviews and working on follow-up activities. Work also continued across institutions on the development of QA with linked providers.

New Directors of Quality (in one institution an interim part-time Director was in post, pending appointment of a full-time Director of Quality) were appointed in three institutions during the reporting period. Changing appointments are helpful to bring new ideas and strengths to the role but it is important that continuity be provided also and that incoming Directors are assisted to get up to speed at national level in the current issues and themes.

In relation to QA revision, there was some mention of adherence to ESG but little mention, apart from one institution, to the *QQI Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines* (April 2016) (which were published after the reporting period), and the *QQI Policy on Quality Assurance Guidelines* (2014).

Review 'fatigue' was a very real phenomenon throughout the sector. One institution in particular requested assistance in the development of initiatives in cooperation with statutory bodies in order to further streamline and co-ordinate review and accreditation processes.

Research reviews have been taking up an increasing proportion of the internal review schedule. Whilst few enhancements in this area are palpable in this period, they may become more apparent in forthcoming AIQRs as the resulting quality improvement plans are implemented.

Two institutions positively mentioned the HEA Compact and its role in advising the QA process,

commenting in particular, how the embedding of the annual and periodic programme review schedule within the Compact places the ongoing review of quality of teaching and learning as a significant priority and performance indicator.

The Irish Survey of the Student Experience (ISSE) was used by many of the institutions to provide information on the student experience and to inform the development of potential improvements in communications and other areas.

Communication was a key theme for improvement in many institutions, along with the perceived need to co-ordinate unit strategic planning with institutional strategic objectives.

The depth and breadth of the impact of QA policies and procedures varied across institutions, but it is clear that recommendations from external examiner reports and internal quality reviews were very helpful to the development and implementation of quality enhancements affecting a wide range of stakeholders and departments.

Glossary

QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, May 2015 (ESG)
HEA	The Higher Education Authority
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
ISSE	The Irish Survey of Student Engagement is open to first-year, final-year undergraduate, and taught postgraduate students in participating higher education institutions each February - March.
QA	Quality assurance (QA) is a term generally used to describe the processes that seek to ensure that the learning environment (including teaching and research) reaches an acceptable threshold of quality.
QE	Quality Enhancement is the enhancement of education and training provision and the standards attained by learners.
Reporting Period	The reporting period represents an academic year from September 1 to August 31.
Designated Awarding Body (DAB)	A previously established university, the National University of Ireland, the Dublin Institute of Technology and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland.
Internal Review	<p>This is a quality review of a department, school, faculty, service area or theme, undertaken within DABs on a routine, rolling or demand basis. It usually follows a procedure of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>an initial self-assessment report (SAR)</i> - <i>followed by a 2- or 3-day visit of a peer review team</i> - <i>resulting in a published report with a series of recommendations</i> - <i>followed by the development of a quality improvement plan by the unit being reviewed</i>
Programme	A process by which a learner acquires knowledge, skill or competence and includes a course of study, a course of instruction or an apprenticeship.

Provider	A person or organisation that provides, organises or procures a programme of education and training.
Linked Provider	A provider that is not a DAB, but enters into an arrangement with a DAB under which arrangement the provider provides a programme of education and training that satisfies all or part of the prerequisites for an award of the DAB.
Completion Rates	The number of enrolled learners who complete a programme compared to the number of enrolled learners who commenced the programme.
Policy	A documented statement of a provider's principles and approach to a particular activity.
QA Procedures	Translated into practice, a policy must be broken down into clear and coherent procedures. Procedures are the means and methodologies that a provider uses to carry out the intention of a policy.
QA Guideline	Statutory guidance published by QQI to which providers will have due regard when developing, revising or updating their own internal, provider, QA system, policies and procedures.
QA System	A provider's quality (assurance) system refers to all of the provider's internal QA policies and procedures working in concert to form an integrated whole.

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