



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland  
Dearbhú Cállochta agus Cállochtaí Éireann

# Quality in Irish Further Education and Training

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QQI  
Insights







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# Foreword

In formally approving the ETBs' quality assurance procedures during the 2018 re-engagement process, QQI was cognisant of the significant organisational change within the sector and recognised that the establishment of an integrated procedural framework remained a work in progress. The development and maintenance of these arrangements is a dynamic process and QQI expects that they will continue to evolve as the ETBs integrate their legacy services and procedures; in response to new or updated quality assurance guidelines that may be published by QQI; or to reflect changes in an ETB's operating context, e.g. becoming a co-ordinating provider of an apprenticeship programme. QQI's quality monitoring processes provide an opportunity for providers to regularly update QQI on any such revisions to approved procedures and on the provider's broader quality enhancement agenda. In the ETB context, 2019 quality reporting had an additional focus on the progress made by the ETBs in respect of the actions identified in the Quality Improvement Plans completed as part of their formal re-engagement with QQI.

QQI is pleased to publish this report reflecting our observations on quality assurance developments within the sector arising from the quality reporting undertaken by the ETBs and discussed in detail with each

ETB during a series of dialogue meetings in May and June 2019. QQI is mindful of the scale of the challenge faced by the ETBs in building a coherent, whole-of-organisation quality assurance system and of the multiple competing strategic and operational demands placed on their resources. In this context, it is encouraging to see a recognition within the sector that an effective system of quality assurance is fundamental to the achievement of those broader strategic and operational aims and that the establishment of such therefore needs to be prioritised accordingly. It is evident from the ETBs' quality reporting that despite a number of ongoing legacy and structural challenges, there is considerable commitment across the sector to the quality assurance and enhancement of further education and training. The strong tradition of collaboration and collegiality within the sector is a significant advantage in this regard and provides opportunities for sectoral learning and sharing of practice. The challenge for ETBs, as they look towards the inaugural review of quality assurance and beyond, will be to harness, sustain and build on the energy and momentum established to date in the ongoing development and monitoring of their quality systems.

**Dr Pdraig Walsh**  
CEO, Quality and Qualifications Ireland





# Key Findings

Since re-engagement with QQI, ETBs have committed significant effort and resources in progressing the implementation of the areas for improvement identified in their Quality Improvement Plans. The scale of activity to be undertaken, the complexity of ETB legacy and consultation arrangements, resourcing challenges and competing demands have meant that whilst progress has been achieved across the board, the timeframes originally envisaged have, in many cases, proven overly optimistic. ETBs have, however, prioritised the establishment of the foundational elements of their quality assurance systems (such as governance structures), which will provide the infrastructure to drive, support and monitor the ongoing development and achievement of their priorities for quality improvement.

Progress in **identifying and operationalising revised models of governance** has varied across the sector. Given the complexity of ETB organisational and delivery structures, it is understandable that ETBs have sought to fully explore, discuss and plan the most appropriate structures to meet the needs of their organisational profile. However, the real test of the appropriateness and effectiveness of governance arrangements is in their operation and QQI has encouraged ETBs to progress the establishment of the new structures and to remain open to adjusting and revising them as required in light of experience.

The establishment of **unified approaches to quality assurance** and the development of common procedures remains a core aim for the ETBs but progress in achieving these has been slower than anticipated. The scale of this task is very significant, both in terms of the number of procedures to be documented and the complexity of ETB provision which requires consideration of multiple stakeholders,

programme types, legacy arrangements and infrastructure in respect of each process. These efforts have also been constrained by the availability of staff to progress this work in the context of competing pressures. ETBs have been anxious to ensure effective consultation with, and buy-in from, a broad range of staff in the development of procedures and whilst this has been time-consuming, ETBs have reported that it has impacted positively on the integration of ETB staff and the enhancement of a quality culture. As the sector approaches the inaugural statutory review of quality assurance, QQI has encouraged ETBs to continue to progress the development of coherent procedures and to document existing good practice so that they are in a strong position to demonstrate the implementation and effectiveness of their quality assurance arrangements in respect of all further education and training provision.

As the economy has continued to improve, ETB programme development and delivery has shifted towards an increased focus on **upskilling individuals in employment and on work-based learning**. Some ETBs have formed dedicated units to support employer engagement and programme development and delivery activity reflects a greater emphasis on traineeship, apprenticeship and blended learning. Whilst a small number of ETBs have successfully led the development of a number of new QQI programmes – particularly in apprenticeship – the experience has proven very resource-intensive and has been exacerbated by restrictions in legacy contractual arrangements. However, they have also gained significant learning from the experience and most of those who have completed the process feel better placed to progress future such activities. There is a strong tradition of collaboration within the sector and

initiatives are underway to identify processes to support shared programme development: however, ETBs also wish to retain the ability to develop their own programmes in response to local needs and further consideration will be required as to the mechanisms necessary to develop and support this capacity at individual ETB level.

The sector's commitment to **quality enhancement through professional development** remains very evident. Significant investment in, and delivery of, a wide range of professional development initiatives has been progressed in line with the FET

Professional Development Strategy and ETBs have reported a positive impact on staff engagement and performance. The **enhancement of the learner experience** also remains a strong theme in ETB quality reporting and improvements in the consistency of supports for learners – particularly in literacy and numeracy – have been a very positive area of focus within the sector. Monitoring and evaluation of the impact of these activities on the quality of teaching and learning, and on outcomes for learners, will be an important part of the quality cycle in preparation for the inaugural review.



# 1 Introduction

- 1.1** In late 2017 and early 2018 as part of the re-engagement process with QQI, each of the sixteen Education and Training Boards (ETBs) undertook an executive self-evaluation, assessing the arrangements for quality assurance within the organisation in the context of QQI's Quality Assurance Guidelines<sup>1</sup>. A quality improvement plan (QIP) was also developed to address any identified areas for improvement. Following a series of dialogue meetings, the re-engagement process was concluded with the approval by QQI of quality assurance procedures for all sixteen ETBs in 2018. A statutory review of the implementation and effectiveness of those procedures is planned to commence in 2020.
- 1.2** As part of ongoing monitoring<sup>2</sup>, the ETBs were asked to formally report by 29 March 2019 on their respective progress in implementing the original QIPs and their plans for 2019. These reports were reviewed by QQI and formed the basis of a dialogue meeting between QQI and each ETB in May and June 2019 (see Appendix). The purpose of the 2019 series of dialogue meetings was to discuss the continuing development and evolution of the quality assurance infrastructure within each ETB since its formal re-engagement with QQI and its progress in addressing the identified areas for improvement. The meetings provided an opportunity to take stock of, and reflect on, the achievements to date, the ongoing challenges faced by each ETB and its future direction of travel.
- 1.3** In most cases, ETBs were represented at the dialogue meetings by the ETB Chief Executive, Director/s of Further Education & Training (FET), Quality Assurance Officer and a cross-section of heads of ETB centres, programme managers and staff responsible for employer engagement. QQI was represented by the Chief Executive, a member of the ETB Monitoring and Review function and a rotating panel of senior personnel from QQI's Quality Assurance Directorate, Qualifications Directorate, and Stakeholder Engagement and Communications Division. This document summarises the main themes emerging from the progress reports and the 2019 series of dialogue meetings.

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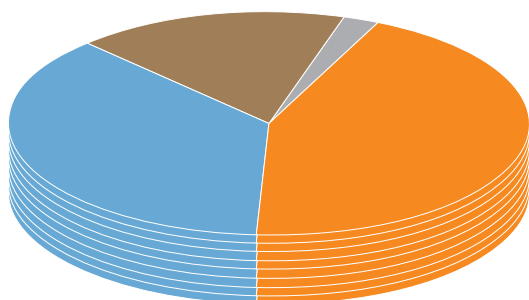
1 <https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Core%20Statutory%20Quality%20Assurance%20Guidelines.pdf>  
<https://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/Sector%20specific%20QA%20Guidelines%20for%20ETBs.pdf>

2 Following the inaugural review, QQI intends to establish a formal monitoring process for the ETBs akin to the annual institutional quality reporting (AIQR) process currently in operation for the publicly regulated higher education institutions.

## 2 Progress Reporting

2.1 The timeframes encompassed by the original QIPs varied by ETB, with around half outlining planned activities for 2018 only and the remainder mostly extending to 2019. There were also significant differences in the scale of activity planned and the level of detail included. In several cases, ETBs have identified that the timeframes in their original QIPs were overly ambitious and whilst progress has been made, it has been partial and remains ongoing. Progress against the actions outlined in the QIPs was reported as follows<sup>3</sup>:

Progress Reporting on ETB QIPs



44% ● COMPLETE

37% ● ON TRACK

17% ● DELAYED

2% ● NOT STARTED

2.2 The main challenges in progressing the QIPs were identified as follows:

- The availability of a consistent complement of suitably qualified staff to progress the activities, exacerbated by restrictions on contracts and the sanctioning of suitably attractive posts and associated pay scales. Staff are often engaged in multiple groups and development activities in addition to their primary responsibilities and in the context of other competing demands.
- The scale, scope, range and complexity of ETB operations and programmes, which has implications for the balance of corporate and centre-level oversight and for the co-ordination of input to, and consultation on, the development of unified approaches to quality assurance.
- Many of the activities involve change management processes which ETBs have sought to implement on a collaborative basis with staff. Whilst this approach seeks to build consensus and establish buy-in, it can be time-consuming. Nonetheless, several senior ETB leaders have commented that this approach has contributed to a notable change in the development of a quality culture among ETB staff, whereby staff no longer perceive quality assurance as an external process and have a greater sense of ownership of, and responsibility for, quality and quality assurance in all aspects of their roles.

3 In some instances, actions were reported as being 'on track' despite the original timeframe having passed. Some actions reported as 'on track' also related to items that had been achieved but are of an ongoing/recurrent nature. One ETB reported progress as 'in progress' and 'overdue' rather than 'on track' or 'delayed'.

## 3 Governance

**3.1** The establishment of appropriate governance structures to support and oversee quality assurance was a core activity identified across the sector in the original QIPs. Whilst the ETBs have now identified their intended structures, there are variations in the extent to which these have been populated and are operational. Where revised governance groups had not yet met, it was anticipated that these should all be functioning by the end of 2019. The revised arrangements apply to all FET provision (including non-QQI provision) and seek to effect a separation of responsibility for development or proposal of initiatives and their approval. Most ETBs have sought to ensure broad representation across the organisation to enable connectivity but in some cases, limited staff numbers result

in the same individuals appearing on multiple governance groups. ETBs have also reported concerns about the complexity of governance arrangements in apprenticeship, whereby the involvement of multiple parties and the potential operation of multiple quality assurance systems within a single ETB pose potential risks to quality assurance. The value of cross-sectoral fora, such as the Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) Quality Assurance Forum, were frequently noted by the ETBs in discussing cross-cutting issues of this nature and in sharing practice.

**3.2** QQI has encouraged ETBs to progress the establishment of the revised structures, noting that they may need to be refined in light of experience and as the organisations continue to evolve

### GOVERNANCE IN FOCUS



- One ETB has appointed an independent chairperson to its Quality Council, the overarching unit responsible for overseeing the quality assurance of its FET provision. To date, this approach has proven beneficial as the ETB considers that it brings greater rigour to decision-making and challenges the organisation to improve. This ETB is also considering the potential establishment of an FET Student Quality Council, with rolling representation of FET learners and alternating locations with a view to maximising its inclusivity.
- In another ETB, a learner and a representative from a contracted training provider have been nominated as members of its Quality Council.
- The explicit alignment of quality assurance functions and strategic planning functions has been reflected in the design of one ETB's governance structures. An FET Strategic Planning and Quality Assurance Council will oversee both activities, with a view to enabling consistency and complementarity.
- This ETB has also established Quality Teams at centre level with common terms of reference that can be adapted as required for local circumstances. In addition to providing an oversight function, these structures provide a mechanism for providing input to, and disseminating, ETB initiatives and procedures and embedding a culture of quality among staff within the centre.

(e.g. where an ETB becomes a co-ordinating provider of apprenticeship). The importance of the visibility of governance arrangements for external stakeholders has also been emphasised. In some instances, further consideration may be required of the degree of externality within FET governance structures. The inclusion of learner and other stakeholder voices in FET governance and decision-making will also be an ongoing consideration. Whilst

a variety of mechanisms for learner voice are in place at centre-level (e.g. learner councils), ETBs have reported that the short-term nature of many FET programmes can be a barrier to achieving consistent representation in learner representative structures as some learners have quite a transient relationship with the ETB. The diversity of ETB learner groups also means that different mechanisms may be required for different cohorts.



## 4 Quality Assurance Procedures

- 4.1** The ETBs inherited a variety of quality assurance arrangements from their legacy bodies, resulting in different practice across regions, service types and centres within each ETB. Establishing a single, integrated suite of procedures remains an overarching aim for each ETB but the scale of this task, the availability of staff, and the degree of consultation, piloting and staff training involved have meant that progress in achieving this has been slower than anticipated. Differences in approach between the legacy further education and training services persist: however, the ETBs have begun to establish cross-service working groups to progress work on specific issues and these appear to be facilitating greater integration and are further embedding a quality culture. The intention of most ETBs is to establish as much commonality in policies and procedures across service types as possible but in many cases it is envisaged that some procedural variations will be required for certain settings and programme types. In addition, different awarding bodies may specify particular procedural conditions with which ETBs are required to comply.
- 4.2** Most ETBs have elected to focus initially on assessment procedures and are at varying stages of implementing common procedures on activities such as assessment deadlines, accommodations and malpractice, informed by a suite of national reference documents developed by ETB staff under an initiative supported by ETBI. Some ETBs have also sought to move towards consistent models for the operation of internal verification, external authentication and results approval panels. QQI has encouraged ETBs to continue to progress the integration of procedures in advance of the planned inaugural review of quality assurance and to ensure that these are publicly accessible by all stakeholders. It will also be important that processes are established for the amendment of the legacy procedures as they are superseded by new procedures to ensure clarity for all stakeholders on current practice.

# 5 Programme Development and Review

**5.1** Programme development and approval structures form a core component of ETB governance models and processes have been established for managing programme proposals. A key focus for ETBs to date has been in reviewing existing provision to eliminate duplication and reposition programmes where required. The upturn in the economy has necessitated a shift in ETB provision to an increased focus on upskilling individuals already in employment. Several ETBs have established (or are seeking to establish) dedicated employer engagement resources to better respond to the needs of local industries and to support programmes with work-based learning components such as traineeship and apprenticeship. Since the introduction of a new model of apprenticeship in 2016, ETBs have led the delivery of five new apprenticeship programmes.

**5.2** Hitherto, the majority of programme development undertaken by ETBs (and their legacy bodies) has pertained to awards in QQI's Common Awards System (CAS). For CAS awards, a significant proportion of the programme design has been determined by QQI (e.g. QQI has specified the minimum expected learning outcomes (i.e. the knowledge, skill and competence) to be achieved by a learner before an award may be made; the purpose of the award; the structure; progression arrangements; assessment

requirements; and the estimated learner effort). However, CAS awards are relatively inflexible and for new awards, QQI is adopting a broader approach to the specification of standards which will provide greater flexibility for providers such as ETBs in developing new programmes. This requires providers to assume greater responsibility for programme design, which can be a lengthy and engaged process requiring particular skillsets. In 2017, QQI also introduced new Policies and Criteria for the Validation of Programmes of Education and Training<sup>4</sup>, which require providers to demonstrate how proposed programmes satisfy a range of criteria on the objectives, design and management of the programme; the appropriateness and sufficiency of staffing and physical resources; and the suitability of the learning environment and arrangements in respect of learners.

**5.3** As outlined in Figures 1 and 2, outside apprenticeship the drive to develop new QQI programmes beyond the existing CAS framework is limited and ETBs have expressed concerns about their capacity to do so<sup>5</sup>. Some ETBs have found the requirements of the new validation policy to be very demanding and the experience of new non-CAS programme development activities has often been lengthy and extremely resource-intensive. Many of the staff involved in developing curricula have existing teaching responsibilities

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/Initial\\_Validation\\_policy\\_7\\_10\\_13.pdf](https://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/Initial_Validation_policy_7_10_13.pdf)

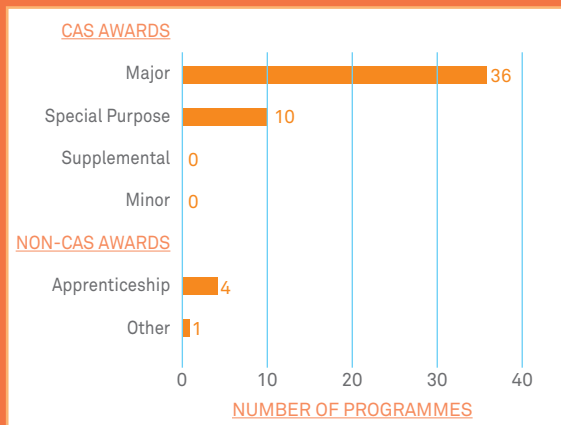
<sup>5</sup> Whilst the majority of ETB provision leads to QQI awards, ETBs also deliver programmes leading to the awards of other awarding bodies and in some cases have been meeting demand for new programmes via this route.



## PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT IN FOCUS

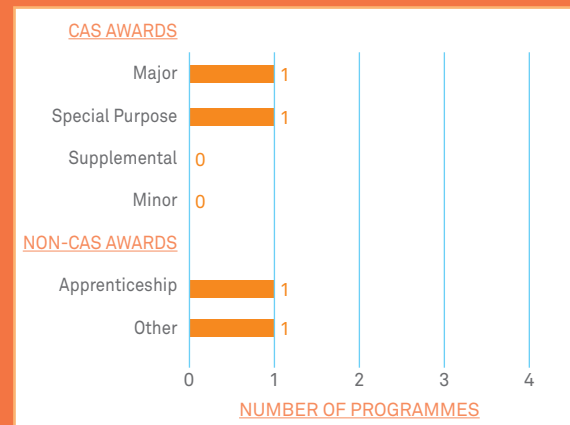


**FIGURE 1:**  
ETB QQI programme validations\*:  
January 2018 – September 2019



\* Data refer only to QQI awards. ETBs also offer programmes leading to awards of other awarding bodies.

**FIGURE 2:**  
ETB QQI programme validation applications at 31 August 2019\*\*



\*\* Excludes applications validated in September 2019.

and in some instances ETBs have had to outsource parts of the process, resulting in a loss of the experience gained in programme development once the process is complete. It has also required a significant investment of time from quality assurance personnel, which similarly has an opportunity cost. In addition, programme development requires particular knowledge and skillsets and there is a need to develop capacity in this area. Some ETBs have expressed concern about the ability of the sector to maintain its responsiveness to learner and industry needs in light of these challenges.

**5.4** The ETBs that have successfully developed non-CAS programmes, or programmes that have been validated in accordance with QQI's new validation policy, have commented on the significant organisational learning gained from the experience - both in

terms of programme development and in quality assurance more broadly. In light of this experience, those that are developing subsequent programmes have found the experience much less challenging. Nonetheless, there appear to be significant structural obstacles for many ETBs in terms of the availability of staff to undertake this activity, which is fundamental to their ability to deliver current, relevant and high-quality education and training and which relates to the provider having primary responsibility for the quality assurance of its provision.

**5.5** An additional dimension to ETB programme development is that many programmes are shared across the sector and delivered across multiple ETBs<sup>6</sup>. This creates potential opportunities for ETBs in resource terms but also poses potential challenges for the governance and resourcing of

6 Seven of the new programmes included in Figure 1 related to individual ETB iterations of a programme in Digital Media Communications.

programme development (and indeed the ongoing monitoring and review of programmes). ETBs are currently seeking to develop a framework to support collaborative programme development activity. Some ETBs have also advocated for a support model to assist the sector with this work. In strategic terms, most ETBs favour a mix of collaborative and local programme development. For national or shared programmes, collaboration is seen to have benefits but most ETBs also wish to retain the capacity to develop their own programmes locally to leverage the particular talent and expertise of their own staff and to meet region-specific needs.

- 5.6 The delivery of shared/national programmes also has implications for programme review which, as outlined in Section 11 of QQI's Core Quality Assurance

Guidelines, is a fundamental part of a provider's quality assurance system. Progress in this aspect of the QIPs has been limited. For the most part, ETBs have identified responsibility for programme review as part of their governance arrangements but there are variations in the extent to which review schedules have been established or reviews are underway. There are also differences in approach, whereby some ETBs consider programme review to be end-of-year, centre-level reflection processes whereas others intend to undertake cross-centre reviews by programme, discipline or NFQ Level. In any event, the extent to which local reviews are able to effect improvements to core dimensions of a national programme (e.g. curriculum) is limited. Consideration will be required at a sectoral level as to how this will be addressed.

## PROGRAMME REVIEW IN FOCUS



- One ETB established a programme review group in healthcare to review and recommend improvements to the delivery and assessment processes of the NFQ Level 5 healthcare support programmes within the ETB. The review process was coordinated through the QA Office and external facilitation was provided by an experienced external authenticator familiar with the healthcare provision across all of the ETB's centres. The remaining members of the group were teaching practitioners from a variety of clinical backgrounds nominated by the FET centres delivering healthcare awards.
- The overall focus of the group was on how improvements in assessment processes and programme delivery could enhance learners' academic and practical competencies and skills in the following areas;
  - » Readiness for progression into further education and/or training;
  - » Readiness for employment; and
  - » Learners' practical understanding of current regulations, legislation and national standards that apply in the provision of healthcare services, appropriate to the HCA level.
- The group produced a report with key findings and a range of recommendations for improvements/initiatives to put into place in the short, medium and long term. The ETB reported that an extremely positive outcome from the review was the establishment of a community of practice, which will facilitate teaching staff to share good practice, resources, knowledge and experiences. The significant buy-in from teaching staff was reported as another positive outcome and was viewed as strengthening the validity of the process at centre/service level.

## 6 Access, Transfer and Progression

- 6.1** ETBs have continued to focus on progression pathways for learners, both within FET and to higher education (HE) and employment. Several ETBs reported on discussions with local higher education institutions to secure formal progression pathways for ETB learners and to establish or update written memoranda of agreement. The experience of ETBs in negotiating progression routes to higher education has been mixed, with some perceiving a degree of overlap in provision between the two sectors and of barriers for FET graduates in accessing HE programmes. It has been suggested that there may be a need to consider a national approach to the recognition of FET awards by the HE sector rather than relying on a series of locally negotiated arrangements. QQI is planning a substantial research project to examine the comparability of selected FET programmes at NFQ Level 5/6 with selected HE programmes leading to awards at NFQ Level 6. The initiative is being supported by an advisory group that includes a selection of key stakeholders and will inform discussions about any implications for NFQ award types at this area of intersection between the FET and HE systems.
- 6.2** There has also been ongoing consideration of the practice of recognition of prior learning (RPL) within the sector<sup>7</sup>. Ten of the ETBs have participated in a pilot initiative to recognise prior learning among members
- of the Irish Defence Forces and this has been reported as a valuable experience in increasing understanding of the process. The extent to which ETBs are currently utilising RPL for the purposes of gaining access to programmes, for exemptions, or for certification varies across the sector. This is a relatively new area of practice but one in which increased demand is anticipated by ETBs as their service provision continues to shift towards individuals in employment with limited qualifications. In this context, ETBs wish to ensure that they have appropriate policy, procedural and resource frameworks in place to quality assure the conduct of RPL practice and to ensure clarity for applicants. Some are at the beginning of this process and have reported plans to develop position papers or have begun to develop policies and guidelines for staff. Others have invested in training staff in RPL to support the roll-out of practice across the ETB. In one ETB, a detailed process is in operation that includes an initial screening tool to ensure the appropriate NFQ level and an assessment of evidence by a subject matter expert. The assessment is subsequently quality assured by internal verification and external authentication processes and, where RPL is applied, this is reflected in the learner's record.
- 6.3** The resource implications of RPL have been reported as a particular concern by ETBs, varying from medium-large scale initiatives (for example, involving a group

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<sup>7</sup> RPL is a process used to evaluate skills and knowledge gained through life outside of formal education and training against a given set of standards or learning outcomes.

of employees working in a particular industry) to individual applications dispersed across multiple disciplines and regions. There are also a number of structural considerations, such as funding models and staff contracts that

are based on the delivery of programmes of education and training. In this context, it has been suggested that there is a need for a national driver on RPL policy to address systemic issues of this nature.



# 7 Professional Development

**7.1** Measures to support the professional development of staff formed a key component of the QIPs and the ETBs reported substantial progress in the availability and delivery of these opportunities in line with the FET Professional Development Strategy<sup>8</sup>. Most ETBs have assigned responsibility for FET professional development to a named individual within the ETB leadership. In some instances, this is being managed in addition to the individual's existing responsibilities and sanction is being sought for a dedicated post to enable a committed focus for this work. A number of ETBs have also reviewed their policies on access to support and funding for professional development.

**7.2** Professional development activities were reported in quality assurance; leadership and management (e.g. change management, project management, management development etc.); and in teaching/pedagogical areas (e.g. integrating literacy and numeracy, assessment and meeting the mental health needs of learners). Professional development in technology-enhanced learning featured prominently across the sector, arising from the roll-out of the Strategy for Technology-Enhanced Learning in Further Education and

Training 2016-2019<sup>9</sup>; the ETBs' ongoing desire to expand access to FET programmes; and changes in the profile of ETB learners (e.g. individuals currently in employment), for whom ETBs wish to be able to offer more flexible modes of delivery such as blended learning. Technology is also influencing approaches to professional development within the sector, with staff availing of online training opportunities and the use of digital badging which enables better tracking of professional development activity. Practical seminars, facilitating practitioners to come together to discuss, share and improve practice, were also found to be very beneficial.

**7.3** One ETB noted that there is a tradition within the training sector of staff returning to industry for a period as part of continuous professional development to ensure the continued currency of their knowledge and skills. It considered this to be a valuable opportunity from which further education staff would also benefit but the requirement to provide cover means that careful planning would be required to extend this practice. ETBs are also exploring opportunities for international professional development and staff mobility through EU funding and exchange programmes.

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8 <http://www.solas.ie/pages/pdstrategy.aspx>

9 [www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/TEL\\_Strategy.pdf](http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/TEL_Strategy.pdf)

## 8 Assessment

- 8.1** Significant activity and progress was reported in relation to the integration and standardisation of approaches to assessment within ETBs, with many highlighting the development, piloting and implementation of common templates and procedures. ETBs have adopted a variety of approaches to the operation of results approval panels (RAPs) including individual RAPs for certain centres; joint RAPs for certain service types (e.g. Youthreach centres or training centres); RAPs for particular regions; and centralised RAPs. In some cases, this is influenced by the volume of results to be considered and differences in academic calendars. Where joint RAPs are in operation, it has been reported that staff engage in them in a collaborative and collegiate manner and that they are a positive source of learning for all involved. They also provide opportunities for the identification by the ETB of common or recurring issues and professional development needs. ETBs have sought to ensure oversight of these processes and consistency of decision-making by the attendance of ETB quality assurance or other senior personnel at RAP meetings; external authentication and cross-moderation practices; and the production of reports collating the issues arising for consideration by ETB governance structures.
- 8.2** Several ETBs also reported the establishment of cross-service communities of practice in particular disciplines to further enhance consistency of standards across services and centres and to provide opportunities for staff to benchmark themselves against colleagues elsewhere in the ETB. To date, these have proven very beneficial and have served to further integrate staff and approaches across services. Assessment has also been the focus of professional development activity by ETBs with seminars and training provided in marking, assessing learner evidence and internal verification resulting in improved knowledge and engagement across staff.
- 8.3** The ETBI FET Directors' Quality Assurance Strategy Group has led the recruitment of a new national panel of external authenticators (EAs) for ETBs and national training is being developed with specific training on external authentication for RPL, blended learning and other specific methodologies. Most ETBs are moving towards a system of central assignment of EAs and several have introduced common templates and sampling strategies to ensure consistency of approach across services and facilitate reporting. Some ETBs have also introduced annual briefing for EAs to update them on changes to policies and procedures in advance of the main certification periods. This was reported as being positively received and resulting in improved practice. The feedback of information from EAs to instructors is also viewed as an essential part of professional development for ETB teachers/instructors.
- 8.4** An area in which the adoption of consistent policies and approaches has proven problematic for ETBs is in relation to repeat assessments. One of the main difficulties arises from contractual differences among teachers in certain settings who are on leave during the summer and are not therefore available to develop, supervise or grade repeat

assessments during this period and in advance of the next academic year. In this context, it will be challenging for ETBs to ensure that certain cohorts of learners are not disadvantaged in terms of accessing repeat assessments as a result of their attending a particular setting within the ETB.

**8.5** ETBs are also seeking to address legacy differences in approaches to the development of assessment instruments. Historically, assessment instruments within the training sector were developed, stored and maintained centrally by FÁS for use by tutors. As these staff were not involved in the development and maintenance of the assessments, ETBs have identified that the skillset is often not available locally among training staff to develop, update and replace assessments as required. To date, ETBs have sought to ensure the appropriateness and currency of assessments by updating them on a piecemeal basis and through the use of external authentication as a means of ensuring standards. Some ETBs have

indicated that they would prefer that staff are able to devise assessments locally and have invested in upskilling staff in this area. As the sector moves towards greater integration of further education and training services, disciplinary communities of practice in some regions are also working together to establish standardised approaches and common banks of assessments based on the best aspects of existing approaches across the legacy services. However, the volume of assessment instruments that have been inherited and which need to be reviewed is very significant and a cross-sectoral process is underway to consider this. Among the issues to be addressed are the expertise and capacity of staff to design assessment instruments and potential costs and industrial relations issues. Arrangements for the storage of instruments will also need to be considered as the Common Assessment Management System used hitherto is being retired.



## 9 The Learner Experience

9.1 ETBs reported significant activity to improve the learning experience and particularly the availability of supports for learners. The ESERs commonly identified inconsistencies in the availability of supports across programmes and settings and ETBs have reported progress in the integration and availability of literacy, numeracy, language and ICT supports. In light of the findings of a SOLAS-commissioned report on integrating literacy and numeracy<sup>10</sup>, one ETB has developed proposals for a Learning and Language Support Service to provide an initial assessment of a learner's skills against the NFQ (and, for learners undertaking English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programmes, against the Common European Framework of Reference for

Languages), to facilitate placement in an appropriate programme. Ongoing embedded support in literacy, numeracy, ICT and language would also be provided as required by learners. It is expected that improvements in the availability of these services will support improved achievement and progression outcomes. In some instances, resources have been developed tailored to the needs of particular programmes and disciplines. One ETB developed a numeracy workbook specifically for electrical apprentices, which was found to significantly assist learner engagement with the subject and improve learner performance. It has since been adopted by other ETBs. The introduction of initial assessments of learners and improvements in the availability of adult

### LEARNER-CENTRED PROVISION IN FOCUS: INTEGRATED SERVICES



- Some ETBs have sought to move away from education and training delivery that is defined or determined by particular funding programmes, e.g. a VTOS centre or a BTEI centre, as these terms are often not meaningful for learners. They seek to enable learners to access appropriate programmes, supports and progression pathways in their local area, regardless of funding programme. Education and training provision is therefore co-located in integrated FET centres with access to appropriate supports as required.
- In this vein, one ETB has recently transformed two former colleges of further education and a former training centre into a three-campus college of further education and training. Single programme specifications in specific disciplines have been developed by communities of practice comprising staff across each service to be adopted across the campuses. The initiative seeks to provide greater clarity for learners (including through the establishment of a central learner recruitment function providing a single point of contact and information) and a consistent learner experience. Additional benefits to the ETB include reduced duplication, clearer and more consistent branding/marketing, and increased collaboration among staff.

10 <http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/Integrated%20Literacy%20and%20Numeracy%20Final%20Report.pdf>



guidance are also ensuring that learners are better supported in determining the most appropriate programmes for their skill levels.

**9.2** A number of initiatives were also reported to support inclusion and to improve services for learners with disabilities or additional needs. Some ETBs have partnered with disability organisations to consider, share and improve practice on universal design for learning. ETBs have also reported the delivery of a number of events and training initiatives on equality and disability, the screening and assessment of dyslexia, and teaching vulnerable adults. The introduction of

common procedures on reasonable accommodations in assessment is also seeking to enhance accessibility whilst ensuring fairness and consistency.

**9.3** Resources and programmes have been developed to assist learners progressing to higher-level programmes in areas such as study skills. Through the Further Education Support Services, ETBs have also collaborated in the development of handbooks on learner referencing and academic writing to support learners as they progress through FET and beyond. Work has also been progressed on learner handbooks and charters to support a positive learning experience.



# 10 Information and Communication

**10.1** Given the very distributed and multi-level nature of ETBs, the establishment of effective communication channels was widely identified as a key priority in the original QIPs. ETBs have reported improvements in this regard - particularly in terms of internal communications between the ETB and centres. Dedicated pages have been established on SharePoint to provide a single repository for staff of up-to-date quality assurance and programme resources and materials. The importance of public visibility of policies and procedures has also been emphasised to ETBs and a number have undertaken website redesigns and invested in digital signage. Several ETBs have established regular newsletters that are issued to all staff, outlining information on developments in quality assurance, programmes, events and professional development opportunities. ETBs have also reported regular briefing processes where staff meetings are held to update staff or to consider specific areas of focus, i.e. governance, assessment etc., including input from external parties such as the DEASP and SOLAS.

**10.2** One ETB noted that it considers its strategic performance agreement with SOLAS<sup>11</sup> to be a key communications tool, setting out its strategic vision and a range of qualitative and quantitative targets for engagement both at macro and micro level. The ETB has found this to be a very useful document in focusing the efforts of FET services and centres and assisting with articulating priorities both internally and externally.

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11 The strategic performance agreements between the ETBs and SOLAS are available here: <http://www.solas.ie/Pages/Strategic-Performance-Agreements.aspx>

# 11 Other Parties Involved in Education & Training

**11.1** The delivery mechanisms for education and training services within the ETB sector are multiple and complex. In addition to the various types of ETB centres (e.g. colleges of further education, training centres, Youthreach centres, multi-provision centres etc.), arrangements are also in place with a wide range of external delivery partners, such as contracted and local training providers and community-based providers. Where contracted arrangements exist with 'second providers', these are subject to formal monitoring arrangements. Some ETBs have noted that these arrangements (which in most cases have been inherited from legacy bodies) are rigorous and intensive and can represent a significant draw on quality assurance resources. The quality assurance of provision to learners in these settings is therefore being considered by some ETBs as part of the ongoing design and development of an integrated and comprehensive ETB-wide approach to quality assurance.

**11.2** Outside formally contracted provision, ETBs have multiple arrangements in place with other partners. The nature and extent of these varies by ETB and the evolution of historical arrangements within the region. Two of the larger ETBs have reported that processes are

underway to map all of the relationships currently in place with external providers. One ETB has also engaged with a number of community providers within the region with a view to their becoming centres of the ETB. This approach is beneficial for these providers (and, by extension, the learners involved in this provision) as it enables community organisations to access the quality assurance infrastructure of an ETB while maintaining the localised nature of community education. ETBs are broadly keen to maintain relationships with community providers as they provide a bridge to hard-to-reach learner cohorts and opportunities to provide further learning pathways for them. However, the potential for initiatives of this nature to be adopted across the sector is likely to be resource dependent as ETBs wish to be assured of their capacity to effectively undertake any additional quality assurance oversight before committing to such arrangements. As with all collaborative arrangements, it is important that ETBs have appropriate arrangements in place for the quality assurance of any provision with which they are connected and that the nature and extent of any arrangements with other parties in the delivery of education and training is fully and publicly documented.

# 12 Self-Evaluation, Monitoring and Review

**12.1** Whilst progress has been reported by ETBs in the use of the Funding Allocations and Requests (FARR) and Programme and Learner Support (PLSS) systems, the extent to which these are being utilised as part of internal quality monitoring (as opposed to responding primarily to strategic planning and performance reporting requirements by SOLAS) is limited. Discussions at the dialogue meetings indicate that data provided to ETBs by QQI (e.g. on grade distribution) are in some cases being considered as part of quality monitoring considerations and benchmarking activity but not on a systematic basis. ETBs have indicated a desire to further

develop this activity but have noted limited capacity for this type of analysis. Several ETBs have therefore established (or are seeking) a dedicated data analytics resource.

**12.2** In terms of the collection of qualitative data, most ETBs have established mechanisms for the collation of the outputs of external authentication and results approval panel processes with a view to enabling the identification of strategic themes and issues to inform quality planning by ETB management. ETBs have also worked with a national adult learner representative organisation to support a Learner's Forum seeking

## SELF-EVALUATION IN FOCUS



- One ETB invited the registrar of a higher education institution to conduct an external review of its QIP and ESER Strategic Actions. The review involved the completion of a desk review of documentation and a site visit for discussions with the ETB's senior management team, QA team and teaching staff. It resulted in the production of a report with recommendations to build on the work undertaken to date and the commitments made by the ETB. The ETB found the review to be a challenging but valuable experience and of benefit in preparing for its inaugural review.
- Another ETB chose to benchmark its programme approval process against another two ETBs and a further education college in another jurisdiction. In doing so, the ETB identified a gap in respect of qualitative metrics that might be used as part of its programme proposal and approval processes and an opportunity to enhance staff induction training. It has now adopted a tool developed by the Lithuanian Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education to enhance this process.
- A QA Support Service undertook a staff survey to reflect on progress against the QIP and to identify priorities for 2019. Staff reported an increased awareness of quality assurance, increased support in quality assurance and the enhancement of a quality culture.

the views of a cross-section of FET learners on the delivery of ETB provision within the region. Whilst such activities are of benefit in identifying broad-based feedback on what is working well and potential areas for improvement, additional mechanisms are required to enable more granular (i.e. by programme/service) feedback to be captured on a routine basis and for ETB oversight of the issues identified and the responses effected.

**12.3** Models of centre-level monitoring by ETBs are also beginning to emerge, involving combinations of data/documentation reporting and planning/review visits. In one ETB, meetings are held with centres to consider local quality improvement planning on the basis of issues arising from:

- external authenticator reports, results approval panel meeting minutes and appeal examiner feedback;
- changes in programme delivery and staffing;
- professional development requirements; and
- centre-led, ETB-led and national quality initiatives.

The ETB and centres have found that the process has a positive impact on the development of a quality culture and facilitates engagement at a centre level. This approach also enables the ETB to identify issues that emerge across the organisation that may need to be addressed at an individual, centre, programme or ETB-level as required.



## 13 Conclusions

**13.1** The 2019 QIP progress reports and series of dialogue meetings represented QQI's first formal quality monitoring activity with the sector since the ETBs formally re-engaged with QQI. The nature of the information requested and discussed is reflective of the still nascent nature of the ETBs' quality assurance systems and their relatively new relationship with QQI as an external quality assurance agency. Whilst there are limitations in the extent to which detailed systemic analysis and conclusions are possible, it has provided a broad indication of progress to date in addressing the areas the ETBs identified for improvement and enabled the identification of the ongoing and emerging trends, challenges, and developments in quality assurance

within the sector. QQI will seek feedback from the ETBs on their experience of the 2019 dialogue series with a view to enhancing future such engagements.

**13.2** The next major phase of QQI's engagement with the ETBs will be inaugural review of quality assurance. The review will provide a comprehensive, independent and evidence-based evaluation of the implementation and effectiveness of quality assurance within the ETBs, the outcome of which will inform and shape the future direction of QQI's engagement with the sector. QQI will continue to work collaboratively with the sector in progressing the review and in developing ongoing arrangements for quality reporting.



# APPENDIX

## QQI-ETB Dialogue Meetings 2019

Education and Training Board	Dialogue Meeting
Cavan & Monaghan Education and Training Board	9 May 2019
Donegal Education and Training Board	9 May 2019
Mayo, Sligo & Leitrim Education and Training Board	10 May 2019
Galway & Roscommon Education and Training Board	10 May 2019
Limerick & Clare Education and Training Board	14 May 2019
Kerry Education and Training Board	15 May 2019
Tipperary Education and Training Board	15 May 2019
Longford & Westmeath Education and Training Board	17 May 2019
City of Dublin Education and Training Board	23 May 2019
Laois & Offaly Education and Training Board	27 May 2019
Dublin & Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board	27 May 2019
Waterford & Wexford Education and Training Board	28 May 2019
Kilkenny & Carlow Education and Training Board	28 May 2019
Louth & Meath Education and Training Board	11 June 2019
Cork Education and Training Board	12 June 2019
Kildare & Wicklow Education and Training Board	24 June 2019

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