

BUILDING CONFIDENCE: SUPPORTS AND ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE TERTIARY EDUCATION SYSTEM

25 MARCH 2020



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

Adding Value to Qualifications



Context

The education and training community in Ireland and across the world is united in facing an unprecedented global public health challenge. This poses a clear threat to human life and has fundamentally disrupted all social routine. Leaders in every institution are prioritising the health and well-being of their students and staff working through the advice of Government and health officials. The effects are already being felt and it is not yet known how long this challenge will last.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is the national qualifications authority and the national quality assurance agency responsible for the external quality assurance of all post-secondary further, higher and English language education and training.

QQI is working closely with the Irish higher and further education and training system (or tertiary education system), the Department of Education and Skills and all other core stakeholder bodies:

- the national student/learner representative bodies: Union of Students in Ireland, Aontas
- the representative organisations supporting providers: Irish Universities Association, Technological Higher Education Association, Higher Education College Association, Education and Training Boards Ireland
- the national policy and funding authorities for higher education and further education: Higher Education Authority, SOLAS
- other national bodies providing frontline support to the national system: National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning

We are working together to support and provide leadership for providers (ie further education and training (FET) providers and higher education (HE) institutions) in their efforts to maintain the integrity, quality and standards of the Irish education and training system, at this time of unprecedented challenge. The system is working cohesively, in a connected way, to maintain support for our students and to protect the value of their qualifications. QQI is dedicated to creating and maintaining these critical cross-organisation connections.

QQI is also connected with international bodies and agencies who are facing the same challenges.

Social distancing means that many of the teaching, learning and assessment practices that we normally rely upon cannot be used now. Alternative arrangements can and will be made where at all possible. Alternative arrangements may involve doing things in a different but equivalent manner or by doing them earlier or later. While the education and training of all students is our focus, students expecting to graduate (i.e. achieve terminal qualifications) this year are a top priority for us.



Some students will not be able to complete their programmes or graduate within the timescales originally anticipated but thanks to suitable alternative arrangements being implemented by providers, as many as possible will still graduate this year as planned.

Students who are not able to participate in alternative arrangements for their assessment will not be penalised and will have opportunities to complete their studies at a later point in time.

We are all working hard to ensure that alternative arrangements will be fit for purpose and especially that 2020 qualifications standards are maintained.



Existing procedures in place to support these challenging times

Institutional Quality Assurance Arrangements

As our universities, RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences, Technological University, institutes of technology (IOTs), education and training boards (ETBs) and other HE and FET providers work hard to develop and implement alternative arrangements for teaching, learning and assessment, they can rely on the guidance, structures and supports of their own well-established internal quality assurance procedures.

[Quality Assurance](#) (QA) is a term generally used to describe the processes that seek to ensure that the learning environment (including teaching, learning, training, assessment and research) reaches an acceptable threshold of quality.

A provider's quality (assurance) system refers to all its internal QA policies, procedures and sub-systems working in concert to form an integrated whole. For example, the QA system specifies policies, procedures, guidelines, roles and responsibilities attached to the human resources and other resources required to govern, oversee, manage, analyse, make decisions, review and improve the quality of teaching, learning, assessment, research and related services.

These very procedures are designed to provide support and oversight in order to ensure integrity and consistency. Even in these extraordinary circumstances they provide support for providers to develop and facilitate alternative arrangements for students.

Many providers are used to making reasonable accommodations for students with a disability. The current situation means that reasonable accommodations are required on a far grander scale. These procedures will ensure all important decisions about to be executed by our different providers are informed by the experience of their professional frontline teaching staff, management teams, educational directors, faculty and school heads, technical trainers, academic experts, student representatives and, where appropriate, by peer reviewers, external examiners.

Providers' institutional QA procedures have all been informed by QQI's [Core Statutory Quality Assurance \(QA\) Guidelines](#).

The Core QA guidelines will continue to inform the procedures now being put in place by providers to:

- ensure that learners are central to quality assurance and arrangements are learner-centred;
- robust plans are in place and are communicated to learners regarding programme amendments and students missing teaching or assessment for a variety of reasons;



- provide a formal infrastructure to manage the increased risks and challenges associated with reductions in staff numbers or classroom time, in addition to moving the mode of teaching to a virtual environment;
- provide oversight and consistency for all decisions relating to alternative teaching and learning provision, including training for core teaching staff and alternative formats for supporting students;
- support the staff members with the knowledge and experience of the programmes (modules and courses) they deliver to make well-informed, valid and reliable decisions on alternative assessment arrangements;
- make the best use of national and international practice, models and examples from institutions around the world – using the added supports of external authenticators and external examiners where possible;
- provide transparent governance and oversight in the due process systems developed to promote professional approaches to all decisions taken, even in these exceptional times.



A National Approach to Quality and Standards for Tertiary Qualifications

Our Core QA guidelines provide a level of consistency within and across our tertiary education system. They outline the elements that are fundamental and common to all providers of programmes leading to awards that are included in our National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

Irish qualifications in the NFQ have high international standing and, together with our stakeholders, we aim to maintain that standing. This includes qualifications of the universities and institutes of technology as well as those of QQI. QQI is the awarding body for all FET providers of programmes leading to NFQ qualifications and for certain private sector HE providers.

All providers offering programmes leading to qualifications in the NFQ form part of the national education and training system. This system is underpinned by provider and national quality assurance structures, which seek to provide public trust and confidence in the education and training delivered and the resulting qualifications obtained by learners.

All providers offering programmes leading to awards in the NFQ understand that they are linked to each other and to the national reputation of the qualifications system, and therefore they have an obligation to uphold the quality of the education and training offering.

Providers also understand that maintaining standards is a challenge in these exceptional circumstances as they endeavour to ensure that learners achieve the core learning outcomes defined for the programmes and courses leading to our national qualifications.



Approaches to alternative arrangements for programmes and the achievement of qualifications

Guiding Principles

Make timely decisions: The advice from the Government and health officials is fast-moving and constantly evolving in response to emerging circumstances. All education and training institutions are encouraged to move towards finalising assessment arrangements, where possible, for the 2020 cohort of students with a focus on graduates and those reaching terminal qualifications. QQI will assist and advise where possible. Some national and international colleges have been decisive in establishing and publishing arrangements.

Communicate with students and stakeholders: Providers understand that students need to be kept fully informed regarding the alternative arrangements that are being put in place to ensure continuity in teaching, learning and assessment, and to preserve ongoing equality and access to these. Institutions are always mindful of the challenges that students experience in extraordinary and possibly unplanned circumstances.

Care for particular groups of learners: While all learners are disrupted by the crisis, some groups are more seriously affected, either by the pandemic itself or by the arrangements that have been put in place in response. These include learners who contract the disease, those who have caring responsibilities, those whose mental health is undermined by the epidemic, international learners, work-based learners, and learners with disabilities, whose difficulties may make the use of online solutions less effective or impossible. Providers are taking all possible consideration of the needs of these groups into account.

Maintain standards: While institutional autonomy is a core feature of professional responsibility, and the different disciplines will require different responses to new arrangements, all institutions are encouraged to adhere to the high-level assessment principles and procedures they have established, while they strive to implement more flexible yet still realistic and reliable alternative assessment arrangements in extraordinary circumstances.

Maintain academic oversight and governance in difficult circumstances: Alternative arrangements that necessitate change to assessment strategies are endorsed by the approval of the institution's academic governance system. Maintaining national standards will require an emphasis on confirming that the core learning outcomes have been satisfied for the respective programmes and courses. Academic governance is a central support for all colleges and institutions.

Stay connected to national supports: QQI and other national agencies and bodies are actively keeping all stakeholders connected. Providers are encouraged to regularly communicate approaches to other core community stakeholders. Many professional bodies are working to support the redirected arrangements in place by the HE and FET colleges and institutions.



Postponements

Where placement is a necessary requirement for a professional qualification, eg teaching, nursing etc, queries should be directed to the relevant statutory regulator. QQI will endeavour to share national approaches with all professional bodies.

While all providers are working intensively to facilitate the majority of their students, they may have no choice but to postpone some aspects of programmes involving one or more of the following:

- work placements (as many host employers may be closed or operating in a reduced capacity);
- students with specific support requirements;
- research facilities (as health advice has resulted in college laboratory closures);
- Erasmus programmes (where students have returned home from abroad); and
- international students studying in Ireland under now very difficult circumstances.

National supports and arrangements in place

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS

The **Department of Education and Skills** has established a **Tertiary Education and Training High Level Working Group** to support action and planning across the system, and to connect and plan for all immediate and longer-term contingencies as the situation evolves.

QUALITY AND QUALIFICATIONS IRELAND

As the National Qualifications Authority and Quality Assurance Agency for all education and training, QQI is working hard to keep all bodies connected. Over the coming days and months, we will be working closely with our student bodies, provider representative bodies, other regulators, funding bodies, and national organisations throughout Ireland.

We will rearticulate national guidance and continue to share best practice models to ensure that quality, standards and student outcomes can be maintained through this challenging period.

We will provide more detailed advice where required and draw on our international counterparts to help us to provide leadership and support on the quality and qualifications agenda. We will assist with contingency planning as required for the next academic year.



QQI has established more detailed guidance for providers availing of QQI awards. We will also reiterate some [high-level assessment principles](#) to assist all providers.

A dedicated [COVID-19 resource page](#) has been created on the QQI website.

UNION OF STUDENTS IN IRELAND (USI)

The Union of Students in Ireland is committed to working with stakeholders in the higher and further education sector to ensure that education provision during this time remains of extremely high quality. The method of teaching has changed, and many are in a position to provide and receive teaching in creative and innovative ways and that provision needs to be structured and supported to maintain the level of quality. There are alternatives being investigated for students who cannot engage in learning online and USI will use its network of student officers and other associated student links to work closely with all stakeholders and the colleges and institutions to ensure these alternatives are suitable for students. USI will work with other key stakeholders to ensure these methods are also of high quality.

IRISH UNIVERSITIES ASSOCIATION (IUA)

The seven universities represented by the IUA are implementing risk mitigation measures across its campuses and are developing detailed contingency plans to respond to the evolving Coronavirus crisis. The IUA's absolute priority is to protect the health and well-being of staff, students and visitors. The IUA has established a liaison group with senior representatives from each of the seven universities to help coordinate those plans and to share information on a daily basis. With almost 150 000 staff and students, including close to 20,000 international students, the universities have put in place a range of detailed contingency measures to respond to the situation as it develops. Each university has moved to online and distance teaching methods for the rest of the academic year and is supporting its students and staff to use these to maintain and support the quality of teaching and learning. Useful guidance has been produced in this regard by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, building on existing good practice across Irish higher education and internationally. Each university is also ensuring that end-of-year student assessments can take place in an academically suitable way, to ensure that programme learning outcomes are achieved. A key priority are students now facing final assessments to obtain their degree. The university registrars are sharing information and good practice to achieve these aims.

THE TECHNOLOGICAL HIGHER EDUCATION ASSOCIATION (THEA)

The eleven institutes of technology, represented by THEA, are working together to protect the health and welfare of students and staff. Arrangements for virtual meetings of member networks, including the Council of Presidents and the Council of Registrars, have been put in place to coordinate the development of detailed institutional contingency plans and risk mitigation measures to meet the unprecedented challenge of the COVID-19 public health crisis. This cohesive approach allows for the sharing of information and good



practice, and is informed by principles that aim to protect the wellbeing of students, that ensure they are supported in completing their studies in a timely and appropriate manner, and that have full regard to the advice and guidelines of the public health authorities. In this context, THEA is committed to maintaining the academic integrity of awards and the maintenance of standards. Each institute, utilising its academic governance and quality assurance structures, is developing and implementing the necessary changes to ensure the delivery of the curriculum and the appropriate assessment arrangements. All institutes have moved to online delivery and have established training and other supports for staff and students to ensure that the quality of the teaching and learning is maintained. Assessment is being designed in support of the national health guidelines and to ensure that social distancing rules are respected. The emphasis will be on establishing that the programme learning outcomes are satisfied, with particular attention being given to those assessments that will determine the award of degrees and other qualifications. To this end, all programmes team are checking that the necessary changes are calibrated against the standards set out in the established programme documentation. Changes to assessment schedules will be pedagogically and academically sound, will be approved by the institution's academic council, and will be communicated directly to students in a timely manner.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING BOARD IRELAND (ETBI)

ETBI, as the representative body for the 16 education and training boards (ETBs), has established liaison groups with senior representatives from each of the 16 ETBs to address the challenges associated with COVID-19. The ETB staff representatives are engaging in a structured way addressing key priority areas of FET – Strategy & Policy, Planning, Resourcing and Reporting, Quality, Work Based Learning and Active Inclusion. These groups, with the support of ETBI, are contributing to the development, formulation and implementation of COVID-19 ETB strategy and policy arrangements and guidance, while also providing a platform for advising on any national and emerging issues pertaining to further education and training.

These groups are providing an important medium for daily communication, daily strategy meetings and for the development of sectoral contingency planning arrangements including distance Teaching, Learning and assessment solutions. ETBI is representing the sector at all FET/HE Covid-19 Groups for the Tertiary Education Sector, working closely with other providers, bodies and agencies to drive solution-focused recommendations that are quality-assured and learner-focused. Consideration is being given to addressing the barriers to FET learners engaging with the introduction of distance learning and on-line assessment tools and provision that will need to be put in place to support these learners.

AONTAS

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation and, as a membership and representative body, is committed to advocating for, supporting, and providing information and resources to adult learners, tutors, practitioners and providers across the island of Ireland. AONTAS is working directly with providers and learners to document their experiences and barriers faced in teaching and learning during COVID-19.



AONTAS will ensure the Department of Education and Skills, QQI, ETBI and SOLAS are given direct input that will inform their response for the community education and adult learning sector.

AONTAS' response at present includes:

- developing and providing a Resource Hub for tutors, learners and families including teaching and learning materials, digital resources, and health and wellbeing activities and information;
- reaching out to our members through phone calls, emails, and surveys, collating this information and reporting to the Department of Education and Skills;
- providing a free helpline on **1800 303 669** to learners through our One Step Up Information and Referral Service and documenting their concerns, experiences, and questions, in addition to the provision of information and referrals;
- AONTAS will work closely with QQI to provide up-to-date information and advice for community education providers who offer courses leading to QQI awards. A webinar for Community Education Network (CEN) members on March 19th with QQI took place to reach these organisations;
- hosting webinars and online calls for tutors, practitioners, providers and other AONTAS members;
- continuing our work with the National FET Learner Forum online, providing additional support to learners and reaching out through communication materials and a learner-focused information campaign;
- expanding and delivering our Learners as Leaders project, an informal participatory programme that seeks to empower adult learners, create collaborative peer support networks, and build their capacity as advocates, mentors, and leaders within the sector as part of the European Agenda for Adult Learning.

SOLAS

SOLAS, the statutory authority for further education and training in Ireland is responsible for the funding, monitoring and evaluation of the further education and training (FET) system. They are currently working closely with education and training boards, and key partners and stakeholders to ensure all necessary supports can be activated and maintained during this period.

In relation to national programmes supported by SOLAS, including apprenticeship, Safe Pass, the Construction Skills Certification Scheme and skills to advance, they have provided guidance and updates on these areas to stakeholders and also on our national website. SOLAS is continuing to maintain and provide supports via national systems and infrastructure across the FET system and they have expanded the eCollege platform to provide learning for practitioners and learners.



There is a dedicated section on COVID-19 on the SOLAS website and they are actively sharing information and updates across all platforms where possible.

HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY (HEA)

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) continues to engage with all stakeholders, in particular, the higher education institutions (HEIs) and their representative bodies during this time of unprecedented disruption. The HEA has communicated the need to observe national health guidelines in order to protect the health and well-being of staff, students and the general public. The HEA is also providing advice and support to HEIs in areas such as Erasmus+, funding and competitive programmes.

HIGHER EDUCATION COLLEGES ASSOCIATION (HECA)

HECA and its 13 member colleges have worked speedily and comprehensively to, firstly, protect the health and wellbeing of students and staff, and further, to maintain the continuity of colleges so as to complete the learning and assessment of all programmes in the current academic year. While maintaining contact with QQI on contingency plans, each college has moved all of its teaching delivery online and is making alternative arrangements for the assessment of all learners. Many end-of-term exams are moving to an online format, with necessary provision being made for students in this changed assessment environment. Others are being replaced by an alternative form of assessment with deferrals being granted to some students where that is the most suitable option. The integrity of assessment is being maintained in line with the quality assurance policies and procedures approved for providers by QQI. HECA colleges' staff have responded with expected enthusiasm to the challenges brought about by this public health emergency and are ensuring that all learners have the opportunity to complete their learning and assessment this year so as to progress as normal.

NATIONAL FORUM FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION (NFETL)

The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education is aware that many institutions are struggling with the same challenges in the sudden mass migration to online learning. Its national networks and established communication channels position it well to facilitate a sharing of knowledge, expertise and good practice within and between institutions. The National Forum has consulted with senior managers, teaching and learning leaders and learning technologists across all Irish higher education institutions to determine their immediate needs in the context of COVID-19. An online community space has been created to allow those supporting teaching and learning to share insights, resources, lessons etc as they support colleagues across the sector. In addition, a National Forum collaborative spreadsheet is being populated by institutions across the sector with resources and information available to staff and students so that institutions can learn from each other and so that every student is given the best opportunity to succeed in these difficult circumstances. In addition, based on suggestions from the higher education community, a number of targeted resources are being developed, in collaboration with experts across the



sector. These resources focus on supporting students in their move to online learning (in collaboration with the Union of Students in Ireland), supporting staff in selecting and applying appropriate alternative assessment methods for the online environment (in collaboration with the 2016-18 national assessment lead, Prof Geraldine O'Neill) and supporting staff in ensuring online assessment is accessible and inclusive (in collaboration with AHEAD).

TEACHERS' UNION OF IRELAND

The Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) represents over 19,000 teachers, lecturers, researchers and other grades in the tertiary education and training sector in Ireland. Its members as professionals are committed to maintaining high quality standards of education and training. The provision of quality education and training approaches to teaching is central to enhancing the learner experience and is part of TUI members professional practice - TUI supports, the national framework of qualifications, multi-level provision of programmes, equality of access, regional provision, recognition of prior learning, high quality standards and clear progression routes for learners. In addition, promoting cooperation and knowledge-sharing through EU Erasmus+ schemes can contribute to the development of quality, standards and best practice. During these unprecedented times, TUI members will strive to maintain quality delivery of teaching to learners within the means available and as appropriate. TUI, as a key stakeholder in the education and training sector, is committed to engaging with QQI, national agencies and other stakeholders and associations to advocate for resources and infrastructure to support quality provision and professional practice in the tertiary education and training sector.

The Academic Year 2020-21

All stakeholders will be looking for guidance on the foreseeable impacts of this health crisis on the next academic year. QQI will consider the longer-term implications for assessment (as part of our existing discussion paper with the NFETL); progression around the system will be considered as part of the national discussions.

QQI will continue to support institutions' engagement with students in partnership with HEA and USI (NStEP), and to ensure that enhancement of quality and standards remains a national tertiary collaborative endeavour with the ongoing support of the Department of Education and Skills and other stakeholders.

These Covid-19 provisions are valid for the calendar year 2020. They will be reviewed before the end of 2020 and updated or extended as required.