



O'BRIEN / GOVERNANCE DESIGN

**GOVERNANCE IN AN EDUCATION AND TRAINING
CONTEXT: SOME AREAS FOR CONSIDERATION**

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INTRODUCTION

QQI's statutory quality assurance (QA) guidelines include direction on the role of governance in an education and training setting. For governance to be effective, it must be designed to meet not only external requirements and expectations, but also to meet the organisation's needs. The QA guidelines therefore allow for, and foresee, variations and diversity in the governance structures that will emerge amongst providers.

The following short document is intended to provide starting points for consideration in developing or reviewing a governance structure. It highlights some of the characteristics and purposes of governance referenced in the QA guidelines; connects governance with quality and strategy; identifies some matters for consideration when developing a governance structure; and concludes with advice on the documentation that supports the operation of governance groups or units.

It is important to note that this document has been developed independently by O'BRIEN / Governance Design and is intended for advisory purposes only. It has no other standing.

KEY FEATURES OF GOVERNANCE INCLUDED IN THE QA GUIDELINES (CORE AND SECTOR-SPECIFIC)

The *Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines* (2016) include a section dedicated to governance (1.1., pp.5-6). The supplementary *Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by QQI for Independent / Private Providers coming to QQI on a Voluntary Basis* (2016) further emphasise features of governance in an independent / private context (pp.2-3). A selection of the purposes of governance referred to in the guidelines are paraphrased below. The governance system:

- Provides oversight of the quality of education and training, and of any related activities, of a provider;
- Requires the separation of responsibilities between those who produce/develop materials and those that approve them;
- Ensures that corporate decision-makers are not exercising undue authority or influence on decision-making related to education and training;
- Contributes to the maintenance of standards;
- Reflects the interests of learners;
- Aligns decision-making with the stated strategy of an organisation; and
- Informs and prompts continuous improvement.

The QA guidelines envisage the governance system being made up of groups or units populated by membership which is informed and experienced enough to fulfil its terms of reference. They also include some specific examples of the anticipated areas that a governance structure will consider: programme development, programme approval, learner results, and self-evaluation findings. In

each instance, the provider is confirming to the awarding body, through its governance, that an appropriate standard of quality has been reached; consistent with its approved quality assurance policies and procedures. Equally, the governance system plays an important part in overseeing the implementation of any subsequent follow-up actions resulting from engagement with the awarding body.

USING GOVERNANCE TO SUPPORT THE IMPLEMENTATION OF QUALITY AND STRATEGY

Before looking in more detail at how a provider of education and training could go about developing its governance structures, it's worth thinking in more detail about what a governance system is doing and can do, particularly in the contexts of quality and strategy.

As noted above, a governance system is overseeing the quality of education and training. A primary reference point when doing so is the approved policies and procedures of the provider; essentially, the quality framework that the provider has committed to applying. It is generally acknowledged that for a quality assurance system to be fully effective, it needs to become embedded within an organisation. Governance is one of the ways in which collective ownership of quality can be achieved; it promotes and requires active responsibility for, and contribution to, the oversight of quality standards. Governance systems that expect informed membership are also acknowledging expertise where it is situated. In terms of education and training quality, it is expected that those involved in teaching and learning, and in the active implementation of quality assurance policies and procedures, are enabled to participate in decision-making.

Whilst quality assurance policies and procedures will be grounded in accepted practice, they can also reflect aspects of the strategy of the organisation. For instance, whilst external consultation is a standard feature of programme development and review, if an organisation wishes to establish closer connections with industry or with the community, it could emphasise and detail in its quality assurance procedures the level of consultation it expects to be undertaken to advance those objectives. The governance unit or group that is responsible for approving the programme or the outcome of its review should be seeking to establish that the nature and extent of consultation intended has been undertaken. It should also challenge the organisation where this is not found to be the case. Building these types of overt connections between strategy, quality assurance policies and procedures, and governance, can have mutually advantageous impacts and can also help to increase the focus of the organisation on its operational and strategic priorities.

In smaller organisations, a governance system will also be required to contribute to the oversight of the quality of education and training and of any related activities. The sector-specific guidelines refer to the potential of using external expertise (2016:2) where provider scale is a factor. Whilst there are practical and logistical issues in having to identify appropriate external expertise to contribute to governance, there are also likely benefits from a strategic perspective. In fulfilling its purposes of overseeing quality and, in doing so, having regard to organisational strategy, a

governance system can provide what is often most difficult to achieve in organisations of all sizes: a consistent opportunity to think, to identify drift in purpose and standards, and to realign the organisation with its priorities. The utilisation of external support in doing so, can prove very helpful.

DEVELOPING A GOVERNANCE SYSTEM – SOME STARTING POINTS FOR CONSIDERATION

Develop a joint understanding of the role and functions of the governance system

It's important to take the opportunity to review at the outset, the role given to governance in the Core and Sector-Specific QA Guidelines and, as an organisation, to consider the value governance can represent. This analysis will also be influenced by the size of the provider and by the number and nature of programmes that it delivers. The more collaborative the approach taken, the greater the level of communication and understanding regarding governance that will emerge; in turn, this will pay dividends at the point of implementation. In reviewing the relevant QA Guidelines, consider the following:

- What areas of quality assurance and improvement will require governance?
- In which of those areas is separation of decision-making and approval required?

Consider how units or groups will form a system of governance

In coming to an appreciation of the breadth of responsibilities of the governance system, an understanding will also be emerging of the number of governance units or groups that will be required. At this point, some further matters will also need to be taken into consideration:

- What governance structures already exist in the organisation and what is their role?
- How will *oversight* of education and training and related matters be achieved?
- How many units of governance are likely to be required?
- What reporting lines between governance units or groups does this suggest?

The matter of how many governance units or groups are required is dependent on several factors. The required separation of decision-making and approval is one. Provider-scale is another. A third, connected to provider-scale, is how realistic it is for a governance unit to provide oversight of education and training and related activities, without devolving some decision-making to sub-units and/or receiving recommendations to inform its decisions. All of this points to the need to develop a governance system that is appropriate to its setting and purpose.

Consider how the governance system will operate

The establishment and implementation of a governance system can be a significant undertaking depending on the scale of governance required. Some of the implementation matters that can usefully be considered in parallel with development are:

- The governance system will require management and administration support. The more governance groups or units, the more support that will need to be planned for;
- The governance system also needs the involvement of other members of staff. Groups or units require written submissions on which decisions can be made and approval granted. This wider participation needs to be acknowledged and understood from the outset;
- The confirmed members of committees will require induction, intermittent briefing interventions, and self-evaluation support;
- The number of times a given unit of governance meets and the scheduling of those meetings requires consideration in the context of the business they are carrying out and any external schedules that need to be met;
- The use of information and communication technology should be considered in terms of communicating with governance units or groups, making papers for consideration available and publishing the outcomes of proceedings. Use of online facilities to reduce the administrative burden and increase communication of governance outcomes can be very valuable.

DOCUMENTATION THAT SUPPORTS THE IMPLEMENTATION OF GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

Documentation of the governance system as part of quality assurance policies and procedures

The *Core Statutory QA Guidelines* are clear in their expectation that a provider's quality assurance procedures will include details of related governance arrangements (2016:7); this ensures that these arrangements are visible externally, but also that they are understood internally. As an example, procedures for programme proposal, development and approval should all indicate which governance unit or units will make and approve associated decisions. Equally, procedures relating to learner results should indicate which governance unit approves those results prior to their submission to the awarding body. It is of course essential that roles given to governance units or groups in quality assurance procedures, align with their terms of reference.

The development of terms of reference

Terms of reference describe the powers and operating parameters of a given governance unit or group. As such, they should include detailed roles and responsibilities, and cross-refer to other governance units as part of the decision-making chain, where appropriate. It is best to be as clear

as possible when developing terms of reference. This makes it easier to implement and operate the governance system. It also adds to the transparency of the organisation by showing how, for instance, assessment results, have been routed through the governance system to the point of approval and submission to the awarding body.

How terms of reference are developed and what they look like will differ amongst providers. The following example is a modular system that builds up into quite comprehensive information about the governance unit or group. In other cases, some of the information presented below could be detailed separately in an operating code or governance manual.

Tiers of information that can inform terms of reference

Tier one information –the introductory details of the governance unit: Information in this section could include:

- the name of the governance unit;
- a one-line description of its purpose;
- the version of the terms of reference;
- approval and review date;
- the Chair and the Secretary;
- the membership and its tenure; and
- meeting frequency.

Tier two information – the objectives and responsibilities of the governance unit: Information in this section could include:

- the objectives of the committee; and
- the specific responsibilities and powers of the governance unit.

Tier three information – how the governance unit will operate: Information in this section could include:

- agenda management (how is it agreed);
- what constitutes a quorum;
- incorporeal meetings (is this form of meeting acceptable if required);
- voting arrangements (if a consensus can't be reached, what is the process for decision-making);
- attendance at meetings (can non-members be invited to attend, observe, present);
- conflicts of interest on the part of members (how are they identified and acted upon);
- confirmation and communication of minutes (when are they confirmed and how are they communicated); and
- amendments to terms of reference (how are amendments to terms of reference approved).