



NATIONAL FORUM

FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING
AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Response to the QQI White Paper: Draft Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines/ Guidelines for Flexible and Distributed Learning

Introduction

The National Forum welcomes the development of the draft quality assurance guidelines which represents a substantial body of work in bringing convergence to arrangements for educational quality assurance leading to awards on the National Framework of Qualifications as well as emergent and more flexible forms of educational provision across the sector.

In the spirit of collegiality and partnership, the Forum would like to highlight some general and specific issues emerging from the current draft guidelines in its contribution to the consultation process. The intersection between QQI and the Forum in their complementary approaches to supporting the assurance, development and enhancement of educational quality, presents a strong basis for further discussion of the current draft in light of emergent and future work of both organisations. The Forum would warmly welcome an opportunity to discuss in greater detail with QQI, the points raised below.

General Observations

1. Further detailed consideration may need to be given to the overall structure and content of the Quality Assurance Guidelines in the next phase of drafting and development. It will be important to achieve a simplified set of Guidelines that reflect and support meaningfully the different institutional contexts and range of educational purposes and objectives embodied in the awards offered across the education sector. The specification of particular sub-set requirements that may only apply to particular forms of provision will be an important aspect of ensuring clarity overall and effective communication to the target education audiences.
2. Simplification of the overall structure and further calibration of the key principles outlined in the Quality Assurance Guidelines may be required. Currently the coexistence of high level principles articulated in the guidelines alongside more direct elaborations of how these principles might be enacted, appears to blur the separation between guidance and implementation. Care may need to be taken to ensure that where specific examples are used that they are not at risk of becoming quickly outdated in relation to developing and new areas of practice.

3. The enhancement focus, which is acknowledged as a key part of quality and its assurance may need further strengthening within the guidelines to avoid the misperception that the balance of emphasis lies solely on compliance. The ideas of a quality ethos and active participation of all staff in educational quality, present an opportunity to acknowledge the importance of enhancement activities and the identification and sharing of good practice. Strengthening this emphasis also provides an important context for the work of the National Forum going forward in a number of its core areas of activity as detailed below.

Specific Comments

The following elements of the Draft QA Guidelines are especially relevant to the current and emerging work of the National Forum, and it would welcome the opportunity to discuss in more detail directly with QQI as the QA Guidelines are developed. The Forum's work could inform and support the aspirations of the QA Guidelines as they are developed further, as well as provide higher education institutions with access to evidence-based good practice processes and approaches to inform their quality assurance arrangements.

4. Assessment

The Forum's Enhancement theme of ***Assessment of/as/for Learning*** will form an important basis for its activities and engagement with the sector, for example, through the National Seminar Series, good practice case studies and on-going research and scholarship to enhancement existing assessment activities. The centrality of assessment in influencing the design, impact and enhancement of teaching and learning activities is crucial. Current established good practice in assessment should be reflected in the Guidelines and the Forum would welcome the opportunity to discuss its contribution further in this regard.

5. Teaching and Learning

The Forum's emerging *Approach to Professional Development* which articulates key professional domains for those teaching in higher education as well as a structured process for self-evaluation and development planning for individual staff. It will in due course following further consultation be supplemented by guidance for institutions on approaches to the strategic enhancement of teaching and learning. Taken together, both of these will support objectives and requirements for improving the quality of teaching and learning. Additionally, current established good practice in teaching and learning should be reflected in the Guidelines.

6. Flexible and Distributed Learning

Flexible and distributed learning has become increasingly digital, and the pedagogic paradigms that inform practice are changing in response to this. Guidelines should allow for the development of best practices and new models of teaching and learning that can fully exploit the possibilities of the digital era while ensuring quality.

In 2015, the Forum published *A Roadmap for Enhancement in a Digital World*, based on extensive consultation and research. Some consideration may need to be given to the use of the term *flexible and distributed learning* which appears to introduce an additional to what is already a quite crowded language describing that provision which is not wholly on campus. The document outlines an evaluation of the current digital landscape across higher education, as well as the key enablers in building digital capacity. This document, which highlights the variability in depth and impact of digital practice, can inform the QA guidelines. The National Review of the Technical Infrastructure of Higher Education, that is currently on-going will as one of its outcomes capture case-studies of good practice across the sector. Additionally, the 2012 report from the SIF-funded IoTI Flexible Learning project contains case-studies and observations which may be of use.

We look forward to discussing the foregoing comments in further detail with QQI.