

# Towards Principles for Programme Validation, Professional Accreditation and Approval, and other Professional Engagements with Education Providers

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## Introduction and Scope

This statement provides high-level principles for the accreditation and approval (for exemptions, and other such engagements) of provider programmes by professional/statutory, regulatory accreditation bodies. It will also apply to autonomous providers accrediting/validating their own programmes, and to Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) in its capacity as an awarding and validating body. The statement will be mindful of European directives and international professional agreements that may impact on aspects of the principles.

The purpose of this document is to ensure a complementary approach by both professional bodies and awarding bodies to:

- **harmonise** separate academic programme validation and professional accreditation processes;
- agree **overarching principles** for these processes;
- **avoid unnecessary duplication and overlap** between related processes where possible; and
- **reduce the burden** on those academic providers subject to many professional, regulatory and state processes and requirements.

**Shared responsibilities** are highlighted for all, while acknowledging that all parties have **individual responsibilities**.

This Irish statement of principles is based upon the Joint Statement of principles established by Universities Australia and Professions Australia with the kind permission of those organisations. The focus of the original principles was exclusively on professional accreditation.

The principles in this Irish version will also include all other significant engagements between professional statutory/regulatory bodies and providers that require approval by professional statutory/regulatory bodies of academic programmes for the purpose of entry by graduates to professional programmes, professional apprenticeship style programmes and others of significance (yet to be identified).

The objectives of this statement are set out below.

## Preamble

All parties referenced in this document place a high priority on pursuing initiatives to enhance quality within the professions and increasing the contribution the professions make to the broader community. While recognising that the overall professional accreditation process is a wider public good, all acknowledge that the immediate beneficiaries of robust professional accreditation processes are **students** and **professionals**.

The members of professional statutory and regulatory bodies in Ireland (referred to as “the professional bodies or professions” hereafter) continue to work in partnership with the universities<sup>1</sup>, institutes of technology, independent private higher education providers and further education colleges (referred to as “Providers” hereafter) in Ireland and in some instances more broadly through their:

- programme accreditation activities;
- engagements for the granting of exemptions, and
- other activities to ensure quality in professional education as the key foundation to entry to practise or register as a professional in Ireland or to gain entry (course exemptions) to professional programmes post-graduation from college.

Academic validation processes are self-regulated by universities and institutes of technology against:

- Institutional policies and criteria for the validation/accreditation of the institution’s programmes,
- Requirements of the European Standards and Guidelines and [QQI’s suite of Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines](#)
- Requirements of the [National Framework of Qualifications](#).

QQI regulates programme validation for private independent providers in private HE and FET providers as well as public FET providers (see QQI’s [Policies and criteria for the validation of programmes of education and training](#)). It is recognised that a complementary approach is necessary by all to harmonise the separate academic validation and professional accreditation processes to – ultimately – avoid duplication of effort.

In this context, the programme accreditation/validation processes of both provider, professional body and QQI are undertaken in a way that accords with the general principles of:

- proportionality,
- risk,
- transparency,
- collegiality,
- enhancement,
- necessity, and
- shared responsibility.

## Definitions

For the purposes of this document, the following definitions are used.

**Professional accreditation** of provider programmes of study is intended:

- to ensure that a programme of study meets essential criteria in the training and education of its students in the relevant professional discipline, and that graduates from that discipline achieve the professional competencies and learning outcomes necessary for entry into the relevant level of professional practice, or
- for approval for entry with exemptions from parts/modules of a professional programme post-graduation.

Professional accreditation can be either regulated or non-regulated. Governments (via regulators), on behalf of the public, regulate some professions where they wish to assure public safety and designate authority for bodies to accredit professions. In unregulated professions, professional associations may establish an accreditation function or approval process as part of their wider professional services and operations.

**Professional accreditation bodies** are autonomous independent bodies that that review and/or evaluate and/or endorse provider programmes of study to ensure that the required standards are met for the relevant professions with the goal of act as evaluators of provider programmes of study with the goal of:

- professional accreditation of those programmes, or
- for the purpose of granting entry to those programmes that require postgraduate entry.

**Academic accreditation or programme validation** refers to the evaluation of a programme of study by a self-accrediting provider such as a university, institute of technology, technological university, RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences or by QQI, against:

- programme requirements specified in the *Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)* ,
- QQI's [Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines](#), as well as any relevant QQI [Topic-](#) and [Sector-](#)specific QA Guidelines
- institutional or national policies and criteria for programme validation and
- the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)

These national guidelines, policies and criteria include specific standards and requirements for academic governance, programme design and delivery, staffing, facilities and infrastructure, learning resources and educational support and, as applicable, require that staffing and resourcing for programmes are sufficient to ensure that students achieve programme learning outcomes.

**Providers**, some of which are autonomous self-accrediting institutions, regularly demonstrate that they have robust academic quality assurance processes for academic programme accreditation and validation and the supporting internal quality assurance infrastructure. Non-self-accrediting providers seek validation of programmes through QQI processes. QQI is responsible for the

development of a suite of statutory quality assurance guidelines applicable to all providers and in line with the [Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area \(ESG\) 2015](#), all of which relate to academic quality assurance.

**Provider programme** means a programme of study that leads to an award on the National Framework of Qualifications and an award conferred by an autonomous Irish provider, or QQI on behalf of other providers.

**Professional accreditation standard(s)** means the published key accreditation criteria used by the relevant professional accreditation body to evaluate a provider programme for professional accreditation purposes.

**Professional accreditation processes** mean the published processes and/or procedures by which a provider programme is evaluated against the professional accreditation standards, with the aim of reaching a conclusion about whether a provider programme meets the minimum standards set by the relevant professional accreditation body for a range of purposes associated with that profession including approval for exemptions (and any minimum standards that have to be met).

## Objectives of this Statement

This Statement is designed to:

- provide jointly agreed principles for the professional accreditation and validation of provider programmes that prepare students for
  - entry into the relevant level of professional practice in a specific professional discipline;
  - approval for exemptions for entry to a professional course following completion/graduation from provider programmes
  - other
- encourage national consistency of the professional accreditation standards and processes at the discipline level, including between state, QQI, self-accrediting providers and professional accreditation panels, and consistency at the level of principle in a discipline's requirements;
- be widely applicable and inclusive to reflect the diversity in the educational design, delivery, quality processes and institutional structures that exist within the education sector and to reflect the different context and quality processes of the professional associations and professional accreditation bodies and meeting any regulatory requirements set by regulators;
- ensure that professional accreditation processes and all programme validation and related review processes operate in a transparent, accountable, efficient, effective and fair way.

## Professional Accreditation Context and Purpose

Professional accreditation of provider programmes serves several purposes, including:

- serving a public good through which stakeholders – the public, students, graduates, employers, higher education institutions, government, professional associations and professional

accreditation bodies – can be assured that graduates of an provider programme meet the criteria and standards for entry into the relevant level of professional practice in a specific professional discipline; or achieve approval for entry exemptions; other

- providing an independent quality assurance process for registration under government legislation and/or membership of a professional association that a provider programme meets the criteria and standards for entry into the relevant level of professional practice in a specific professional discipline;
- encouraging adherence to a code of ethics or behaviours for the professional discipline;
- aiding student and graduate mobility both within Ireland and overseas, including potentially improving ease of access to further study or employment in Ireland and overseas.

## Basic Principles for Professional Accreditation

The professional accreditation standards and processes will vary in detail between professional disciplines but ideally should be underpinned by the following guiding principles and characteristics within three core areas of focus:

- professional accreditation standards;
- professional accreditation processes; and
- stakeholder engagement

The basic principles applicable to each area of focus are set out below.

### Professional accreditation standards should:

- focus on professional competencies and learning outcomes at graduation;
- develop criteria for professional accreditation that meet relevant Irish, European and other international benchmarks, including all relevant European directives and international professional agreements, and are demonstrably based on available research and evidence;
- take due and realistic account of the wider education environment, including the demands made by other external agencies and regulators on the providers; limitations in available resourcing; and diverse institutional circumstances;
- be cognisant of, and distinguish between, the respective requirements of QQI – responsible for monitoring adherence to the Statutory Quality Assurance guidelines and National Framework of Qualifications – and professional accreditation bodies and sectoral regulators – responsible for professional accreditation – and should not lead to unnecessary duplication of effort or process;
- engage stakeholders, including providers, students, state department and agencies, education providers, industry, the profession, and public interest representatives including consumers/community in the development and review of professional accreditation standards and relevant guidelines and processes;
- be published, together with the accreditation processes to be used by the professional accreditation body; and
- be reviewed periodically.

## Professional accreditation processes should:

- recognise that **providers are responsible for academic accreditation and validation** and have **wider roles** in learning and teaching, scholarship, research and community engagement;
- consider **resources, processes, policies and practices** where appropriate;
- base the evaluation of provider programmes on the **published professional accreditation standards**;
- be **transparent, consistent and predictable** to stakeholders, including providers and students;
- be informed by an understanding of the **distinct and complementary roles** of professional accreditation bodies and providers which have responsibility for academic accreditation and validation;
- clearly **define scope and activities of accreditation panels**;
- implement **procedures for identifying, recording and managing perceived or actual conflicts of interest** in the professional accreditation process, including those pertaining to the membership of accreditation panels;
- have effective **complaints and appeals processes** relating to the accreditation process and decisions by professional accreditation bodies; and
- **minimise the cost** of professional accreditation on providers, for example by being prepared to share and accept information from complementary accreditation processes.

## Stakeholder engagement is enabled by professional accreditation through:

- **engaging stakeholders**, including students, state department and agencies, education providers, industry, the profession, and public interest representatives including consumers/community in the work of the professional accreditation body **beyond the direct development of professional accreditation standards**;
- working towards **continued dialogue** between professional bodies and providers to facilitate mutual trust and confidence between parties;
- **working towards such approaches** for disciplines that **do not have consistent national professional accreditation processes**;
- working towards the development of a **complementary approach to programme accreditation** between providers and professional accreditation bodies; and
- working to **resolve overlaps between different accrediting bodies in the same field**.

## Roles and Responsibilities of Providers, Professional Bodies and QQI

Together with their respective members, these bodies must work in partnership to ensure the maintenance of standards in professional education.

They share a responsibility to develop complementary approaches to programme accreditation as well as to align professional standards and the learning outcomes requirements of the National Framework of Qualifications.

## Roles and Responsibilities of Providers

Providers are responsible for the academic accreditation of their own programmes. This includes:

- **compliance with the National Framework of Qualifications Framework, ESG and Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines** established by QQI and where appropriate **regulatory processes**;
- designing, accrediting, validating and setting final curricula for programmes through **rigorous internal processes**, based on defensible **benchmarks, evidence and research**;
- setting and measuring **programme learning outcomes** and the **standard of attainment**; and
- **allocating resourcing** and deciding **staffing profiles** for programmes to ensure that students achieve programme learning outcomes, including the appropriate levels of staff and reporting and management lines.

**The providers are responsible for working with Professional Bodies** in the professional accreditation of their programmes and approval of exemptions by:

- recognising the **role of professional accreditation bodies** in accreditation of provider programmes;
- providing **relevant information and evidence against the standards** for professional accreditation and approval of exemptions; and
- **disclosing substantial changes** that affect their professional accreditation or approval to the relevant professional accreditation body.

## Roles and Responsibilities of Professional Bodies

Professional Bodies who accredit programmes or approve provider programmes for exemptions are responsible for the accreditation of provider programmes that aim to achieve the professional competencies and learning outcomes necessary for:

- entry into the relevant level of the profession, or
- entry exemptions for programmes leading to professional awards,
- other.

This includes:

- **establishing the standards** required for professional accreditation and the registration of graduates, based on defensible benchmarks, evidence and research;
- **accrediting provider programmes** by applying professional accreditation processes fairly and transparently against published professional accreditation standards, including statutory and regulatory standards;
- ensuring that the members of professional accreditation panels are **appropriately skilled, trained, supported** and that there are processes to assist them to identify and manage effectively any perceived or actual **conflicts of interest**;
- recognising their **broader international obligation** to align with international professional accreditation standards, as well as national regulatory standards, as appropriate for their professional discipline;
- **recognising and supporting a diversity of provider approaches** in meeting professional accreditation standards and avoiding prescribing resources, processes, policies and practices; and

- recognising that provider programmes prepare students for **entry** into the relevant level of the profession and that **ongoing professional education will ensue post-graduation**.

## Joint Roles and Responsibilities

Professional Bodies, Providers, QQI are responsible for:

- acknowledging that the **achievement of quality graduate outcomes** is the **central purpose of professional accreditation** and that each party is working genuinely towards this goal;
- promoting **continuous improvement in the quality of provider education and professional training** to respond to evolving community needs and the needs of professional practice;
- **co-operating** in the process and **keeping each other informed of changes** in discipline pedagogy, professional practice experience and other matters that could impact on the professional competencies required of graduates or the manner in which they are educated;
- promoting **ongoing open communication and dialogue** about professional accreditation standards, graduate competencies and attainment.
- proactively **identifying and communicating quality issues** with graduate competencies and outcomes;
- using **research and evidence to evaluate graduate outcomes** and attainment and, where systematic evidence may suggest unsatisfactory outcomes, to **work collaboratively towards their improvement**;
- **investigating specific provider practices, processes and policies** where there is sufficient evidence to substantiate a claim of unsatisfactory graduate outcomes and attainment.