



**QQI**

Quality and Qualifications Ireland  
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

## **HET Core Validation Policy And Criteria 2010, Revised 2013**

QQI has adopted policies, criteria and guidelines established by its predecessor bodies and saved under section 84 of the 2012 Act. These are adopted and adapted as necessary, to support new policies issued by QQI and the establishment of QQI services in accordance with the 2012 Act. Over time these policies will be replaced with new QQI policies under the QQI *Comprehensive Policy development Programme*. All references in this policy document to the predecessor bodies and the associated structures should be read as referring to QQI and its structures.

In the event that there is any conflict between the adopted and adapted legacy policy, criteria and guidelines and QQI policy, the QQI policy will prevail.

# Contents

1	Introduction	4
	1.1 Duration of Validation	5
	1.2 Validation and Change	5
	1.3 Commencement of this policy	5
2	Key Stages in the Validation Process	6
3	Validation Criteria	6
	3.1 Outline Programme Validation Criteria	6
	3.2 Elaborated Programme Validation Criteria	7
	3.2.1 Development and publication of explicit intended learning outcomes (ESG)	7
	3.2.2 Careful attention to curriculum and programme design and content (ESG)	8
	3.2.3 Specific needs of different modes of delivery and types of higher education (ESG)	10
4	Features common to QQI Validation Processes	10
	4.1 Providers which may apply for validation	10
	4.2 Withdrawing an application for validation of a programme	10
	4.3 Internal Assessment by a Provider	10
	4.4 The External Assessment Process for Validation	11
	4.5 Post-validation Follow-up by QQI	14
	4.6 Revalidation	14
	4.7 Review and withdrawal of validation by QQI	14
	4.8 Refusal of validation	15
	4.9 Appeals against Refusal or Withdrawal of Validation by QQI	15
5	Devolution of Responsibility for Validation Sub-processes where QQI is the Awarding Body	15
6	Conditions of validation	15
	6.1 Protection of Enrolled Learners Pre-condition	15
	6.2 Conditions	16
7	Validation in the Context of Modular Systems	16
8	Supplementary Validation Processes, Policy and Criteria	17
9	Interpretations	18
10	References	21

# 1. Introduction

Validation is the quality assurance procedure by which an *awarding body*<sup>1</sup> approves new programmes of education and training. Specifically, it is the process by which an awarding body satisfies itself that a learner may attain knowledge, skill or competence for the purpose of an *award* made by the awarding body. It corresponds to the process of programme accreditation used in some other European countries. Validation is a core function of quality assurance mandated by the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012.

The validation policy and criteria herein have been designed to restrict attention to those elements which are considered intrinsic to all programmes. In doing so it is recognised that a programme is defined as any process by which learners may acquire knowledge, skill or competence. By focusing on what is considered intrinsic to all programmes the policy and criteria avoid unintended bias in favour of any particular type of programme or approach to teaching and learning. In so doing they facilitate diversity and open the way for enhancing innovations.

A validated programme is not a static entity, frozen in time (Section 1.2). It is expected that, informed by annual review, changes will continually be made: for example, to teaching, learning and assessment processes and strategies; lecture notes; assignments and reading lists. Changes should be considered and implemented in the context of the effectiveness of the overall programme in enabling learners to achieve its intended learning outcomes. However, not all aspects of programmes are likely to require frequent change. For example the minimum intended learning outcomes of major award programmes will by their nature be relatively stable.

Validation, when implemented rigorously, fairly and transparently, supports public confidence in the quality of programmes and in the standards of awards. It also contributes to the enhancement of the quality of programmes. Nevertheless, *providers* of programmes of higher education and training have the principal responsibility for the quality of their own programmes. Validation should help providers to discharge this responsibility.

This document sets out the core policy and criteria for the validation of *programmes* of higher education and training.

- It outlines the key stages in any awarding body's validation process (Section 2)
- It outlines generic criteria for validation by an awarding body (Section 3)
- It details those elements which are common features of the various QQI validation processes (Section 4)
- It provides for some devolution of responsibility for certain validation sub-processes to providers (without delegated authority) with the necessary capacity and experience (Section 5).
- It presents the general conditions for validation by QQI (Section 6)
- It addresses validation in the context of modularisation (Section 7)
- It cites the QQI documents providing more specialised validation policy and criteria (e.g. for research, transnational and collaborative programmes) for awarding bodies as well as other supplementary information (Section 8)
- It summarises the validation policy and criteria which apply to awarding bodies acting under *delegated authority* (Section 9)

## 1.1 Duration of Validation

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Validation is normally for a specified period not exceeding five years. See Section 4.6 on revalidation.

## 1.2 Validation and Change

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It is assumed that 'programme boards' (or equivalent) will make necessary enhancements and adaptations to programmes from year to year (see also Section 4.6.1). This will be informed by continual internal monitoring, analysis and annual reviews of the programmes (including inputs from external examiners and boards of examiners). Providers should have appropriate quality assurance procedures for this and have agreed these with QQI.

There are limits to what may be changed before a programme must be revalidated. All new programmes must

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<sup>1</sup> Certain terms have a precise technical meaning in the context of this document and may have important nuances which differ from conventional meanings. These terms are set in italicised orange typeface where they first appear and, except where a specific cross-reference is provided, are defined in the Interpretations section.

be validated. An extensive (i.e. very substantial) change to a programme is one which effectively results in a new programme. The interpretation of what does or does not constitute an 'extensive change' is a matter for expert judgement. Undermining anything which was essential to support the original validation decision would be judged to be an 'extensive change'. Elimination of any core intended programme learning outcomes would also be judged to be an 'extensive change'. A change in the pre-requisite learning requirements for a given programme may require an extensive change to the programme.

In some cases the change may be such as to allow the findings of the original validation process to be reused. An example of this is where a programme designed to be provided at one location is modified to enable it to be provided at another. The modifications might, in this case, be the changed teaching staff and the changed facilities and resources and perhaps the changed quality assurance environment. If such a programme's curriculum and assessment remain unchanged they need not be re-examined in detail. The validation of the modified programme could focus on what has changed: the difference. This type of validation is called *differential validation*. Guidelines on differential validation are provided in the *HET General Programme Accreditation Manual, Revised 2013*

The relevant awarding body should be consulted in case of any doubt about whether or not revalidation is necessary.

### 1.3 Commencement of this policy

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The policy applies to all new validation (or revalidation) decisions starting from 09 October 2013 except in any cases where applications have been received by QQI prior to that date.

## 2. Key Stages in the Validation Process

The validation process used by awarding bodies (i.e. QQI and institutions with the necessary delegated authority) shall be consistent with the generic quality assurance model promoted by the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)* and the Irish Higher Education Quality Network's (IHEQN) '*Principles of Good Practice in Quality Assurance/Quality Improvement for Higher Education and Training*'. Specifically, the ESG Standard 3.7 states that the processes of external quality assurance agencies will normally be expected to include:

- Self-assessment: *"a self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance process<sup>2</sup>";*
- External assessment: *"an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, (a) student member(s), and site visits as decided by the agency";*
- Report publication: *"publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes";*
- Follow-up: *"a follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report".*

Validation by an awarding body fits into this framework. It is an *ex ante* process. It occurs before a programme starts and involves the first three stages. The validation of programmes includes self-assessment by the provider, external assessment, and report of the outcome. The *expert panel* (group of experts) which makes the "external assessment" must be independent of the institution(s) providing the programme. The internal and external assessments are the essence of the validation process.

Validation reports may include prerequisite conditions which must be met prior to the formal completion of validation. Any such prerequisites must be followed-up by the awarding body before a formal validation decision is made.

Normally a validation report will include conditions and recommendations (which may be optional) to be implemented following validation. These require follow-up by the awarding body. The awarding body's quality assurance procedures should provide for this follow-up.

Awarding bodies are responsible for monitoring the quality of programmes which they validate. Monitoring can be seen as long-term follow-up.

Following the validation decision, the expert panel report is published on the validating body's website.

## 3. Validation Criteria

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<sup>2</sup> The italicised text here and in the following three stages is quoted from ESG Standard 3.7.

Both the self-assessment and the external assessment mentioned in Section 2 require explicit criteria. Before a programme can be validated by an awarding body it must be assessed against the validation criteria in this section. The validation criteria are presented below, first in outline and then elaborated.

### 3.1 Outline Programme Validation Criteria

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The validation criteria are outlined as follows:

- Standards: The *minimum intended programme learning outcomes* must be consistent with the relevant *awards standards* and the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) *award-type descriptors*.
- Access standard: The *prerequisite learning* for participation in the programme and any other assumptions relating to the programme's *target learners* must be explicit.
- Learning: The programme must enable its *target learners* to attain the *minimum intended programme learning outcomes* reliably and efficiently (in terms of learner effort). The concept of minimum intended programme learning outcomes and its relation to teaching, learning and assessment are explained in *Assessment and Standards, Revised 2013*.

### 3.2 Elaborated Programme Validation Criteria

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This section elaborates upon the outline validation criteria. It applies to all programmes. The elaboration is aligned with the ESG Standard 2.1 and the corresponding guidelines. Supplementary criteria for programmes with a transnational or collaborative dimension are provided in *Policy for Collaborative Programmes, Transnational Programmes and Joint Awards 2012*. Additional criteria for the validation of research degree programmes are established in *Research Degree Programme Policy and Criteria 2010*.

ESG Standard 2.1 states that: *Institutions should have formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review and monitoring of their programmes and awards*. The *relevant* elements of the corresponding guidelines are explored in the following sub-sections which provide explicit criteria for the validation of programmes.

#### 3.2.1 Development and publication of explicit intended learning outcomes (ESG)

To validate a programme it is necessary to know 'where learners start' and 'where they get to'. Therefore, validation is only possible where the following are explicitly specified:

- The target learners' prerequisite learning and any other relevant assumptions about programme participants;
- The minimum intended programme learning outcomes and any other educational objectives of the programme.

Validation requires evidence that the minimum intended programme learning outcomes are consistent with the applicable awards standards and the relevant NFQ (National Framework of Qualifications) award-type descriptor(s) (see *Assessment and Standards, Revised 2013*.)

Since awards standards are cumulative, the programme's prerequisite learning specification must include the knowledge, skill and competence specified at lower NFQ levels in the applicable awards standards for which the programme does not provide learning opportunities. This is especially important for *conversion programmes* at higher levels in the NFQ.

The intended learning outcomes of major award programmes should emphasise *profound learning* outcomes much more than transient learning outcomes. This requirement arises from the nature of the learning outcomes specified by the NFQ and awards standards. Transient learning outcomes are those which are relatively easily acquired and date more quickly. An example of this kind of learning might be skill in the use of a particular software package—one learns how to operate the software without much concern about why the user interface is the way it is or about the underpinning algorithms or data structures. Profound learning takes longer to acquire and dates more slowly if at all—it changes a person significantly. Examples of this include learning to speak a modern language, to play a musical instrument or to be proficient in mathematical methods. This perspective is only an approximation but can be a useful alternative way of thinking about kinds of learning and approaches to learning.

#### 3.2.2 Careful attention to curriculum and programme design and content (ESG)

Validation requires evidence that target learners may achieve the intended programme learning outcomes. The

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following points elaborate on the specific evidence that should be presented.

1. The programme's content and learning environment must be appropriate to the programme's intended learning outcomes.
  - (a) The programme's staff (assessors, teachers, etc.) as a group must be competent to enable learners to develop (achieve) the intended programme learning outcomes and to assess learners' achievements as required by QQI through *Assessment and Standards, 2009*;
  - (b) The programme's learning environment (physical, social, and intellectual and recognising that the environment may be virtual) including resources (see the final paragraph of this section) and supports, should be consistent with the intended programme learning outcomes; the places at which, or virtual spaces within which, instruction is to be provided should be specified and suitable;
  - (c) Programme content including reading lists, lecture notes, and any other material used by the programme should be appropriate;
  - (d) The programme should make reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities (including access) (see the various guidelines published by AHEAD [www.ahead.ie](http://www.ahead.ie) and [Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners](#));
  - (e) If the programme is to be accessed by international students, appropriate provisions should be made. See *Provision of Education to International Students: Code of Practice and Guidelines for Irish Higher Education Institutions (IHEQN) 2009*.
2. The programme should *involve* authentic learning opportunities to enable the achievement of the intended programme learning outcomes.
  - (a) The programme's strategy for enabling learners to move from the minimum access standard to the minimum intended programme learning outcomes should be explicit, realistic and viable. The programme should be provided in a way that its intended learning outcomes can be reliably and efficiently attained by the learners. It is to be expected that all learners who are judged qualified to access a particular programme should be able to graduate from that programme subject to their making a reasonable effort and complying with the programme's conditions.
  - (b) The programme and module assessment strategies (for both formative and summative assessment) should be both clear and appropriate (see *Assessment and Standards 2009*). They should provide for the verification of the attainment of the intended learning outcomes.
  - (c) In the case of a modular programme the pool of modules and learning pathway constraints should be explicit and appropriate in light of the intended programme learning outcomes (see Section 7.0). Providers of modular programmes should have effective guidance services for learners on the selection of appropriate learning pathways.
3. The programme should compare well against benchmarks (where appropriate):
  - (a) The programme (characterised by its curriculum, assessment strategies, learning environment, prerequisite learning and minimum intended learning outcomes) should be comparable with other programmes (at the same level) in similar fields of learning which are designed to prepare graduates for similar roles. Comparisons should also be made with programmes at higher and lower NFQ (or equivalent) levels and the proposed programme's intended learning outcomes should be appropriately situated relative to those of the benchmarking programmes.
4. The information about the programme as well as its procedures for access, transfer and progression should be consistent with the procedures described in national [Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners](#)
  - (a) The presentation of the programme should not lead learners to presume that successful completion of the programme will entitle them to enter a particular profession or progress to another programme unless this is actually the case.
  - (b) If, for example, the programme is designed to meet the educational requirements of a regulated profession or recognised professional body this should be stated explicitly.
  - (c) The programme's use of *ECTS* (credit) and provisions for *Recognition of Prior Learning* should be consistent with the *ECTS Users' Guide 2009*; *Assessment and Standards 2009* and with relevant national policy including:
    - i. NQAI's *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of a National Approach to Credit in Irish Higher Education and Training 2006*
    - ii. NQAI's *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training 2005*
5. The programme should meet genuine education and training needs

- (a) The provider should have evidence that the programme meets the target learners' education and training needs.
  - (b) The programme as a process and the intended programme learning outcomes should be adequately informed by the views of appropriate stakeholders such as learners, graduates, lecturers, employers, relevant advisory bodies, social and community representatives.
  - (c) The provider should demonstrate that its programme compares favourably with other similar programmes already in place.
  - (d) When the provider is either part of the public service or its programme is publicly funded, it should demonstrate that in developing new programmes it has given due regard to relevant public policy.
6. The programme should be viable
- (a) The provider should have a viable delivery/business-plan for the programme. This is important for several reasons. For example if the programme assumes a certain cohort size it may not function as planned if either insufficient or excessive numbers are recruited.
  - (b) The provider should have satisfactory contingency arrangements for adapting to changing circumstances or coping with failure of the programme (having due regard for the interests of learners).
  - (c) The programme should be consistent with the provider's mission and strategy.
7. All programmes should have procedures for assessment of learners which should be consistent with *Assessment and Standards, Revised 2013*
- (a) A *programme assessment strategy* should be provided for the programme as a whole and *module assessment strategies* for each of its constituent modules.
8. The provider should have, where required, suitable arrangements for protection for enrolled learners (see Section 6.1) in the event that it ceases to provide the programme.
9. The provider should have appropriate quality assurance arrangements for the proposed programme. Any new quality assurance arrangements required should be agreed with QQI. Where QQI is the awarding body such new arrangements should be detailed with the application for validation.

The points above also cover the ESG guideline on the "availability of appropriate learning resources". Learning resources include information resources (such as libraries and online databases); physical resources (such as laboratories, equipment, study areas and studios) and human resources (such as tutors, counsellors, advisors and peers where applicable).

### 3.2.3 Specific needs of different modes of delivery and types of higher education (ESG)

The specific needs of different modes of delivery and types of higher education should be addressed appropriately by all programmes. This is a cross-cutting criterion. Modes of delivery include, for example, full time, part-time, distance learning, e-learning (including blended learning), experience-based learning, problem-based learning. Types of higher education include for example academic, vocational, professional education and training.

## 4. Features common to QQI Validation Processes

This section addresses validation undertaken by QQI.

### 4.1 Providers who may apply for validation

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The following may apply for validation by QQI:

- (i) All providers with programmes previously recognised/validated by QQI or HETAC and
- (ii) Providers who are seeking initial access to programme validation following successful agreement of quality assurance procedures in Stage 1 of Provider Access to Initial Programme Validation, 2013

Submission of an application for validation shall be accompanied by the appropriate fee and will be assumed by QQI to imply acceptance of relevant QQI policy and criteria.

### 4.2 Withdrawing an application for validation of a programme

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An application for validation may be withdrawn by the applicant provider at any stage prior to the formal validation decision by QQI (see Section 4.4 Step 7). No report will be published in this context. If withdrawal occurs following Step 1 in Section 4.4 the application fee will not be refunded by QQI.

### 4.3 Internal Assessment by a Provider

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Prior to making an application for validation of a programme, a provider will conduct an internal assessment of the relevant programme. This internal assessment process will be guided by the quality assurance framework of the provider and the validation criteria (see Section 3). The internal assessment process should always involve a reflexive self-assessment and it may involve experts who are external to the provider. The term 'internal' refers to the ownership of the process.

A report on the internal assessment will be presented to QQI for external assessment along with a description of the programme. Here, the word external means that the assessment and the expert panel which conducts it are external to the provider. Guidelines on presenting a programme are provided in the *HETAC General Programme Validation Manual*.

### 4.4 The External Assessment Process for Validation

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Validation of new programmes involves seven steps as follows.

Note that complaints may be made at any stage in accordance with the procedures set out in the QQI Customer Charter but subject to the *Core Validation Policy and Criteria*.

**Step 1: Acknowledgement and desk-review:** Following receipt of an application the QQI executive acknowledges the application in writing and then conducts a desk-review to determine whether or not the application addresses the validation criteria and the programme description accords with the guidelines in the *HET General Programme Validation Manual, Revised 2013*. If QQI considers that the application inadequately addresses the criteria, or is inadequately presented, it will inform the provider along with a written statement of the reasons. The provider may then revise its application and resubmit it within eight weeks of being informed by QQI. If following resubmission the application is still unacceptable it will be refused and the application fee will not be refunded by QQI.

**Step 2: Expert panel selection:** Following acceptance of an application an expert panel is established to make an assessment of the application. The expert panel is constituted on a case-by-case basis in accordance with *Participating in an Evaluation Panel as an Expert Assessor: Guidelines*.

Validation expert panels will require expertise in the programme's discipline-area and in generic areas including pedagogy, assessment, and quality assurance. Expert panels should be competent to make national and international comparisons.

Validation expert panels will normally include an assessor with expertise in understanding and representing the interests of learners. Normally this will be a learner. Where it is not feasible to include a learner then a recent graduate, or a student union officer, or another suitable person may represent the interests of learners.

Validation expert panels may also include persons with specialist expertise in quality assurance.

**Step 3: External assessment:** The expert panel assesses the proposed programme against the validation

criteria.

The provider's self-assessment is a *key part* of the evidence considered by the expert panel.

The expert panel will normally undertake a site-visit as part of the assessment to establish if the programme meets the criteria and should be validated. The site-visit enables the expert panel to interview the provider's leadership and programme personnel about the programme and their self-assessment. It also allows it to experience the *learning environment*, explore the *quality assurance procedures*, and assess the appropriateness of relevant facilities and resources to support provision of the programme. The site-visit may also provide an opportunity for the expert panel to discuss the proposed programme *in situ* with other relevant stakeholders including any relevant learners. The expert panel will normally provide informal feedback to the provider at the conclusion of a site visit (this should not be taken as necessarily representing the final expert panel report which may set aside the informal feedback).

Arrangements for the site visit will be made by QQI in consultation with the expert panel and the provider.

Step 4: Expert panel report: Shortly after the site visit the expert panel agrees a report of its findings, conclusions, prerequisites for validation, conditions and recommendations. Recommendations may be optional. This report is known as the draft expert panel report.

The report must be explicit and unambiguous concerning:

- Whether or not the programme as described should be validated;
- Prerequisites for validation (i.e. conditions which must be met before the programme is validated and a Certificate of Programme Accreditation is issued);
- Special conditions for validation.

The conclusions must be based on judgements made against the validation criteria. Its findings and recommendations should relate to the validation criteria.

The prospective readers of the expert panel report include:

1. The Programme and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC) (for decision) and the Programmes Oversight Committee
2. The provider's Governing Authority or equivalent (for quality assurance and enhancement);
3. The provider's Academic Committee or equivalent (for quality assurance and enhancement);
4. The provider's Programme Board or equivalent (for quality assurance and enhancement);
5. The public including prospective learners (for quality assurance and information).

These stakeholders have different information needs and expertise. Accordingly, the expert panel report should be divided into two parts. The first part should include the report's main findings, conclusions and recommendations. It should be drafted with the provider's Academic Committee (or equivalent) in mind giving sufficient detail to provide the information it needs and should be understandable by the other stakeholders. More detailed quality enhancement recommendations and related findings and conclusions should be included in the second part addressed to the Programme Board.

QQI may set-aside a draft expert panel report

- If it does not address the validation criteria; or
- If it reflects a perversity of judgement; or
- If the credibility of the validation process is compromised in any way.

In this case a fresh external assessment process will be launched. However, normally QQI will accept and abide by the clearly-expressed findings in a report of an independent expert panel.

After the expert panel has agreed a draft expert panel report and this has been accepted by the QQI executive, this will be sent to the provider by QQI. The provider will be invited to indicate in writing, within a specified time, if it does not accept the factual accuracy of the report.

If there are factual errors in the draft expert panel report these will be corrected and a revised report will be issued.

If the provider is not satisfied that the validation process was conducted appropriately in accordance with QQI policy and criteria it should make a written complaint. This will be investigated by members of the QQI executive not directly involved with the instance concerned. If the QQI executive is satisfied that the process is reliable it will continue with the process and forward the provider's comments to the appropriate committee in QQI. This

does not impinge on the provider's right to complain or to appeal under Section 4.8. If the QQI executive is not satisfied that the process is reliable but considers that it can be remedied, it will take the necessary actions. Otherwise, a fresh external assessment process will be launched.

Step 5: Provider response: The expert panel report is sent to the provider which is invited to respond in writing (within a specified time) on the expert panel report's findings, conclusions, prerequisites for validation, conditions and recommendations. If the provider does not respond in writing within the specified time the application will be considered withdrawn.

The provider's response should:

- Demonstrate how the proposed programme has been modified to meet any prerequisites for validation;
- Explain how any special conditions have been met or will be met (in which case this should be addressed in the implementation plan [mentioned in the next bulleted item]);
- Provide an implementation plan to address the expert panel report's recommendations and conditions with specific objectives, actions, times, targets/success-metrics.

Step 6: Final expert panel assessment: Following consideration of the provider's response, the expert panel agrees a brief statement setting out its reaction and its final recommendations to QQI regarding validation. This statement will be included as an addendum to the report and included in the submission to Academic Committee.

Step 7: QQI decision: The QQI Board has delegated the formal validation decision to the Programme and Awards Executive Committee. The PAEC's decision is based on the *HET Core Validation Policy and Criteria, Revised 2013* and informed by the following evidence:

1. The expert panel report;
2. The provider's response;
3. The expert panel's reaction to the provider's response if any;
4. A memorandum from the QQI executive on the context for and conduct of the process noting any concerns or complaints expressed by the provider.

The expert panel report may be adopted by the Programme and Awards Executive Committee as it is or with amendment. The PAEC may impose additional conditions to those recommended by the panel. If major amendments are considered necessary, this will be managed by QQI in consultation with the expert panel chairperson.

Where validation is part of the provider access to initial validation of programmes leading to QQI Awards process, the decision must also be ratified by the Approval and Review of Providers Committee.

Step 8: Report Publication: Following the validation decision, the report of the outcome is published on the QQI website.

#### 4.5 Post-validation follow-up by QQI

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Validation by QQI is complemented by its *Policy and Criteria for Provider Access to Initial Validation of Programmes Leading to QQI Awards, Provider Monitoring Policy and Procedures* and by its *Policy on Institutional Review of Providers of Higher Education and Training*. These and other policies, particularly the monitoring policy, address a range of requirements on post-validation follow-up. QQI post validation policy will ensure that the conditions of validation and any binding recommendations are met by providers and their programmes. The monitoring intensity of providers post validation will be proportional to perceived risk. Monitoring findings may initiate processes which result in the withdrawal of programme validation.

External examining is a quality assurance mechanism employed by Irish higher education institutions that supports public confidence in academic qualifications. Providers should involve a new programme's external examiners in the follow-up of validation conditions and recommendations.

Normally providers appoint their own external examiners but where it deems it necessary QQI may appoint the external examiners for any programmes which it validates.

In the case of providers achieving programme validation through *Provider Access to Initial Programme Validation for QQI Awards*, QQI normally nominates the external examiner to be appointed by the provider for each new programme and receives a copy of the annual report of the external examiner.

#### 4.6 Revalidation (Programmatic Review)

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Programmes will normally be revalidated by QQI following a recommendation arising from the provider's programmatic review conducted in accordance with agreed quality assurance procedures and applying the validation criteria in Section 3. The arrangements for research degree programmes are different and are addressed by '*Research Degree Programme Policy and Criteria*' 2010.

In the unusual event that the revalidation of a programme(s) must be delayed, a provider may apply for a short extension of the validation duration to enable it to complete its review. Such extensions if granted by QQI may be subject to the condition that no learners may start the programmes concerned until the programme has been properly revalidated.

#### 4.6.1 Changes to programmes following validation

As already noted minor changes to programmes will normally be required from year to year. Substantial changes may be proposed following programmatic review when applying for revalidation (see Section 4.6). Occasionally circumstances will require the revalidation of programmes to be brought forward.

Some providers may wish to make significant changes to their programmes outside of the programmatic review process. Providers wishing to have such flexibility should establish appropriate quality assurance procedures for this purpose and agree them with QQI.

#### 4.7 Review and withdrawal of validation by QQI

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The review and withdrawal of validation will be conducted in accordance with the process and criteria outlined in Sections 46 and 47 and of the Qualifications and *Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012*.

Withdrawal of validation may only occur following a review under Section 46 of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012. If, following such a review, QQI decides to withdraw a programme's validation the provider of the programme concerned may make representations to QQI as outlined in Section 47 of the Qualifications Act.

#### 4.8 Refusal of validation

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Refusal of validation may occur when an application for validation is not accepted (see Sections 4.1 and 4.4 Step 1) or when the QQI Programme and Awards Executive Committee upon consideration of the findings of the expert panel is not satisfied (against the criteria in Section 3) that the programme will enable learners to attain the knowledge, skill and competence required for the relevant award. Where this occurs the provider of the programme concerned will be informed of this by notice in writing and of the reasons for this decision.

Where QQI refuses to validate a programme the provider of the programme concerned may make representations to QQI. This process shall be same as that set out in Section 45 of the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012* for representations concerning withdrawal of validation. The principles of natural justice will apply.

#### 4.9 Appeals against Refusal or Withdrawal of Validation by QQI

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Where QQI refuses or withdraws validation and has confirmed its decision following consideration of any representations made by the provider, the provider of the programme concerned may avail of the QQI appeals process in accordance with the 2012 Act.

## 5. Devolution of Responsibility for Validation

### Sub-processes where QQI is the Awarding Body

QQI may devolve some responsibility to the provider for managing elements of the external assessment process. This will only be done when QQI has confidence that the provider has suitable internal quality assurance processes. Such devolution will be governed by QQI's validation policy and criteria. For example validation procedures will always incorporate the key stages outlined in Section 2. Devolution of responsibility will not extend to making validation decisions. Moreover, it must be established formally through a signed memorandum of agreement between QQI and the provider concerned. As devolution applies to the validation process alone, it is not equivalent to delegated authority to make awards.

## 6. Conditions of validation

### 6.1 Protection of Enrolled Learners Pre-condition

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Before a programme can be validated the provider must satisfy QQI that arrangements are in place which make provision for learners in the event that it ceases to provide the programme. This applies if the proposed programme duration is three months or more and is to be provided by a provider which intends to operate programmes of education and training on a commercial and profit-making basis. Refer to QQI *Protection of Enrolled Learners: Protocols for the implementation of Part 6 of the 2012 Act*.

### 6.2 Conditions

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The essential conditions of validation are that the provider of the validated programme shall:

- Maintain the status of programme(s) recognition;
- Establish, having regard to existing quality assurance procedures, procedures for quality assurance for the purpose of further improving and maintaining the quality of education and training which is provided, organised or procured by that provider as part of the programme concerned and agree those procedures with QQI.

- Operate quality assurance procedures agreed with QQI;
- Implement procedures for the assessment of learners which are consistent with *Assessment and Standards, Revised, 2013*;
- Implement the procedures described in the document *Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners*;
- Implement any special conditions of validation attached to the relevant awards standards.

Additionally providers shall normally be required to:

- Notify QQI of any change in circumstances affecting the provider which could affect or be perceived to affect the provision of the programme. This includes significant changes in corporate or academic governance, ownership, legal status, profile of teaching staff, profile of learners, numbers enrolled, facilities, or resources;
- Co-operate with and assist the QQI in the performance of its functions;
- Maintain learner data records (personal identification, progression, module marks, stage classification etc.) in order to assist QQI in the performance of its functions;
- Provide the information required by QQI's award making and monitoring functions including information in respect of completion rates;
- Implement the programme in accordance with the current programme schedule (or equivalent document in respect of a joint award [see *HET General Programme Validation Manual, Revised 2013*]) and current assessment strategies;

- Subject to Section 4.6.1 obtain QQI's approval prior to substantially amending the programme's minimum intended learning outcomes, save in the case of incremental enhancements arising from the implementation of findings of the provider's agreed quality assurance procedures;
- Notify QQI of any information concerning the programme or its circumstances that may reasonably be expected to give QQI cause to consider reviewing the programme. Explicitly this includes where another awarding body withdraws or seeks to withdraw validation from the programme and /or any alterations to accreditations (additions or withdrawals) by a professional or regulatory body;
- Implement the programme as agreed with the resources indicated.
- Adhere to and implement the Provider Lifecycle of Engagements

## 7. Validation in the Context of Modular Systems

This section is concerned with the validation of programmes in modular systems.

Modular systems are attractive to larger providers because they offer the possibility of having a compact set of building blocks from which programmes can be constructed. Modular systems have some attraction for learners because they facilitate greater choice than systems with only prescribed programmes. Normally, a learner can only enrol for a module if he or she has the pre-requisite learning. This is normally expressed in terms of modules successfully completed. Modular systems are challenging to implement properly. Converting a monolithic programme to a modular programme will result in fragmentation and loss of coherence unless the programme's learning objectives are used as a guiding light. In well planned modular programmes intended module and programme outcomes resonate and support each other and derive meaning from each other. Validation by an awarding body must consider whole programmes leading to higher education and training awards. Programme validation cannot be conducted in a piecemeal fashion. Higher education and training *modules* (which are programmes within programmes) may be validated for minor awards. If it is intended that a group of modules be combined to produce a programme leading to a major award then that programme must be validated in its own right. It is not sufficient that the modules have been validated either individually or as part of other programmes. However, such prior validation work may be reused.

Modules intended for multiple use in different types of programmes will need to identify the various different target groups. The module's assessment strategy and its teaching and learning strategy need to take the different potential target groups into account. These strategies may need to have the flexibility to adapt to these different groups (e.g. through the use of different assessment tasks). See Assessment and Standards for more guidance on modularisation.<sup>3</sup>

Consider, for example, a programme of 240 credits consisting of 48 five-credit modules selected from a pool of 150 modules. The following specifications always need to be included when applying for validation:

- The minimum intended programme learning outcomes (with variants if the outcomes are affected by choice of electives);
- The minimum prerequisite learning assumed at entry to the programme (with variants if affected by constraints on the choice of electives);
- The programme's modules and stages (identifying the capstone modules);
- Prerequisites and co-requisites for each module and stage;
- Minimum intended module learning outcomes;
- Programme, module and stage assessment strategies and teaching and learning strategies with details of the curricula and assessments.

Validation needs to look at all of the above in the light of the relevant award standard(s). If such a modular programme is approved (in line with the *HET Core Validation Policy and Criteria, Revised 2013*) then the invariant (programme independent) elements of constituent modules are automatically approved for modular use. The invariant elements do not need to be re-approved *for that purpose* until approval expires, unless approval is withdrawn following a review of validation.

Should another programme seek to include one of the approved modules validation will need to consider the module's variants (e.g. teaching staff and place of delivery). Naturally, the suitability of the module for inclusion in the new

<sup>3</sup> For example, QQI's Assessment and Standards 2013 (p 13) guides that 'a major award programme will normally require a specific process which, working to the programme assessment strategy, integrates constituent modules so that the intended programme learning outcomes are supported. This should promote overall coherence; consistency between module and programme intended learning outcomes; and establish the epistemological and cultural identity of the programme.'

programme will always require consideration at validation.

## 8. Supplementary Validation Processes, Policy and Criteria

This document addresses validation in general terms. The policy and criteria are supplemented by more specialised policy and criteria by the following QQI documents:

1. *HET General Programme Validation Manual, Revised 2013*
2. *Policy for Collaborative Programmes, Transnational Programmes and Joint Awards;*
3. *Research Degree Programme Policy and Criteria;*

## 9. Interpretations

Access	The process by which learners may commence a programme of education and training having received recognition for knowledge, skill or competence required. (See the <i>Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners, NQAI 2003</i> )
Awarding body	An awarding body is a body that makes awards namely: QQI or a recognised institution with delegated authority to make awards.
Award	An award which is conferred, granted or given by an awarding body and which records that a learner has acquired a standard of knowledge, skill or competence.
Awards Standards	Together with the award type descriptors of the NQF, the awards standards describe the learning, in terms of knowledge, skill and/ or competence, that is to be acquired by learners before particular higher education and training awards may be made. The awards standards describe the learning required to pass. See <i>Assessment and Standards, Revised 2013</i> for more details.
Award-type descriptor	An award-type descriptor is a description of a class of named awards sharing common features and level. Award-type descriptors are determined by the National Framework of Qualifications.
Conversion programme	This is a loosely defined term. It normally signifies a programme designed to enable a graduate to acquire a qualification in a new field building on learning in another field at the same NQF level.
Delegated Authority	QQI may delegate authority to a recognised institution of the Council (i.e. an institution specified under Section 52 of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance [Education and Training] Act 2012) to make awards.
ECTS	See <i>ECTS Users' Guide (2009)</i> 'ECTS credits are attached to the workload of a fulltime year of formal learning (academic year) and the associated learning outcomes. In most cases, student workload ranges from 1,500 to 1,800 hours for an academic year, whereby one credit corresponds to 25 to 30 hours of work.'
ESG	<i>Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area</i> . Published by ENQA in 2005 and available at <a href="http://www.enqa.eu">http://www.enqa.eu</a>
Expert Panel	See ' <i>Participating in an Evaluation Panel as an Expert Assessor: Guidelines 2009</i> ' (Reference H.4.3)
Institutional Review Policy	See ' <i>Policy on Institutional Review of Providers of Higher Education and Training</i> ', December 2007 (Reference H.1.1)
Minimum Intended Programme Learning Outcomes	The interpretation here is from <i>Assessment and Standards, Revised 2013</i> . The minimum achievement (in terms of knowledge, skill and Programme Learning competence) that the learner is certified to have attained if he/she successfully completes a particular programme (i.e. passes all the required assessments). The minimum intended programme learning outcomes define the minimum learning outcomes for a particular programme at the programme level. These must always be specified by the provider. If the programme allows substantial

choice, there may need to be variant forms of the minimum intended programme outcomes — e.g. a programme might allow a person to choose from a number of specialisations.

A learner who completes a validated programme is eligible for the relevant award if he or she has demonstrated, through assessment (including by recognition of prior learning), attainment of the relevant minimum intended programme learning outcomes.

In addition to minimum intended programme learning outcomes, the programme provider may aspire to describing other 'intended programme learning outcomes' beyond the minimum. In this document, 'intended learning outcomes' refers to all or any of the intended outcomes, including the minimum ones. 'Minimum intended learning outcomes' refers exclusively to the minimum ones. The minimum intended programme learning outcomes identify the principal educational goal of the programme — effective assessment helps learners to attain that goal. Minimum intended programme learning outcomes are developed and maintained by providers. Programmes are designed to enable learners to achieve minimum intended programme learning outcomes. Minimum intended learning outcomes are specified for each of a programme's constituent modules. The number of learning outcomes in a statement of intended learning outcomes is variable (depending, for example, on the semantics and the level of explicitness used). This is not a proxy for credit.

Teachers and learners may strive for additional learning outcomes that are beyond the minimum. In addition to 'minimum intended programme learning outcomes', providers may describe other levels of intended programme learning outcomes beyond the minimum.

See also intended learning outcomes in *Assessment and Standards, Revised 2013*.

Module	A programme of education and training of small volume. It is designed to be capable of being integrated with other modules into larger programmes. A module can be shared by different programmes. See <i>Assessment and Standards, Revised 2013 (p.53)</i> for a more elaborate definition.
Module Assessment Strategy	See <i>Assessment and Standards, Revised 2013 (p.14)</i> .
Learning Environment	Learning environments are diverse. Teachers and other learners are part of a learner's learning environment. Learning environments have both physical and social structures. Learners interact with the learning environment; the environment responds to the learner, and the learner to the environment. ( <i>Assessment and Standards Revised 2013</i> .)
Prerequisite Learning	Knowledge, skill and competence to be attained prior to enrolment on a programme or module.
Programme	A "programme of education and training" means any process by which learners may acquire knowledge, skill or competence and includes courses of study or instruction, apprenticeships, training and employment.'
Programme Assessment Strategy	See <i>Assessment and Standards Revised 2013 (pp. 13-14)</i> .
Provider	A 'provider of a programme of education and training' is a person who, or body which, provides, organises or procures a programme of education and training.
Quality Assurance Procedures	Providers of programmes of higher education and training are required to establish, having regard to existing procedures, if any, procedures for quality assurance for the purpose of further improving and maintaining the quality of education and training which is provided, organised or procured by that provider as part of the programme concerned and shall agree those procedures with QQI.  QQI agrees institutional procedures under the <i>Policy and Criteria for Provider Access to Initial Validation of Programmes Leading to QQI Awards, 2013</i> . Programme-specific procedures are normally agreed at validation.
Recognition of Prior Learning	See ' <i>Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training (NQAI June 2005)</i> ' and <i>Assessment and Standards Revised 2013 (pp. 29-30)</i> .
Target learners	Target learners are persons with specified prerequisite learning and other legitimate prescribed characteristics (e.g. a programme might be designed for students who wish to study through a particular language).

Validation

“Validation” means the process by which an awarding body shall satisfy itself that a learner may attain knowledge, skill or competence for the purpose of an award made by the awarding body.’

## 10. References

European Communities *ECTS User's Guide* 2009

*Assessment and Standards Revised* 2013

*HET General Programme Validation Manual* Revised 2013

*Participating in an Evaluation Panel as an Expert Assessor: Guidelines* 2009 (Reference H.4.3)

*Policy on Institutional Review of Providers of Higher Education and Training* 2007 (Reference H.1.1)

*Policy and Criteria for Provider Access to Initial Validation of Programmes Leading to QQI Awards, 2013*

*Provider Monitoring Policy and Procedures* 2010 (QQI Reference F.1.2)

*Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners, NQAI* 2003

*Policy for Collaborative Programmes, Transnational Programmes and Joint Awards* Revised 2012 (Reference E.1.3)

*Research Degree Programme Policy and Criteria* 2010 (Reference E.1.7)

*IHEQN Provision of Education to International Students: Code of Practice and Guidelines for Irish Higher Education Institutions* 2009 (QQI Reference E.2.3)

*Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of a National Approach to Credit in Irish Higher Education and Training, NQAI* 2006

*Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training, NQAI* 2005