



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

Re-engagement with QQI

Policy and Criteria for Renewed Access to QQI Validation for Voluntary Providers of Further Education and Training



QQI, an integrated agency for quality and qualifications in Ireland

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Section	Title	Page
1	Summary	2
2	Introduction	2
2.1	Purpose of this Paper	3
3	Policies and Criteria	5
3.1	QQI Guidelines and Criteria for FET Legacy Voluntary Providers	5
3.2	Policy on Approval of QA Procedures for FET Legacy Voluntary Providers by QQI	6
3.3	Process for Approval of QA Procedures for FET Legacy Voluntary Providers	7
4	Review of Policy	8

1 SUMMARY

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was established in November 2012 by the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012 (the 2012 Act).

The 2012 Act sets out the functions of QQI which include making awards to learners and validating the programmes that lead to those awards.

This document sets out the process, policy and criteria for voluntary providers of education and training programmes that had a QA agreement with the former FET (Further Education and Training) Awards Council to continue to access the programme validation process of QQI.

Detailed procedures and guidelines support this policy document. QQI policy is developed through a consultative process involving all stakeholders. Details of the policy development process are available on www.QQI.ie. QQI policy is adopted by the Board and implemented by the executive accordingly.

2 INTRODUCTION

Access to validation of programmes leading to QQI awards is dependent on the approval of provider Quality Assurance (QA) procedures by QQI. Section 84 of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012 (the 2012 Act) allowed for the transition of all providers that had a QA agreement with one of the former QA agencies (the former FET and HET Awards Councils and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland) to engage with QQI on a temporary basis until such time as new QQI policies and procedures were developed and commenced. QQI engagement with FET legacy voluntary providers is currently on the basis of this transition provision and relies on the legacy policies of the former FET Awards Council. This document sets out the approach of QQI for the publication of QA guidelines and criteria for FET legacy voluntary providers under Section 27 of the 2012 Act and the approval of QA procedures, based on the Guidelines and Criteria, by QQI under Section 30 of the 2012 Act.

For new providers, or for providers with whom a former FET Awards Council QA agreement has lapsed, access to QA engagement with QQI is established through the Initial Access to Validation of Programmes Leading to QQI Awards process.

Review of the effectiveness of providers' QA procedures was a compulsory requirement of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 (the 1999 Act). In the lifetime of the former FET Awards Council, FET legacy voluntary providers were not subject to statutory review of the effectiveness of their quality assurance procedures. This is in contrast to other sectors, where providers underwent external peer evaluation and reviewed the effectiveness of their own procedures, making improvements where necessary. Accordingly, the approval of FET legacy voluntary providers' quality assurance procedures is being prioritised for attention by QQI. This paper specifically concerns itself with FET legacy voluntary providers.

Following on from Re-engagement with QQI: Overarching Policy for All Providers, using the former FET Awards Council categories as a subset of the entire FET legacy provider cohort, FET legacy voluntary providers are:

- Community/Voluntary Sector Organisations
- Employer/Work-based Learning providers
- Hospital Centres of Nurse Education
- Private Providers – Colleges
- Private Providers – Companies
- Private Providers – Individuals
- Public Service Agencies (other than BIM, Fáilte Ireland and Teagasc)
- Sectoral Representative Bodies
- Skillnets
- Training for People with Disabilities
- Youth Services

Some providers fall into multiple categories. In cases where FET legacy voluntary providers are also HET legacy voluntary providers the Re-engagement with QQI: Policy and Criteria for Renewed Access to QQI Validation for Voluntary Providers of Higher Education and Training is appropriate.

The interpretation of the term ‘provider’ is based on the concepts set out in the 2012 Act. Being considered a ‘provider’ by QQI does not confer any status on a provider in and of itself. Recognition is of programmes leading to awards in the National Framework of Qualifications.

2.1 Purpose of this Paper

The key purpose of this paper is to move providers out of the current transition arrangements and into a position of engagement with QQI, on the basis of the functions set out in the 2012 Act. Section 84 of the 2012 Act allowed for the transition of all legacy providers to engagement with QQI on a temporary basis until such time as new QQI policies and procedures were developed and commenced. QQI engagement with FET legacy voluntary providers is currently on the basis of this transition provision and relies on the legacy policies of the former FET Awards Council. The transition status for each FET legacy voluntary provider is temporary and will expire by a specified date. This means that the QA agreement and validation of programmes, established through the legacy policies and procedures of the former FET Awards Council, will expire on this date and QQI certification processes will no longer be available to providers.

The purposes of this paper also encompass a range of objectives, which are:

1. To set out the QQI Guidelines and Criteria and approach to QA approval

QQI is a new QA agency established in the 2012 Act. This paper sets out for consultation the proposed QQI Guidelines and Criteria for the quality assurance (QA)

procedures of FET legacy voluntary providers and the approach and process for QQI to meet the statutory requirement to approve FET legacy voluntary providers' QA procedures.

2. To provide a tailored approach for FET legacy voluntary providers

This paper sets out a specific approach for FET legacy voluntary providers. It allows them, on a one-off basis, and for the purpose of transferring to engagement with QQI, to apply to QQI for the approval of their QA procedures using a process that takes into account their prior QA agreement with the former FET Awards Council. When this process has closed, all subsequent voluntary provider applications seeking approval of QA procedures will be made through the Initial Access to Validation of Programmes Leading to QQI Awards process.

3. To commence the process of engagement between QQI and voluntary providers based on the 2012 Act

Provider engagement with the former Awards Councils was based upon the statutory agreement of QA procedures and the periodic monitoring and review of the effectiveness of these procedures set out in the 1999 Act. These requirements are continued in the 2012 Act together with additional statutory requirements.

QQI approval of provider QA procedures places engagement on a new legal footing and forms the basis of all consequent interactions between providers and QQI. This will be captured in a Lifecycle of Provider Engagements with QQI.

The concept of a Lifecycle of Provider Engagements has been developed by QQI and is equally applicable to all providers. It identifies, organises and communicates the range of engagements between QQI and a given provider. There is a diverse range of providers that have relationships with QQI. There are also many kinds of interactions between QQI and providers based on the functions set out in the 2012 Act. Each type of provider will have a particular set of obligations and entitlements based on their particular status and services sought from QQI. The obligations and entitlements of providers are also closely linked to the concepts of scope and capacity, which are included in QQI QA Guidelines. In establishing the Lifecycle, providers will engage with QQI on the basis of a common understanding between the provider and QQI about the scope of their provision and an assurance that their capacity is commensurate with this. Any substantive changes to either scope or capacity will require a reappraisal of the agreed Lifecycle.

4. To ensure that providers are operating effective QA procedures that will encourage public confidence in the quality of the education and training system

The role of QQI as an external quality assurance agency is to externally evaluate providers' QA procedures to ensure public accountability and to provide public confidence in them. The formal published evaluation of provider QA procedures by QQI improves public confidence in the programmes offered by providers e.g. that they enable learners to achieve intended learning outcomes and provide them with a well-supported learning experience.

As well as its role as an external quality assurance agency, QQI also acts as the awarding body for FET legacy voluntary providers. Whilst QQI sets standards for awards, it does not, as some other awarding bodies do, develop or provide programmes for providers, or give them learner assessment support.

Providers must take responsibility for developing, maintaining and providing their programmes, as well as for the internal quality assurance of these programmes and the procedures for assessing learners enrolled on them. There is, therefore, a minimum capacity that must be in place before a provider can access the QQI programme validation process. This capacity may depend on, for example, the award type, the National Framework of Qualifications level and the field of education and training.

The QQI Guidelines and Criteria for QA and the obligations for QQI providers, though founded on former QA Guidelines, will be different to those of the former FET Awards Council. It is important to state that while some of the providers that had a QA agreement with the former FET Awards Council will progress to QA approval by QQI, the QA procedures and capacity of some FET legacy voluntary providers may not meet QQI QA criteria. That is to say that some providers who had direct relationships with the former FET Awards Council, and whose learners currently receive awards directly from QQI, may be unable to establish a new QA relationship directly with QQI under Section 30 of the 2012 Act. This is further elaborated on in this document. Existing providers may also choose to consider satisfying the requirements for meeting QQI QA criteria through consortia or networks. QQI is currently considering and analysing how such arrangements might be accommodated.

3 POLICIES AND CRITERIA

3.1 QQI Guidelines and Criteria for FET Legacy Voluntary Providers

In accordance with Section 27 of the 2012 Act, QQI will issue Guidelines and Criteria for quality assurance procedures specific to FET legacy voluntary providers.

The Guidelines and Criteria will be constructed on the basis of existing former FET Awards Council Quality Assurance Guidelines. The information contained in the Guidelines and Criteria will also encompass the sequence for FET legacy voluntary providers to exit their current transition status and, if desired, to seek QQI QA approval and programme validation.

Legacy providers' QA procedures were agreed under the 1999 Act. The requirements for these procedures were augmented in the 2012 Act with additional statutory requirements which apply to all provider categories. Therefore QQI QA guidelines and criteria comprise former FET Awards Council Quality Assurance Guidelines, with modifications and improvements to bring them in line with the obligations for providers prescribed by the 2012 Act and, as previously consulted upon, the Guidelines and Criteria for new voluntary providers established by QQI for Initial Access to Validation of Programmes Leading to QQI Awards. Modifications and improvements will include, specifically:

- Protection of enrolled learners requirements of the 2012 Act¹
- Information for learners requirements of the 2012 Act
- A reappraisal of the first and second provider concepts and related Guidelines in line with the 2012 Act

¹ See *Protection of Enrolled Learners: Protocols for the Implementation of Part 6 of the 2012 Act for details.*

- An overarching requirement for providers to demonstrate capacity in their QA to deliver within their intended scope of programme provision.

To assist providers seeking QQI QA approval with the revision of their QA procedures, QQI will highlight, consult on and publish the differences between the former Guidelines of the former FET Awards Council and the QQI Guidelines and Criteria for FET legacy voluntary providers.

Following the publication of the initial set of QQI Guidelines and Criteria for FET legacy voluntary providers, QQI may, from time to time and in consultation with providers, issue revised Guidelines and Criteria. In the future, in their on-going engagements with QQI, providers will be required to remain cognisant of the relevant changes to Guidelines and Criteria and adapt and evolve their QA procedures to reflect these changes.

3.2 Policy on Approval of QA Procedures for FET Legacy Voluntary Providers by QQI

QQI will implement a communications process for ending the transition period and the approval of QA procedures with FET legacy voluntary providers. This will include, but not be limited to:

- Setting out a clear pathway for providers to exit transition status and seeking QQI approval of QA procedures
- Providing clarity and transparency on the criteria for the evaluation of QA procedures
- Giving direct information to providers of the intended changes to come so that they can plan for their own contingencies
- Exploring the feasibility of new approaches to the approval of QA, such as consortia or networks

The transition status for each FET legacy voluntary provider is temporary and will expire by a specified date. This means that the QA agreement and validation of programmes, established through the legacy policies and procedures of the former FET Awards Council, will expire on this date and QQI certification processes will no longer be available to providers.

A transition expiry date will be established for each provider's legacy QA agreement. This will be influenced by:

- The establishment date of the provider's legacy QA agreement (older agreements will mean an earlier expiry date)
- The calculation by QQI of a reasonable timeframe for the provider to seek QQI approval of QA procedures prior to expiry
- Instances where identified risk factors (e.g. volume of provision) mean that the expiry date should be brought forward to encourage providers to seek QQI QA approval
- An ultimate expiry date beyond which no re-engagement will be possible for any legacy provider

QQI approval of QA procedures may take place during the normal pattern of engagements between providers and QQI in so far as possible. Where necessary QQI may directly request that a provider makes a QA approval application.

All FET legacy voluntary providers had a QA agreement with the former FET Awards Council. In conducting the evaluation of providers' QA procedures, QQI will take into account the FET legacy voluntary providers' prior QA agreement with the former FET Awards Council. The QA agreement with the former FET Awards Council was based on the establishment of provider QA procedures. Accordingly, the emphasis of the evaluation will be on the implementation of fit-for-purpose QA procedures and provider capacity rather than the existence of the procedures per se. In carrying out the evaluation, QQI may use evidence generated through prior engagements with the former FET Awards Council, gleaned through programme validation, monitoring and certification.

QQI will undertake dialogue with external entities other than providers (e.g. funding agencies, licensing bodies, regulatory bodies) so that they are aware of the objectives of this policy, the changes to come and the QQI approach to QA and criteria for QA approval.

3.3 Process for Approval of QA Procedures for FET Legacy Voluntary Providers

Each FET legacy voluntary provider will be required to make an application for the approval of their QA procedures to QQI if they plan to engage with QQI beyond their transition expiry date.

QQI will notify each FET legacy voluntary provider of their transition expiry date. Providers will also be advised of the final date by which an application for the approval of their QA procedures can be submitted to QQI to allow for continuity and a seamless progression from transition to QA approval.

Applications for approval can only be made following the publication of criteria.

Following the publication of the Guidelines and Criteria, applications by providers for programme validation will only be accepted by QQI where they are accompanied or preceded by an application for QA approval.

QQI will carry out an evaluation of the provider's QA procedures against the published criteria. The minimum criteria for QA approval will be set out in the Guidelines and Criteria for FET legacy voluntary providers. Providers must demonstrate that the criteria have been met.

Each application will be assessed against the criteria in a fair, open and transparent manner. Independent experts (capable of acting without conflicts of interest) will carry out the evaluation of each application.

Applications for approval of QA procedures must be accompanied by the relevant fee.

QQI may approve the procedures or refuse to approve the procedures.

Approval of QA procedures by QQI enables a provider to apply to QQI for programme validation within the scope of access granted. QA approval does not confer any status on a provider. It only confirms that the provider is eligible to apply for QQI programme validation. Following approval, the provider will be allowed to continue

with programmes already validated through the former FET Awards Council until each individual programme review date.

A refusal to approve QA procedures by QQI will mean that the provider will need to commence the process of winding down programmes in advance of the transition expiry date. The provider will be required to provide information to learners, cease the commencement of validated programmes and commence the orderly wind-down of programmes already in train.

Where a substantial portion of the criteria have been met, QQI, in refusing to approve the procedures, may make recommendations to the provider. In this instance, the provider will be permitted to make one resubmission for QA approval. The expiry date will be extended for a maximum of 6 months to allow for an additional application.

Following a decision not to approve, the provider may choose to commence the process of making a new application to QQI for the approval of their QA procedures. This application will be made through the Initial Access to Validation of Programmes Leading to QQI Awards process, only after a prescribed time interval. The fee associated with the Initial Access to Validation of Programmes Leading to QQI Awards process will apply.

Providers opting not to seek QQI approval of their QA procedures will be required to provide information to learners regarding the status of their programmes, cease the commencement of validated programmes and commence the orderly wind-down of programmes already in train.

Part 7 of the 2012 Act provides for appeals procedures. Providers may appeal if QQI: refuses to agree QA policies and procedures; refuses to approve policies and procedures for access, transfer and progression; or if QQI refuses to validate a programme.

4 REVIEW OF POLICY

As re-engagement is a one-off process for each provider, there is no requirement to review this policy. This policy will therefore expire once re-engagement has been completed for all FET voluntary legacy providers.





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