

Memorandum of Understanding between
the Higher Education Authority and Quality
and Qualifications Ireland
2021-2023



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

Note: this MOU was established in 2021 and will be monitored and reviewed by both organisations to ensure it remains current and reflects the commencement of the new HEA legislation.

INTRODUCTION

This is the third Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI); the original MoU was established for the period 2015-2017. The current MoU re-emphasises the commitment of both organisations to ensure the coordination and complementarity of their activities in the interests of the higher education sector as a whole. While significant progress has been made and valuable lessons learned through implementation of the previous two MoUs, system level challenges remain, and this current MoU will act as a framework to channel the renewed efforts of both organisations and their staff in actively pursuing ways to collaborate meaningfully.

A whole-of-education and whole-of-government approach:

The approach continues to be one of working in partnership with the broader higher education community, in order to optimise their efficiency, effectiveness and strategic impact and in so doing, to demonstrate tangibly the impact of the interrelationship between the HEA and QQI. This partnership-working is underpinned by a whole-of-education and whole-of-government approach to the development of policy and practice in higher education.

Institutional autonomy:

Both the HEA and QQI are committed to supporting the enhancement of the performance and quality of Irish higher education, while upholding the principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy; and both are committed to the achievement of the key system objectives identified in the Higher Education System Performance Framework. Cooperation between the two organisations will support the collective advancement of the reform agenda for higher education in partnership with the sector.

MOU communication/awareness:

This document recognises the benefits of ensuring that the staff and board members of both organisations have a full understanding of the complex, multi-dimensional interrelationship between the roles of the HEA and QQI. The MoU will also act to facilitate the identification of further areas of collaboration with the aim of increasing the positive impact on the sector.

INFLUENCES ON THIS MoU

It is important to acknowledge that this MoU has been devised within the broader policy-context of the higher education environment in Ireland. In brief, some of the influences on the formulation of the MoU have included:

- » The legal and regulatory responsibilities of the HEA and QQI, as set out in legislation (and in the Appendix to this document) and reflected in the organisations' strategic visions and plans. The new Higher Education Authority Act 2021, when finalised, will add a new dimension to a revised version of this MOU.
- » The requests and reporting requirements of the respective units in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (D/FHERIS) and the ongoing commitment of the Department to the work of both organisations, which is vital to underpin progress.
- » The Technological Universities Act 2018 and the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019.
- » The responsibilities assigned to both organisations within the *Higher Education System Performance Framework*.
- » The responsibilities assigned to both organisations within the various strategies and Action Plans for Education including but not limited to:
 - D/FHERIS Strategy 2021 - 2023
 - the most recent Action plan for Apprenticeship 2021 -2025
 - the National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2022-2026
 - The responsibilities assigned to both organisations within the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, including the progress review and related plans.
- » The National Development Plan 2040.
- » Both organisations' desire to support Ireland's European commitments.
- » The *Oversight and Performance Delivery Agreements* which the HEA and QQI respectively have with the D/FHERIS.
- » The importance, from a national perspective, of maintaining the independence of QQI as a quality assurance agency, qualifications authority and awarding body, in line with European and international norms and standards.

- » The shared commitment to promoting the student voice in Irish higher education.
- » The ownership by the education and training community of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and its use to support the advancement of a number of the activities carried out by both organisations, in partnership with higher education institutions, to enhance the delivery and quality of education and training and to progress key issues such as Access and the recognition of prior learning (RPL).
- » The shared interest of both organisations in promoting the international recognition of qualifications awarded by Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).
- » Priorities arising from the strategy statements of both organisations and the high degree of commonality of the parties with which the HEA and QQI interact, including labour-market representatives and private HE providers.
- » The increasingly widespread acknowledgement of the value that can be derived from carrying out regulatory roles collaboratively.

PURPOSE AND SCOPE

This MoU between the HEA and QQI provides an agreed framework for cooperation and communication between the two organisations. It has been developed in accordance with the relevant statutory provisions, national strategies, and government policies; and with due regard to the *Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies* and other influences on the MOU stated above. It is not a legally binding agreement or contract and it is not exhaustive in its identification of the two organisations' responsibilities. This MoU does not preclude the identification and implementation by the organisations of additional objectives and actions.

Intersection of the roles of the HEA and QQI

The HEA and QQI have much in common: both organisations are concerned with enhancing the quality, coherence, and performance of the Irish higher education system while upholding the principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy that are enshrined in State legislation on higher education. Likewise, both aim to minimise the bureaucratic burden placed on higher education institutions while ensuring their full accountability to the State, and both are committed to operating in a transparent manner in partnership with institutions and other stakeholders.

The HEA and QQI are committed to working together to foster a coherent whole-of-education and whole-of-government approach to the strategic development of policy and practice in higher education.

COMMITMENTS AND ASSOCIATED ACTIONS

This MoU sets out four key commitments, as agreed by QQI and the HEA, for the period up until the commencement of the new HEA Act: coherence of approach, alignment of activities, Ireland in an international context, and partnerships for enhancement. Against each commitment associated actions are listed which, it is envisaged, will contribute to the realisation of that commitment. In agreeing the commitments and associated actions for this MoU, the HEA and QQI have reflected upon the following:

- » Areas of common interest between the organisations
- » How each organisation might use the outputs arising from the fulfilment of the independent legislative functions of the other
- » Potential areas of collaboration between the organisations already established
- » Potential added-value and benefits of interaction arising from collaboration between the organisations

1. Commitment to coherence of approach and alignment of activities

Within the context of this MoU, the HEA and QQI seek to identify themselves as independent organisations, as collaborating organisations with a common cause acting *under the aegis of the same Minister*, and as organisations whose actions impact upon an external environment, both public and private, of which they must be cognisant. In addition, this document reflects the common cause of both organisations to strengthen the NFQ as a key national infrastructure for the enhancement of education and training in Ireland.

In order to foster this coherence of approach to the strategic development of higher education in Ireland, the HEA and QQI are committed to aligning their activities at operational level, where appropriate. QQI's monitoring and review of higher education institutions and the HEA's strategic oversight of the sector need to be mutually complementary. The HEA and QQI intend to acknowledge and utilise the outputs arising from their separate but complementary roles in order to reduce the bureaucratic burden experienced by higher education institutions in responding to the regulatory and legislative functions of the two organisations, as well as government policy. To support the achievement of this objective, the HEA and QQI will seek to align the organisations' approaches to collecting and utilising data, in collaboration with higher education institutions and other parties, and to formally and continually communicate relevant information between the organisations. Cooperation between the HEA and QQI in this regard has the potential to ensure that accountability and quality-improvement of the higher education system go hand-in-hand.

Data

Cooperation between the two organisations will continue in respect of the further development by the HEA of a data strategy for higher education and further development of institutional profiles for HEIs, and by QQI of a statutory database of programmes and awards. The Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ), will aim to coordinate and develop the organisations' respective data collection and analysis functions to minimise duplication of effort and to enhance the evidence base for the strategic oversight of the sector. Furthermore, data-sources, such as the StudentSurvey.ie and the national survey of employers, have potential to feed into quality assurance and enhancement processes undertaken within the sector.

Access, Transfer and Progression

Both the HEA and QQI will mutually support each other in the fulfilment of the organisations' distinct but connected responsibilities in the areas of access and progression. Fostering a coherent approach to enhancing access, transfer and progression in higher education is a shared concern of the HEA and QQI. The HEA reviews and supports the implementation of the access plans of higher education institutions through the strategic dialogue and compact process, as well as setting out in the national access plans the system-level targets against which progress in ensuring equity of access to higher education is measured.

QQI has statutory responsibility for determining policies and criteria for access, transfer and progression in relation to learners and for reviewing periodically the implementation of procedures for access, transfer and progression by providers. Therefore, cooperation between the two organisations in this area is imperative to ensure equity of access to higher education and to encourage the development of progression (learning) pathways.

International Education

The HEA and QQI, in common with the HE sector, share responsibility for maintaining and enhancing Ireland's reputation within an international context in respect of the quality of higher education provision. Both the HEA and QQI have a role to play in supporting the implementation of the *International Education Strategy* at national level through quality assurance measures and enhancement initiatives. This relates both to provision for international students coming to Ireland and the provision of education by Irish HEIs overseas. In this regard, both organisations have an on-going role in supporting Irish engagement in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and wider global mobility of learners and institutions. The HEA is the national agency for the European Commission's Erasmus+ programme, and the national coordinator for other international programmes

and initiatives. QQI is designated as the National Coordination Point for the implementation of the European Qualifications Framework. QQI is charged with establishing a statutory code of practice for the provision of education and training to international learners and an associated International Education Mark (IEM) to signify the compliance of providers with this code.

In fostering the alignment of activities across the areas referenced above, the organisations will ensure that there is a shared understanding of the language and definitions that they will use.

Associated actions:

- i. QQI and the HEA will increase efforts to ensure that all relevant members of both organisations are familiar with the content of the MoU and that all dealings between the two organisations and with other named parties are conducted in a manner that is consistent with its objectives.
- ii. The HEA will include QQI in the list of organisations with which data is shared under the terms and conditions for data-collection from higher education institutions.
- iii. Within the process of strategic dialogue and other interactions, the HEA will satisfy itself of the fulfilment by institutions of their quality assurance obligations, using the documented outcomes of statutory monitoring and quality review conducted by QQI in the form of annual dialogue and/or periodic review and other evaluative reports, and the Annual Institutional Quality Reports produced directly by HEIs.
- iv. Where available, QQI will utilise the data produced by the HEA to satisfy itself, within the process of annual dialogue and periodic review, of its institutional data requirements.
- v. The organisations will fully acquaint themselves with the reporting obligations of higher education institutions to both organisations and commit to reducing, with a view to eliminating, where possible, requests for the same or similar information. Both organisations will also look to each other in the first instance prior to making data requests to HEIs.
- vi. A nominee from each organisation will be identified as the liaison person to ensure that communication and information is exchanged on a timely basis between the organisations, including copies of any system level communication by either organisation and the reporting and meeting schedules associated with annual and

strategic dialogue events.

- vii. The Chief Executive of each organisation will share the corporate plan and be invited to meet with the Board of the other on an annual basis.
- viii. The full senior management teams of the organisations will meet as appropriate during the year to inform each other of developments.
- ix. Relevant staff of both organisations will meet on a thematic basis.
- x. The organisations will actively seek to identify where information and communication should be extended to other parties in the interests of national coherence and consistency.
- xi. The organisations will consult with one another on the development of policy and of mechanisms and infrastructure to support policy-implementation and the restructuring of the higher education landscape, specifically:
 - Implementation of the new HEA legislation
 - Post COVID-19 changes to methods of HE delivery - impact of online and blended learning and remote access delivery in general
 - Delegated Authority
 - Technological University status and review
 - HEI engagement with the Apprenticeship Action Plan
 - Policy on public HE funding and impact
 - Policy on Springboard funding and other HCI and labour market initiatives
 - Access, transfer and progression (learning pathways)
 - National qualifications policy and developments including micro credentials
 - Academic integrity including research integrity
 - Equality, diversity and inclusion
 - Student partnership and engagement
 - Any other areas that emerge

- xii. The HEA will keep QQI informed of the development and on-going implementation of funding streams for public and private HE including initiatives aimed at aligning education and training with labour-market requirements and the impact of outcomes on the higher education system.
- xiii. The HEA and QQI will collaborate on European developments and the implementation of relevant European tools that support the international recognition of qualifications awarded by HEIs in Ireland. These include, but are not limited to, the European Qualifications Framework, the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area, the European Diploma Supplement and the European Credit Transfer Scheme.
- xiv. The organisations will work in partnership to support the implementation of *Ireland's International Education Strategy* at a national level through quality assurance and enhancement activities and will explore opportunities to jointly promote these initiatives and related activities internationally and the revival of the international education market in Ireland.
- xv. The organisations will seek to work in partnership with other state agencies involved in the promotion and regulation of international education.
- xvi. QQI will consult with the HEA and higher education institutions regarding the development and implementation of the International Education Mark (IEM).
- xvii. The organisations will work together to explore the feasibility of developing high level principles or other approaches to support and enhance equity of access to higher education, and to promote the attainment of equality of opportunity across the sector through key structures and groups such as the National Access Plan steering group and others.
- xviii. The organisations will consult and agree text on references to the other in published forms which are actionable, or which entail interpretations of policy positions.

2. Commitment to enhancement projects

Collaboration

The HEA and QQI are committed to working in partnership with higher education institutions and other parties, and to aligning the enhancement activities of both organisations with identified national requirements. Structured engagement by the organisations with key stakeholders has the potential to demonstrate the coordination of the work of the HEA and QQI, as well as providing an opportunity for sectoral input into the policy approaches adopted. The establishment by the organisations of a forum for engagement with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (D/FHERIS) the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), has facilitated this dialogue and continues to serve as a platform to support engagement with other stakeholders.

Teaching and Learning

The enhancement of the quality of teaching and of the student-learning experience in higher education in partnership with higher education institutions is a central concern of both the HEA and QQI. Both organisations will continue to support and engage with the activities of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning and ensure there is no overlap or duplication of national enhancement initiatives.

Research

Both organisations are committed to supporting the quality and integrity of research activity conducted by higher education institutions. In relation to doctoral education, the implementation of the national framework by the HEA and QQI, in collaboration with higher education institutions, will help sustain the quality and strategic relevance of provision across all types of doctoral programme (including structured programmes, work-based programmes, and practice-led doctorates), as set out in the Innovation 2020 action plan. More broadly, enhancing the visibility of the quality of research in higher education and its assurance, and demonstrating its value and impact, as well as showcasing the high-quality learning environment of Irish higher education institutions, are challenges that the HEA will seek to address in partnership with QQI and higher education institutions through the National Framework for Doctoral Education and the National Advisory Forum for Ireland's Doctoral Framework (established March 2018).

Associated actions:

- i. The organisations will collaborate with each other and with the higher education institutions and other parties in Irish Quality and Qualifications Forum (IQQF) to

establish how to effectively interpret and utilise outputs, including data, produced at an institutional and sectoral level in order to inform planning for qualifications, quality assurance and quality enhancement objectives.

- ii. The organisations will work collaboratively with higher education institutions.
- iii. In order to assist in streamlining quality enhancement activities at a national level, the HEA will consult with QQI in relation to the priorities to be pursued with the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning.
- iv. The organisations will continue to jointly support the development and sustainability of the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP).
- v. QQI will be a partner with the HEA and SOLAS in the survey of employers.
- vi. QQI and HEA will continue to liaise on the implementation of the Springboard funding programme for labour market skills, especially in relation to the quality assurance of programmes offered by private HEIs.
- vii. The HEA and QQI will consult with higher education institutions on the assessment of research quality and activity.
- viii. The organisations will work in partnership with the sector and funding bodies;
 - to promote the National Framework for Doctoral Education (established in 2015) to ensure it is 'applied consistently across all higher education institutions that provide such education as an essential underpinning of the Irish PhD brand';
 - to promote the work of the National Advisory Forum for Ireland's Doctoral Framework (established in 2018); and
 - to work collaboratively with other stakeholders engaged in research funding and evaluation.
- ix. The organisations will promote the integration of research, teaching and learning through their quality enhancement activities, for example through holistic unit reviews and disciplinary reviews.
- x. The organisations will cooperate where appropriate in HR activities such as recruitment and staff development.

SIGN-OFF AND REVIEW

This MoU is jointly signed by the Chief Executive Officer of the HEA and the Chief Executive Officer of QQI, and it takes effect from the date on which it is agreed and signed by the two parties.

This MoU is intended to stand for the period April 2021–31 December 2023. In the intervening period its currency will be kept under review. Following feedback from the review of the implementation of the second MoU, QQI and the HEA will continue the engagement between the executives of the two organisations in order to increase the level of understanding of each other's functions on an operational level. This will be a resource and time intensive process which the two organisations consider essential in order to realise the objectives set out in this MoU. Any amendments required to ensure that it remains fit-for-purpose, and that it reflects the emerging priorities of the organisations, will be published by mutual written agreement.

Signed on behalf of the Higher Education Authority:

Alan Wall, Chief Executive

Date:

Signed on behalf of Quality and Qualifications Ireland:

Padraig Walsh, Chief Executive

Date:



Appendix

Roles and responsibilities

HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY

The role of the HEA www.heai.ie

The HEA has a central oversight role in respect of the strategic development of a coherent system of diverse higher education institutions with distinct missions which will be responsive to the needs of wider society, to achieving the objectives and advancing the national priorities identified in the most recent version of the *Higher Education System Performance Framework*, and to being accountable for so doing. In carrying out this overarching role, the HEA has responsibility for supporting quality outcomes across all activities of the higher education institutions – academic, administrative and governance – and for holding the institutions accountable for such outcomes.

It is the responsibility of the HEA to ensure the alignment of institutional strategies with national strategic objectives, and to ensure the delivery of agreed objectives (detailed in compacts with institutions) through effective performance-management at institutional and system-levels. These objectives span the enhancement of teaching and learning, the advancement of equity of access to higher education, the enhancement of institutions' responsiveness to the needs of wider society, research capacity-building, and the internationalisation of Irish higher education. Central to the HEA's strategic development of a coherent and effective higher education system is the structural reform, and the reform of the funding and governance of higher education institutions, with which the organisation is charged in the *National Strategy*.

QUALITY AND QUALIFICATIONS IRELAND

The role of QQI www.qqi.ie

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is the statutory quality assurance body for higher education (HE), further education and training (FET) and English Language Education (ELE) in Ireland. QQI is the main awarding body for the private HE sector and both the public and private FET sectors. It is the responsibility of QQI to maintain and develop the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and the Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ - Irish Register of Qualification (irq.ie)) and to advise the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science about national policy on quality assurance and qualifications in education and training and matters relating to RPL.

In its external quality assurance role:

- » QQI issues statutory quality assurance guidelines (QAGs) to HE and FET providers, approves the quality assurance (QA) systems of providers. When they are developing their own QA procedures, providers are expected to have regard to the statutory guidelines and submit these procedures to QQI for agreement.
- » QQI validates programmes of education and training based on specified award standards.
- » QQI reviews HEIs using peer reviewers with national and international experience to establish the effectiveness of the institution's quality assurance procedures. The findings are published and referenced both nationally and internationally.
- » QQI is the national regulator for academic cheating and promoting academic integrity.
- » Institutions submit an Annual Quality Report (AQR) to QQI on an annual basis and this forms the basis of dialogue meetings between QQI and the institutions.
- » QQI is also responsible (through NARIC Ireland) for providing recognition advice to holders of foreign qualifications seeking to work or gain access to further education opportunities in Ireland and to Irish graduates who wish to have their qualifications recognised overseas.
- » QQI will synthesise the findings of external reviews; conduct themed reviews across a number of institutions; and facilitate the exchange of good practice across the system.



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