QUALITY IN IRISH PRIVATE AND INDEPENDENT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

QQI
Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

QQI Insights

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Quality in Irish Private And Independent Higher Education Institutions

This is the second thematic analysis of quality assurance and quality enhancement within Irish private and independent higher education institutions to be published by QQI. It is based on Annual Quality Reports submitted by 24 private and independent higher education institutions in February 2022. It was produced on behalf of QQI by a project team comprising Dr. Annie Doona, Dr. Cathy Peck, Dr. Deirdre Stritch and Laura Devlin.

Foreword

A key strategic priority for QQI is the provision of system-level analyses and insights to promote greater understanding of emerging issues within the tertiary education sector and to ensure both confidence in, and continuous improvement of, the quality of education and training in Ireland.

This report is the second analysis of the Annual Quality Reports (AQRs) submitted by Irish private and independent higher education institutions to QQI. The AQRs seek to provide documentary evidence of the establishment, implementation and monitoring of an institution's internal quality assurance system, consistent with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (2015) and with QQI's statutory quality assurance guidelines. Ireland's private and independent higher education sector includes a diverse mix of institutions, ranging from smaller specialist providers to large institutions with international operations. A corresponding diversity and scale of quality assurance systems and activity is reflected in quality reporting from providers in this sector.

The report provides a thematic analysis of the content of the AQRs submitted in 2022 in respect of the 2020/21 reporting year. Whilst COVID-19 continued to impact on the operations of the sector during this period, the AQRs evidence that the experience acted to accelerate the digital transformation agendas of several institutions. It is also evident that online and blended modalities for teaching and learning are perceived to provide significant opportunities for providers in this sector and amendments to policies and procedures have been effected to support their adoption in the longer-term.

The AQRs also indicate that issues related to academic integrity were a significant dimension of quality considerations during this period. The extent to which academic integrity features across the whole spectrum of the quality system - governance, policy, student supports, staff development – emphasises the need for quality systems that are integrated, coherent and cohesive and which respond to threats to quality in a holistic way.

Dr Padraig Walsh
Chief Executive Officer

Background and Context: The Annual Quality Report

The Annual Quality Report (AQR) is an important element of QQI's quality assurance monitoring and review framework. It provides assurance to QQI that requisite quality assurance (QA) procedures are being implemented and regulatory requirements are being met by higher education institutions (HEIs). For HEIs, the report forms a single, transparent repository of policies and procedures; acts as a record of completed and ongoing quality enhancement activities; and sets out planned quality enhancement activities for subsequent reporting periods. It also serves to disseminate good practice throughout the sector.

The AQRs are published on QQI's website and provide transparency on, and enhance public confidence in, quality assurance in Irish higher education institutions. In addition, QQI invites institutions to submit case studies pertinent to specific themes in quality assurance and quality enhancement for the reporting period. The themes identified by QQI for this reporting period were: academic integrity and the impact of COVID-19. A collection of the unabridged case studies is published separately on QQI's website.

This is the second thematic analysis (synthesis report) of quality assurance and quality enhancement within Irish private and independent HEIs to be published by QQI. It is based on AQRs submitted by 24 private and independent HEIs in February 2022 in respect of the preceding academic year. These HEIs had their quality assurance procedures approved by QQI through the reengagement process, and offer programmes that are validated by QQI. Many of these providers also offer programmes leading to awards of other awarding and professional bodies.

This thematic analysis is a qualitative analysis of quality assurance developments and enhancements within Irish private higher education institutions as reported on by the HEIs in their AQRs. Themes were identified with the aim of highlighting and disseminating good practice and identifying key areas of focus for the private independent higher education sector.

This thematic analysis report is based on the Annual Quality Reports submitted by the following private and independent HEIs:

No	Institution
1	Bridge Mills Galway Language Centre
2	Carlow College, St Patrick's
3	College of Computing and Technology (CCT) College
4	Children's Therapy Centre (CTC)
5	City Education Group
6	Dorset College
7	Dublin Business School (DBS)
8	Gaelchultúr Teoranta
9	Griffith College
10	Hibernia College
11	Holmes Institute Dublin

12	Independent College Dublin
13	Innopharma Labs Ltd.
14	Institute of Business and Technology (IBAT) College, Dublin
15	Institute of Integrative Counselling and Psychotherapy (IICP) College
16	International College Dublin (ICD) Business School
17	International College for Personal and Professional Development (ICPPD)
18	International School of Business
19	Irish College of Humanities and Applied Sciences (ICHAS)
20	National College of Ireland (NCI)
21	Opening Training College (OTC)
22	Setanta College
23	SQT Training
24	St Nicholas Montessori College Ireland (SNMCI)

Table 1: List of Private and Independent HEIs that submitted AQRs in 2022

Section 1: Strategic Updates - Quality Assurance Implementation and Related Developments

1.1 Contextual Factors Impacting on QA

Across the AQRs submitted by private and independent HEIs for the 2020/21 academic year, the challenges of maintaining continuity for learners throughout phased public health restrictions were evident. This reporting period was also the first submission of an AQR for eight of the providers in this sector, who had only recently completed the engagement process with QQI. As such, the AQRs provided an opportunity for many private and independent HEIs to follow up on their learning and development from the reengagement process, as well as reflect on their experience of pivoting online during the pandemic. In addition to documenting valuable learning from these experiences, the AQRs reflected a breadth of enhancement and ongoing development activities underway within HEIs. These encompassed internationalisation, research, expansion of scope of provision, further development of existing procedures and the development of new procedures to meet emerging challenges, for example in relation to academic integrity.

A number of institutions spoke about their position within global networks or ownership by entities based outside of Ireland. Some HEI's operate in other jurisdictions e.g., Setanta College, which has approval to operate within the state of Florida. This international dimension to the operating context of HEIs is reflected in the structure and composition of governance arrangements and in the QA infrastructures of those providers. Some also note the enhanced supports and/or markets available to them through these formal international links:

- Dublin Business School (DBS) is a wholly owned subsidiary of Kaplan Inc., the education division of the Graham Holdings Co. Senior staff from the wider Kaplan Inc. organisation sit on the DBS Board of Directors. DBS operates through Graham Holdings committees such as the Compliance Committee; IT Security Committee; Corporate Audit Services Committee; and Compensation Committee. In addition to regular contact on operational matters, more formal coordination of policies and practice is achieved through a range of structured engagements across the Kaplan group.

- IBAT College Dublin (IBAT) is wholly owned by 9822 Limited, which is a wholly owned subsidiary of Global University Systems (GUS). A key objective identified by IBAT is to leverage the GUS global footprint to expand the range of programmes offered. In 2020/21, IBAT collaborated with another GUS HEI, GISMA, based in Berlin to offer GISMA postgraduate students two complementary IBAT professional diploma courses. These are short-duration, stand-alone qualifications that do not lead to an award on the NFQ.

- Holmes Institute Dublin (HID) is a member of the Holmes Institute Group based in Australia. Although a new provider that had not commenced its academic offering in Ireland (scheduled for the 2021/22 academic year), the independent panel that approved its QA procedures in March 2020 noted that:

  > Following its meeting with HI representatives, the Panel was very satisfied that HI is an institution with long-standing and significant experience in higher education, and that it has the skills, resources and experience to establish a higher education provider in Dublin. (AQR p. 9)

Some HEIs outlined changes to their approved scope of provision[1] during the reporting period. These were predominantly (though not exclusively) in the area of blended learning and reflected a hastening of pre-existing ambitions in this space resulting from the move online in response to COVID-19. CCT College, IICP Education & Training Ltd. and Saint Nicholas Montessori College Ireland (SNMCI) all successfully extended their approved scope of provision to include blended learning early in the reporting period. Other HEIs signalled their intentions to apply for an extension to their approved scope of provision to include blended learning, e.g. SQT Training Ltd., Children's Therapy Centre (CTC) and Independent College Dublin; whilst IBAT College was in the process of having its policies and procedures for blended learning evaluated by QQI as the reporting period drew to a close. The process by which CTC prepared its application for approval of QA procedures for blended learning is captured in the case study below.

Case Study 1:
Preparing to submit an application to QQI to become a Blended Learning Provider

In March 2020 with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, CTC was given two days' notice to move all teaching online as we had a teaching day on the Saturday. The practical and experiential nature of the training offered presented very specific challenges that required creative and innovative solutions. Familiarity with the Zoom Pro platform for meetings and experience in online CPD training via Zoom Pro was useful and enabled us to swiftly upskill trainers in using this platform. CTC connections with experienced international trainers provided support and guidance in managing an efficient, user friendly and ethical online learning experience. We entered into contracts with international experts in tele-mental health so that they could train staff and students in online clinical practice. We also engaged more international experts (in both mode of delivery and in subject matter) to provide training so that we could experience online delivery from the learner perspective. CTC carefully implemented and monitored the effectiveness of the resulting flipped classroom strategies and blended learning experience during the coronavirus crisis.

CTC was pleasantly surprised at how effective and popular this proved to be. As we attract learners from all over the country for both our academic and CPD courses, the burden of travel can be onerous on some learners and may negatively impact on work-life balance. Our learners are mature, professional and highly motivated, and we found that many components of our education programme, including but not limited to lecture-based components (e.g. such as both clinical and dissertation supervision) were not hampered by the switch to online delivery. In addition, we found that some components were actually enhanced by the online platform and the flipped classroom and resources provided to learners.

We therefore decided to explore ways to incorporate more of these approaches into our programmes. We determined that this would include engaging in research and reviewing our QA Policies and Procedures, making changes and additions where necessary.

We identified the need for a separate "Online and Blended Learning Strategy" to include:
- Definitions of key terms
- Limits of what will constitute Online and Blended Learning (O&BL) in terms of learner numbers and geography
- Expertise included in, or available to, corporate and academic governance
- Clear rationale and business case for O&BL

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1   'Scope of provision' refers to the range and type of programmes that a provider is approved to offer. It includes the lowest and highest level on the NFQ at which a provider can offer awards; what award types can be offered; and how and where they can be delivered. An example is: Casey Training Solutions is approved to offer Minor and Component Awards at Levels 5 and 6 on the NFQ in the area of Healthcare delivered via face-to-face and blended learning modes. Casey Training Solutions can submit programmes for validation to QQI within this approved scope of provision. *QQI Reengagement Process – Glossary of Terms and Frequently Asked Questions.*

- Summarising resources and agreeing an approved budget and timescale for establishing both online and blended learning, as appropriate

- Demonstrate understanding of the ongoing resource implications (human and infrastructural) and show commitment to addressing these implications

- Informing programme developers of the types of programmes and learner profiles suitable for CTC

- Selection and approval of a particular software, hardware, and media infrastructure to support BL and reasons for this choice communicated to and approved by corporate and academic governance

- Adherence to QQI guidance with regards online and blended learning, and preparation for implementation of a Gap Analysis of existing quality assurance (QA) and quality enhancement (QE)

Work began on collating information into a Briefing Document for consideration by the Academic Council with recommendations for developing the CTC Online and Blended Learning Strategy and considering the need for an additional Online and Blended Learning QA Policy, and expanding our Teaching, Learning and Assessment policy to explicitly reference various modes of delivery. This preliminary work could provide the foundations for an application for QQI approval as a Blended Learning Approved Provider.

Case Study 1: CTC - Preparing to submit an application to QQI to become a Blended Learning Provider

1.1.1 Reengagement

The majority of providers that had been regulated by QQI's antecedent agency, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), completed QQI's reengagement process prior to this reporting period. HEIs welcomed the process and were positive about its impact on their governance and QA systems. For some providers, this was the second AQR submitted post reengagement. AQRs from these providers typically note that recommendations arising from reengagement have now been fully addressed or are in progress to be completed in the next reporting period. However, detail is not always included across AQRs as to how this has been achieved. Many of the recommendations to providers arising from reengagement relate to strengthening governance structures; ensuring appropriate separation between commercial and academic decision making; and the enhancement of staff and student voices in units of governance.

- International School of Business (ISB) notes that all planned QA objectives (all of which arose from reengagement) identified in the previous AQR have been completed. ISB further notes that the recommendations around governance arising from reengagement, i.e., ensuring: a greater role for Course Boards in QA; a clearer line of communication for Student Council; and an increased role for assistant directors, have been completed. In addition, the Director has resigned from the Academic Council and has been replaced by a senior lecturer from IT Carlow. This step was taken to ensure clear separation between academic and commercial decision-making.

- In follow-up to reengagement, NCI's Annual Programme Monitoring and Evaluation process will be reviewed and refreshed in the next reporting period (2021-2022) and the Quality Assurance and Enhancement System (QAES) will be updated accordingly.

- IICP Education and Training Ltd. (IICP) implemented structural changes resulting from reengagement, particularly in the area of governance. In July/August 2021, an external Chair to the Academic Council was appointed by the Board of Directors. The reconstituted Academic Council had its first meeting in September 2021. Additionally, the Terms of Reference for the Advisory Board,

which was introduced at reengagement to bring an independent, objective and external perspective to the strategic planning process, were revised to clarify membership. In July/August 2021, a range of external members were appointed to, and inducted into, the Advisory Board, which had its first meeting in August 2021.

- At Hibernia College, the scheduled review and development of the College's Teaching, Learning & Assessment (TLA) Strategy was completed during this reporting period and included clearer articulation of universal design approaches and assessment mechanisms, as set out in the specific advice in the College's reengagement report.

- In response to feedback from the reengagement panel regarding the need for DBS to collect learner completion rates to inform programme monitoring and review, the provider has now developed a learner completion report which, at the time of reporting, was in user testing. It is intended that the report will be brought into full use for programmes completed in the academic year 2021/2022.

1.1.2   COVID-19

During the academic year 2020/21, the ongoing and evolving public health restrictions resulting from COVID-19 continued to have an impact on private and independent HEIs in Ireland. Contingency plans, approved by academic councils, were in place and communicated to staff, learners and external regulators. The AQRs reflect the rapid and successful pivot to online learning made by HEIs at the start of the pandemic and the longer-term embrace of technology to support and complement teaching and learning thereafter. Simultaneously, ensuring a safe return to campus as public health restrictions abated was a key concern for many HEIs. In cognisance of the evolving public health restrictions and ongoing challenges and vulnerabilities faced by many learners, some providers adopted a hybrid approach to delivery (whereby classes were held in-person and simultaneously broadcast online) in the reporting period, with limited if any changes to planned class schedules.

It is clear in the AQRs that the move to online learning in response to COVID-19 led to more rapid progress in the overall delivery of digital transformation. Investment in new, and enhancement of existing, technology and IT supports (e.g., virtual learning environments (VLEs), library systems, physical infrastructure, including the installation in classrooms of HD motion (video) cameras, microphones, addition of e-learning studios etc.) is apparent in many AQRs. Whilst some of this effort had commenced prior to COVID-19, it was expedited by the pandemic. Indicative examples of steps and measures undertaken are outlined below:

- Independent College Dublin invested heavily in hardware; software; ongoing CPD training and support for staff; and providing both access support and pastoral care to learners. The facilitation of online and, subsequently, blended learning was supported by an upgrade of the audio-visual equipment in classrooms to facilitate live streaming and recording of lectures. Faculty training and professional development in relation to the effective use of virtual campus resources was provided as standard and continued to be available at the time of reporting. The investment in resources was further supported with technical and administrative support provided by library staff and the Quality Enhancement and Innovation in Teaching and Training Officer.

- At Griffith College, steps were taken to support hybrid delivery of classes (with some learners in the classroom and some at home): training was provided for lecturers and all rooms were substantially refitted and upgraded with new microphone set-ups and cameras. On all campuses, training was provided by the Digital Learning Department (DLD). The DLD established creative solutions for practical/hands-on disciplines (e.g., music, drama, journalism etc.), for example, a "Sew Cam" in the Fashion Department (Design faculty) facilitated everyone in the classroom joining a Zoom session, and the session was then projected in the room. This enabled learners to share views of their work while maintaining social distance.

- A review of the temporary library services established at the start of the pandemic at Griffith College found they were extremely beneficial for learners. The following services were retained on a permanent-basis:
  » Increased subscriptions to online services and databases
  » Acquisition of e-books rather than physical books where available
  » A book chapter scanning service

- CCT conducted a review of contingency arrangements implemented at the start of the pandemic, which confirmed that the approach taken was effective. Student success rates further supported this.

- ISB reported that the move to online learning took place without any interruption to class delivery, and resulted in a significantly increased volume of learning materials being made available on Moodle.

The essential role played by library services in responding to the needs of learners and ensuring continuity of teaching and learning by, for example, expanding digital access, extended opening hours, and the development of resources, guides and tools, is evident throughout the AQRs. This is expanded upon in an extract from the case study provided by DBS.

Case Study 2: DBS Library

The strategic challenge facing the DBS Library in 2021 was to transition from a traditional academic library service to an innovative academic support hub. The closure of the physical library due to COVID-19 lasted from March 2020 to September 2021. This 18-month duration demanded an accelerated change initiative of all the library services. The library could no longer rely on footfall for the discovery of services nor on face-to-face interactions for instruction.

The DBS Library took a strategic decision in 2021 to be 'digital-first' in response to DBS's continued commitment to hybrid and online teaching. While this initiative will influence collection development decisions in the future, the immediate need in 2021 was the review of 925 module reading lists and updating for digital availability. Where items were not available digitally, the team collaborated with faculty to find alternatives.

In order to coordinate and identify student academic support gaps, the library led the creation of the Learner Support Committee. This committee, Chaired by the library, consists of all departments providing student support and instruction outside of normal, modular teaching hours, including Library, Academic Operations, Student Experience, and Student Engagement. The committee led to a number of successful interdepartmental collaborations. These include the first DBS all online new student induction, the first mapping of the student journey from the perspective of support offerings, as well as an on-going project to overhaul the current student information web portal.

The library also introduced two new online support programmes based on the needs identified working in collaboration with the Registrar, Teaching & Learning Quality Enhancement Department, Academic Programmes Office, and Course Directors. Once the needs were identified, the Library team partnered with academic faculty to develop the curriculum for both Postgraduate Academic Writing Support and Computing Applied Technological Support.

Computing Applied Technological Support was developed in collaboration with the Academic Director of Computing and the Computing faculty. It launched in June 2021 to support students in areas such as maths, statistics, and programming. The model of delivery was based on the successful Postgraduate Academic Writing programme. Each session was voluntary and attendance was capped at 15 students per session. Attendance averaged 82% of capacity with many of the sessions over-subscribed in 2021. These highly successful collaborations, both internally and externally, prove the extraordinary efforts of the DBS Library team. Through their efforts, the DBS Library services have been transformed into a collaborative learning environment.

> **Achievements**
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> These successes have been endorsed by student feedback; for example following an online Information Literacy support session, 100% of students answered 'Yes' to an anonymous survey asking if they would recommend the session to a friend.
>
> Following the above, the future for the DBS Library is to continue to evolve into an innovative academic support hub, with a focus on 'digital first' to ensure maximum flexibility for all learners, based on learnings from the past 18 months

Case Study 2: DBS Library

1.2 Other Strategic Updates

Notably, a number of private and independent HEIs reported on the achievement of broader strategic goals during this reporting period. A breadth of developments and achievements reflected that, notwithstanding the challenges of the pandemic, many HEIs were able to continue progressing strategic ambitions related to growth, scope and quality. Those providers for whom COVID-19 or other factors delayed the development of new strategies or achievement of deliverables reported that work had been picked up by the end of the reporting period and was now continuing apace. For example:

- SNMCI achieved strategic objectives associated with the diversification of its programme base and increased flexibility of delivery by expanding its scope of provision to include blended learning. SNMCI also expanded its physical capacity through the purchase of a new building within walking distance of the original site.

- Griffith College extended its scope of provision to additionally deliver government-funded, industry-based apprenticeship programmes.

- SQT updated the organisation's strategic plan, as well as its teaching and learning strategy. These updates were informed by the fundamental and long-lasting changes brought about in response to the pandemic.

- DBS undertook a mid-point review of its existing strategy that considered changes required because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Areas of focus for the remainder of the plan were identified and a number of projects identified.

- NCI commenced a consultation process to inform the development of its new strategic plan to be published in 2022. NCI also launched a holistic review involving staff and students in the co-design of a more streamlined student success infrastructure. This project - which responds to the outcomes of the 2019/2020 Administration Review by seeking to maximise efficiency, effectiveness, quality, and consistency of services across the NCI student and programme lifecycle - was on track to be completed within the next reporting period.

- International College Dublin acquired Public Affairs Ireland, which is now a school within the college.

- Hibernia College reported that the development of a new college strategy was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to a new Board of Directors. Following the appointment of a new Board of Directors in March 2021, a new strategy workshop was scheduled for Q4 2021 with a view to developing a five-year strategic plan for the college by the end of Q2 2022.

1.2.1   Devolved Responsibility

A small number of experienced private and independent HEIs have devolved responsibility from QQI for some aspects of the programme validation process, namely for arranging an independent evaluation report of the proposed programmes. Obtaining devolved responsibility for this aspect of the process denotes a level of trust and confidence in the provider's ability to oversee an objective process. Providers do not have a role in making a decision about the approval of their proposed programme. One provider obtained devolved responsibility during the reporting period, while the focus of those that already have such responsibility was on its application to the validation of micro-credentials:

- In 2021, DBS gained devolved responsibility for validation of new programmes within its approved scope of provision. DBS reviewed and updated its programme approval policies and procedures in advance of achieving devolved responsibility. New programmes must now be approved at three key stages by DBS's Programme Approval Sub-Committee (PASC): programme proposal; developed programme approved to proceed to independent evaluation (mock panel of experienced, independent panel members); and updated programme approved for submission to QQI.

- Griffith College outlined its procedures for validating micro-credentials under devolved responsibility for programme validation. The college appoints desk auditors within the same framework that applies to major programme validation panel members. The external panel may seek clarification or further information as necessary before making their recommendations using a report template provided.

- NCI was granted devolved responsibilities in 2018. While there were no changes to the relevant policies and procedures during the reporting period, NCI updated its arrangements with QQI for devolved responsibility in response to the QQI pilot processes for the validation of micro-credentials and fully online delivery. The Quality Assurance and Enhancement System (QAES) will be updated to reflect these developments within the 2021/22 academic year.

1.2.2 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

An explicit focus on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) as this pertains to leadership, management and staff dynamics was not discernible within most of the AQRs submitted by private and independent HEIS. However, commendable work was undertaken within those institutions that have advanced further in this area.

During this reporting period two institutions engaged successfully with the Athena Swan process:

- NCI secured the Athena Swan Bronze Award. The provider reports that a commitment to EDI is reflected in NCI's strategic priorities, policies and practices.

- Carlow College submitted an application to Athena Swan Ireland in June 2020. Minor revisions were required to meet the Bronze Award. The revised application was submitted and the Bronze Award subsequently achieved following the reporting period.

Notably, both of these institutions submitted evidence of broader EDI initiatives, reflecting that the achievement of the Athena Swan Bronze Awards was occurring within institutions that had made significant commitments to fostering an inclusive culture. For example:

- NCI became the second HEI in Ireland to be recognised as an Autism Friendly institution during the reporting period.

- Carlow College led a project to advance equality in relation to gender and ethnicity in higher education. The college hosted a virtual symposium entitled 'Gender and Race in Higher Education:

Good practice and competing inequalities' and produced a good practice guide for all higher education institutions.

Notably, Griffith College formalised the EDI agenda within its decision-making structures during this reporting period. It was agreed that the Academic and Professional Council and its sub-committees would introduce a standing agenda item to reflect on the EDI dimensions of any decisions taken by the committees at their meetings. This action was implemented across the college.

Significantly more focus was placed on EDI in relation to supporting a diversity of learners throughout the AQRs submitted. This was very evident, for example, in the AQRs submitted by CCT, Griffith College and Carlow College. Examples of this are discussed and noted throughout sections of this thematic analysis report that are focused on teaching, learning and assessment and the learner experience. HEIs may benefit from being encouraged to reflect and report on how EDI is addressed in all aspects of a provider's operations and culture in future reporting periods.

1.2.3 Landscape Funding

In the previous reporting period, IT Carlow and Carlow College received €60,000 from the Higher Education Authority Landscape Funding Programme to establish a joint project office to support and drive a range of new collaborative initiatives across teaching and learning, further education and higher education progression, research, learner engagement, engagement with community and local authorities, staff development, EDI and internationalisation.

In this reporting period, the Partnership Programme Manager for IT Carlow and Carlow College undertook several initiatives to support collaborations on new programme development. The work resulted in the completion of process documents and data sharing agreements to support the delivery of programmes in practice. This reporting period also saw work commence on the development of shared initiatives between academic staff in both institutions, as well as engagement with the international offices. In line with the funding period, this programme of work was concluded in July 2021. It is intended that there will be an emphasis on collaborative provision/validation in the area of blended learning in the 2021/2022 academic year.

1.3 Governance and Management of Quality

A number of private and independent HEIs reported on expansions and enhancements made to their governance structures, inclusive of advisory committees. In many instances, these changes were reflective of responsiveness to pressures in the external environment. In other instances, these developments could be seen as indicative of enhancements and a process of maturation.

- SNMCI's Interim COVID Emergency Response Team completed risk assessments related to COVID-19; undertook planning and preparation to uphold the academic integrity of programmes and to provide positive student experiences in all eventualities related to the subsequent academic year.

- CCT established an Audit, Risk and Strategy Committee serving an advisory role to become operational in the subsequent reporting period.

- Setanta College established a new Governing Board.

- Griffith College established a research committee through its Academic and Professional Council. Further information on the operation of the committee is available in the 'Griffith College Research Committee Guiding Principles' document. An online symposium showcasing staff research was held to mark the establishment of the committee.

- Hibernia College appointed a new Board of Directors and commenced the development of a five-year strategic plan. Its Academic Board also approved the establishment of a Student Engagement Committee (SEC) during this reporting period, with the proposed purpose of guiding the Academic Board and the college community in strategy, policy and approach to student engagement and partnership.

- ICD's Academic Council formed a new Standards in Assessment Subcommittee during the AQR reporting period. Its objectives include overseeing recruitment of external examiners, enhancing the procedures for external examination, and enhancing Examination Board meetings.

- IICP revised the Terms of Reference of the Advisory Board to clarify scope, membership, roles and reporting arrangements. The Advisory Board was constituted and held its first meeting on 4th August 2021.

- ICHAS established a Garda Vetting Committee to deliberate on any disclosures other than nil disclosures that are returned. This is a decision-making body within the college with developed terms of reference.

- City Education Group reported on the establishment of an Advisory Board to advise the Board of Directors on "issues relating to mission, vision, values and strategy, the strategic development of the Group with reference to current and future trends in education and training in Ireland, Europe, and globally at second, further and higher levels." (AQR: p. 9)

The crucial role that appropriately qualified and informed externality plays within the corporate and academic governance structures of HEIs in this sector was also in focus. A number of new and additional appointments to academic councils were reported by institutions including International College Dublin; Innopharma Labs Ltd.; and ISB. CTC appointed an external Chairperson to the Examination Board. The Irish College of Humanities and Applied Sciences (ICHAS) welcomed new student and faculty membership to a reconstituted Governing Authority. In appointing members to the new Governing Authority, the AQR notes that the Board of ICHAS was conscious of ensuring appropriate representation of key stakeholders as well as gender balance and externality.

1.3.1   New Roles

A number of the private HEI's reported an expansion of capacity in specific operational areas, as well as restructuring and revisions impacting existing roles. Unsurprisingly, these new roles were often directed at addressing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, e.g. enhancing and developing capabilities in relation to teaching and learning, digital and online learning and the expansion of student support services. For example:

- SNMCI appointed an instructional designer.

- City Education Group (CEG) consulted with an external educational technologist to ensure best practice in TLA across the Group and appointed a student support officer and a research officer/librarian.

- Independent College Dublin created a new role of Quality Enhancement and Innovation in Teaching and Training Officer. It also appointed an examinations officer and reviewed the roles of student services, learner support and academic operations staff.

- At DBS, the posts of Head of Academic Programmes and Head of Quality Enhancement and Innovation in Teaching and Learning were combined to form a new post, Academic Dean. A new post of Head of Teaching Delivery & Content Production was created.

- Innopharma Labs Ltd appointed a Head of Teaching and Learning, a Learning Designer, a Librarian and a Learner Support Officer.

The AQRs submitted during this period also indicated that capacity to lead, manage, monitor and enhance quality assurance continued to be developed through the creation of new roles in this area. For example:

- Hibernia College created a new Quality Assurance and Enhancement Manager role, as well as two new quality assurance administrator roles.

- International College Dublin appointed a new Head of Quality Assurance and Enhancement. A new role was created for a Quality Enhancement and Innovation in Teaching and Training Officer, who assists learners, lecturers and support personnel to adapt to new teaching and learning approaches.

- NCI appointed a new Registrar and a Director of Quality and Institutional Effectiveness (QIE). The Quality Improvement and Enhancement Team was relocated from the portfolio of the Vice-President (Academic Affairs and Research) to the Office of the Registrar. This relocation was designed to enhance connectivity, consistency and quality across the student and programme lifecycles.

- ICHAS appointed a dedicated Clinical Director to support the Placement Manager and the Vice President (Academic Affairs) in ensuring and assuring the quality of work-based learning sites and to enhance the existing placement management processes. It also appointed a new dedicated Admissions Officer.

- CEC reported on the recruitment of a Registrar to support the Director of Quality in leading quality enhancements and creating a quality culture.

Notably, a number of new appointments reflected the overall trend across the sector toward furthering enhancement and progressing future-facing and strategic ambitions despite the challenging nature of operating throughout the pandemic.

- Setanta College appointed both an International Coordinator and a Regional Coordinator.

- Dorset College created an international sales and marketing role and a Springboard programmes lead post.

- DBS appointed a dedicated Practice Research Coordinator to drive DBS's research strategy and created the role of Validation and Accreditation Manager, reporting to the Registrar to assist with all aspects of the validation process for new and reviewed programmes, as well as assist with preparation for delegated authority.

1.3.2 QA Policies and Procedures

The established QA frameworks of the private and independent HEI's were outlined within Part A of the AQRs submitted. Within Part B, updates and enhancements to the QA frameworks made during the reporting period were documented. The focus of these varied substantially across the sector.

In some areas, updates to QA reflected responsiveness to the external environment, for example, in the development of procedures pertaining to assessment and academic integrity. In others, they reflected ongoing and planned development to support general enhancement and strategic activities that transcended the immediate context of the pandemic.

- SCNMI undertook revisions to processes pertaining to admissions, feedback, learner and lecturer induction, professional development, intellectual property, assessment control, academic integrity, use of the college's ICT, privacy and student engagement in the online environment.

- ICHAS added a policy on policies to the QAE documentation that provided a framework for policy development that is transparent and comprehensive. The college additionally developed a code

of conduct for users of the virtual learning environment (VLE) that was developed in conjunction with staff and programme directors. The college reported on the development of a Garda vetting policy and procedure and further enhanced its policies and procedures in relation to data usage and retention during the reporting period.

- Carlow College approved two new policies during the reporting period. These were the Right to Disconnect Policy and the Staff Code of Conduct Policy.

- DBS added a number of new policies to its QA Handbook on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, Learning Analytics, Group Work, Conflict of Interest, Marking, Online Exams and Sexual Harassment and Sexual Consent.

- NCI's Academic Council reported the need to update the QAES to maintain accuracy and currency with internal and external developments, requirements and needs as well as to support NCI's capacity to scale its provision and services in line with strategic plans for growth. Work was initiated within the reporting period, particularly in relation to policies and procedures aligned with alternative assessments throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this was planned for finalisation in the subsequent reporting period as part of the Streamlining Student Success Structures initiative. The expanded timeline was to enable NCI to review and refresh all QA policies, procedures, and practices, as well as ensure that the new policies and procedures could be clearly understood and implemented consistently across NCI.

- Setanta College reported that it had developed a new academic integrity policy and was undertaking a review of its policies for the recognition of prior learning (RPL).

- Griffith College reported on the development of a new protocol for the oversight of printed and web-based marketing information. A new template for annual programme review was developed in consultation with programme directors as well as a new template for non-accredited short course proposals.

- Independent College Dublin reported updates to quality assurance policies and procedures approved by the quality assurance and enhancement committee and academic council during the reporting period. These included QA modifications associated with online or hybrid programme delivery and more explicit definitions of extenuating circumstances for learners as well as a range of clarifications to processes for assessment moderation, grading, appeals and the failed module policy.

- The Open Training College (OTC) reported on development of its RPL Policy, Acceptable Usage Policy, Academic Integrity Policy, Student Support Policy and GDPR Policy.

- Innopharma Labs Ltd introduced new policies and guidance documents in a number of areas. These included Academic Integrity Measures and Actions, a Communication Policy for Learners, Standing Orders of Academic Council, a Policy and Procedure for Venue Approval and Academic Workload Models.

- Hibernia College developed a new policy, procedure and application form during this reporting period to specifically enhance the College's practices related to fitness to practise.

1.3.3 Sustainable Development Goals

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are only explicitly referenced in one of the private and independent provider AQRs. Nonetheless, it is clear from the reports that initiatives that contribute to the goals are taking place in some HEIs. Some examples include:

- Five new programmes at NCI contributed to UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education: Widening Access; Promoting Lifelong Learning; Distance Learning; and Student Learning Supports).

- DBS has a Sustainable Environment Initiative and has set an objective to build on the work of its sustainable environment group to create a sustainable environment policy and plan to reduce the carbon footprint of the college.

- In May 2021, the Griffith College Faculty of Journalism and Media Communications, in partnership with the Institute of Advertising Practitioners Ireland, launched a €10,000 Creative Bursary aimed at disadvantaged and DEIS schools across Ireland for the forthcoming academic year. The theme for the bursary was sustainability, with schools asked to develop a creative communications campaign to highlight their sustainable initiatives and policies.

- Sustainability was key in the redevelopment of a listed building on Griffith College's Cork campus. Following the most recent upgrade project, completed in Q1 2021, it is now almost a zero-energy building.

Further and more detailed reporting on this topic in future AQRs from this sector would be valuable.

Section 2: Internal Quality Assurance System Enhancement and Impacts

2.1 Academic Integrity

Academic integrity was a key theme across all AQRs in this reporting period. The eight providers that are members of the National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN) referenced ongoing membership and involvement in national academic integrity events and activities, including the inaugural National Academic Integrity Week held in October 2020. Other HEIs reported that they are keeping abreast of developments in the NAIN as a means of keeping up-to-date on this issue. This reporting period saw a more mature and wide-ranging engagement with academic integrity than in previous AQRs. It is notable that discussion of, and reference to, academic integrity is no longer confined to a discrete section on that topic; rather it is embedded throughout the descriptions of activities in governance, policy updates, teaching, learning and assessment, as well as student supports and staff development, indicating that academic integrity is now a firmly embedded consideration across all aspects of HEIs.

A plethora of examples of good practice, toolkits and guides that have been developed were provided. Many providers held events for both staff and learners and made relevant information permanently available in VLEs. Some HEIs have made academic writing and related modules mandatory for learners. Indicative examples of activities undertaken are set out below:

- At CCT, activities pertaining to academic integrity during the reporting year encompassed four main areas: institutional committee work, including the work of the Academic Standards Board and Academic Integrity Committee; the production of online guides for the CCT Learning Space using software such as Subjectsplus and Screencastomatic; the creation of interactive content for CCT's Academic Integrity page on Moodle using H5P; and the expansion of academic integrity instruction via CCT's Student Success Classes.

- CCT also produced an Online Guide to Academic Integrity and Assessment Design and an Online Guide to Avoiding Contract Cheating.

- At Carlow College, Stage 1 learners must complete a mandatory Academic and Digital Skills Module and all learners are reminded of academic integrity values through programme handbooks and resources on the VLE. Workshops and one-to-one sessions are provided by the Academic Resource Office and the Essay Doctor Service. The Plagiarism Policy was also revised by the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee in February/March 2021.

- In 2020, CTC created a new role of Learning Support Officer, who developed a suite of tools to support learners with academic writing. Videos were produced to address: academic integrity; avoiding unintentional errors and plagiarism; academic writing and literacy; citation instruction; revised policies and procedures in regard to academic integrity and the impact of the new resources being made available to learners.

- DBS is developing resources, including podcasts, for learners, for example on the dangers of essay mills.

- CEG reported on the development of a series of tools on academic writing which are located on both the faculty and student hubs and which can be accessed via the CEG centre for teaching, learning and assessment.

- Gaelchultur's newly approved policy on TLA incorporates academic integrity.

- At Independent College Dublin, the QA documentation on academic misconduct was comprehensively revised to ensure clarity. Academic integrity is covered at learner induction, at the start of each semester, and at extra in-term sessions for learners and lecturers. A body of materials were developed by the librarian and CPD sessions were held for staff.

- At SCNMI, the academic misconduct policy was renamed an academic integrity policy, reflecting the work of NAIN and an acknowledgement of the need to support learners to develop academic integrity skills. Academic integrity was considered in the review of assessments in SNMCI's Contingency Plan 2, in particular in relation to open-book examinations. The college proactively addresses the link between student stress and the number of incidents of breaches of academic integrity.

- Griffith College developed guidelines for the use of viva voce examinations where this is deemed appropriate in investigating suspected academic misconduct.

- Key developments at Hibernia College in this period include updates to the college's Academic Writing Toolkit and awareness building. The college launched a short course to coincide with National Academic Integrity Week in 2021. Students and staff took part in a newly-designed, online, short course on academic integrity. The Digital Learning Department hosted drop-in academic referencing workshops on Zoom between February and October 2021.

- ICHAS provides supports to learners including pre-recorded academic writing skills tutorials, guides to referencing and information on how to prepare an essay. At the beginning of each year, learners are offered the opportunity to attend a writing skills workshop. Staff are encouraged and supported to engage in relevant CPD.

Many HEIs reported on their use of plagiarism detection software and measures taken to support and upskill staff and learners in its use. This is well illustrated in the case study below from NCI.

Case Study 3:

Norma Smurfit Library Turnitin (anti-plagiarism/student learning support) developments

Introduction and Context:
Since the introduction of Turnitin in 2018, the Library became increasingly aware that many students viewed Turnitin as something to be feared. In 2020-21, the Library further enhanced its efforts to promote Turnitin as a tool to support better academic writing and consequently, good grades for students. Below are some of the initiatives the library undertook to contribute to the above aims of changing staff and students' relationship and attitude towards Turnitin.

Summary of the Initiative:
One of the main methods the library uses to provide instruction to users is through LibGuides which are online guides that cover different subjects. The online guide has become more popular over time and between January 2020 and December 2021 it was viewed 8,720 times. It is particularly well used during the busy assignment submission periods, such as November 2020 when there were 1,112 views throughout the month. The guide also includes a Turnitin FAQs section where students and staff could search for questions or submit one if they do not find an answer. These Turnitin FAQs have quite high public views particularly those in relation to similarity scores or reports such as, "What does the colour on my Similarity Report mean?", which has had 3,000 views since it was added in 2019.

Students seemed to have a fixation with the Turnitin similarity scores or percentages returned, and Library staff perceived that they often misunderstood what these scores really meant. To address this, we included several FAQs and information boxes emphasising the fact that similarities do not in themselves equate to plagiarism. Rather, Turnitin simply finds similarities but does not determine whether a student has quoted or cited correctly.

The Turnitin guide also included a staff tab that facilitates staff Turnitin training, as well as instructions for setting up assignments and detecting plagiarism. Staff-specific FAQs were also made available. In an effort to help demystify the entire Turnitin process for students, we decided that both the staff and student resources should be available to all in one place.

Draft Submissions
The College decided to allow students to make multiple draft submissions prior to their final assignment submission. This has allowed students to check their similarity score and make changes to their assignments if needed, for example by reducing the number of direct quotations and making better use of paraphrasing. This improves the similarity scores students are getting but it should also improve the quality of their writing, and consequently their grades.

Key Findings:
It seems that students continue to be apprehensive about Turnitin. Statistics were collated on the number of draft submissions being made through Turnitin and results showed that for 2020 and 2021 the average student submitted less than one draft submission per assignment. This suggests that there are still a lot of students not utilising the draft submission option. To this end, one future development will be the availability of Turnitin's Draft Coach which is expected to be available for integration with Microsoft Word in 2022. This will mean that students can in future get an idea of their similarity scores and sources without having to submit a draft through the Turnitin Moodle plugin. We anticipate that this will encourage more students to use the draft submission function and lead to a better-quality outcome for students.

Conclusion:
In the 2020/21 academic year, the Library has been part of a wider College effort to improve student and staff understanding of Turnitin and to dispel many of the misconceptions around it. There is an effort to bring it out into the open and dispel myths and fears. We continue to highlight as much as possible that Turnitin is a tool to help improve academic referencing, paraphrasing, and academic writing in general. The Library will continue to update its guides and FAQs to ensure that students receive accurate information about this digital learning support service.

Case Study 3: NCI - Norma Smurfit Library Turnitin (anti-plagiarism/student learning support) developments

Whether the rapid move online and related changes in teaching, learning and assessment necessitated by COVID-19 had an impact on rates of academic misconduct, and the implications of this for assessment practice, are not explored in the majority of AQRs with a few notable exceptions:

- NCI stated that data on disciplinary cases throughout 2020/21 was discussed at exam boards. A formal review of assessment experiences during the 2019/2020 and 2020/21 academic years will be completed in the next reporting period and will inform decisions about assessment going forward.

- ISB reported that it encountered significant numbers of academic misconduct in the mid-term exams. Staff responded by designing final assessments that were more task-based and involved case studies, resulting in a reduction in the number of misconduct cases. ISB also ensured students were better informed of the consequences of engaging in academic misconduct.

2.2 Teaching, Learning and Assessment

During this reporting period, private and independent HEIs reported widely on the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on modalities for teaching, learning and assessment. Although the AQRs documented online teaching and learning practices that were primarily implemented as a response to public health restrictions, in many instances HEIs indicated that they intended to retain and build upon innovations borne of necessity during this period. In particular, the enhancement of VLEs, the accessibility of synchronous online classes for remote learners and the greater diversity of assessment modalities employed were noted to be enhancements with longer term benefits.

A number of HEIs progressed the development of teaching, learning and assessment strategies that took appropriate account of developments prompted by the pandemic and the potential post-pandemic landscape. For example:

- Griffith College commissioned the development of a teaching and learning strategy grounded in current college practice and international best practice, which was informed by extensive stakeholder consultation. A framework for the implementation of this roadmap was initiated during the reporting period.

- City Education Group (CEG) developed an additional chapter within its QA manual focused on quality assurance arrangements for the delivery of both face-to-face and blended learning programmes, building on a previously developed digital strategy.

- ICPPD's Teaching and Learning Covid Response Sub-committee, which was convened in July 2020 and reported to the Academic Board, formulated a strategic plan for teaching and learning for the 2020-2021 academic year. The remit of the committee also included progression implications, particularly implications for clinical practice, and tutor training.

- Hibernia College undertook the scheduled review and development of the college's teaching, learning and assessment strategy during this reporting period.

- SQT reflected that out of adversity had come opportunity, with the pandemic serving to catalyse the successful implementation of new and innovative approaches to programme delivery that has been part of the provider's strategy for many years. These were formalised in an update to the teaching and learning strategy (2022 – 2025). Developments at SQT are elaborated further in the case study below.

Case Study 4:

The Future of Blended and Online Delivery at SQT

The pivot to virtual delivery in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 involved significant investment in terms of resources (human and capital). It also involved fundamental changes to SQT's business model, programme delivery, quality assurance and support operations which are now well established and sustainable from a stakeholder perspective.

In 2021, 89% of programmes were delivered virtually using a synchronous delivery strategy. Stakeholder feedback on these virtual programmes to date has been overwhelmingly positive and has confirmed that the quality of SQT programmes has not been compromised by this new mode of provision. To date, 93% of learners have rated their virtual programme 4 or 5 stars and 98% would recommend their programme to a colleague.

Of critical importance is that feedback from client companies indicates that many have made the decision that learning within their organisations will need to change in line with new ways of working and upskilling their employees. This implies that blended and virtual learning will become the new normal for industry. Figure 7 illustrates that 64% of learners prefer virtual delivery over the traditional classroom approach, whilst Figure 8 demonstrates the varying preference for virtual delivery at an industry level.
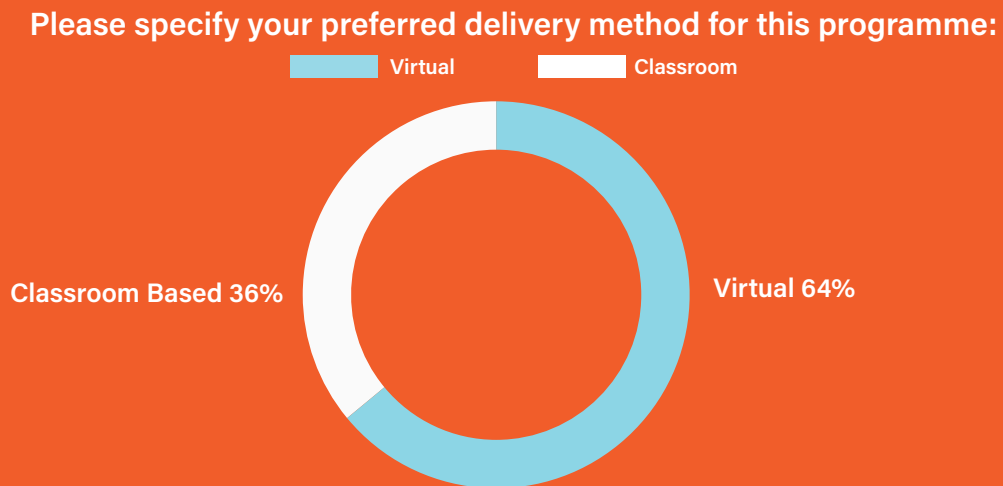
Please specify your preferred delivery method for this programme:

Virtual   **Classroom**

Classroom Based 36%   Virtual 64%

Figure 7: Preferred Delivery Method

Prefered delivery mode by course category
(data= # respondents to question - 2021 only)

Virtual   **Classroom**

Quality
Project and Programme Management
Management Systems
Life Sciences
Lean Size Sigma
Leadership and Personal Development Skills
Laboratory
Information Security
Hospitals/Medical
Health and Safety
Food Safety
Environment and Energy Management
Continual Process Improvement

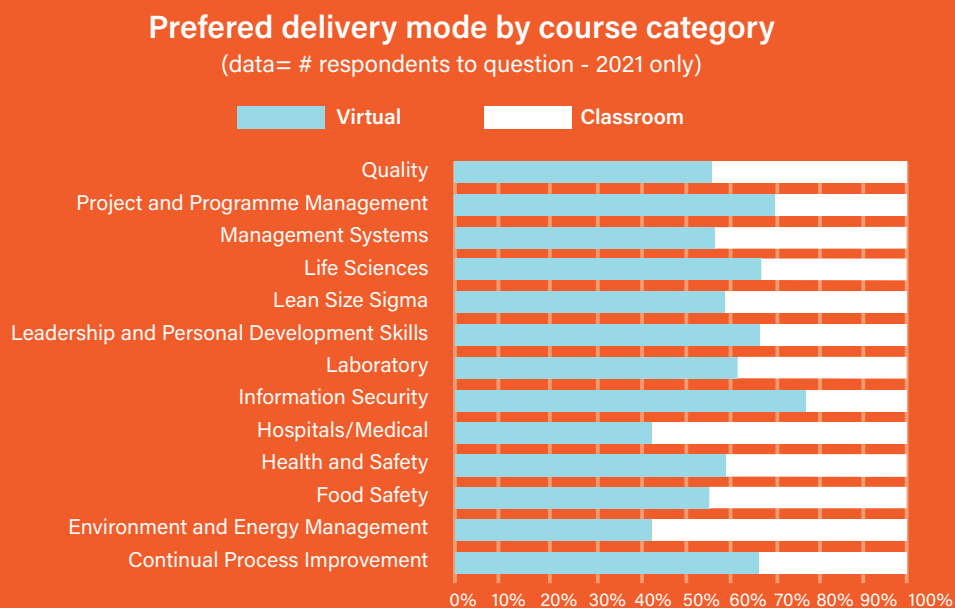0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

Figure 8: Preferred Delivery Method by Course Category

Given the successful development of the virtual delivery model, it is now operationally possible to extend SQT's learner reach to a much wider target population and begin to deliver on its strategic goal of becoming a trusted education partner nationally and internationally. SQT's customer base is predominantly multinational organisations seeking global training partners to ensure consistency of training and skills development across all sites. Based on the acceleration of the deployment of virtual technology, clients and learners are now demanding virtual programmes that facilitate global multisite integration. Specifically, SQT witnessed a two-fold growth in learners outside of Ireland on non-accredited programmes in 2021 and a five-fold growth when compared to pre-pandemic numbers.

Finally, an important strategic focus in the medium to long term is for SQT to offer its entire suite of programmes to all learners irrespective of their location subject to QQI approval. This has been documented within SQT's updated Teaching and Learning Strategy (2022-2025), which has been developed to reflect the significant enhancements and modifications, which have resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. This strategy sets out SQT's priorities in relation to teaching, learning and assessment and seeks to provide a framework and focus for T&L and virtual learning related activities within SQT. It incorporates relevant overlapping T&L objectives which are set out in its overarching organisational Strategic Plan 2022-2025. Consequently, the extension of scope of provision for blended and online synchronous delivery on a permanent basis is consistent with SQT's revised business model and addresses the transformative needs of its diverse cohort of learners and their organisations.

Case Study 4: The Future of Blended and Online Delivery at SQT

A number of private and independent HEIs reported on investments made in the technologies and platforms underpinning their VLEs. Further investments were also made in classroom-based ICT systems to facilitate hybrid delivery. Examples of work undertaken in this area include:

- Hibernia College commenced the planning and research phase for a new college digital learning architecture. Workshops were facilitated with college staff to focus on finding solutions in a teaching, learning and assessment context and identify suitable technologies

- Dorset College installed smart touch screens, high-quality cameras and sound systems in all physical classrooms to facilitate effective hybrid delivery. Other enhancements taken to facilitate a safe return to campus during periods of reduced restriction were the installation of UV lights and air purifiers in all classrooms.

- ICD undertook a Moodle upgrade alongside further investments in software. Enhancements to Moodle include:

  » the inclusion of a new well-being section for learners

  » the creation of a learner Career Portal which helps learners develop interview skills and carries employment opportunities from professional bodies

  » the uploading of recordings of live lectures to the module Moodle page

- A suite of internally created training courses and guides was provided to staff and students on all improved systems in use for online education.

- DBS introduced Zoom Rooms into a third of its classrooms during 2021. Zoom Rooms offer the opportunity for an enhanced hybrid learning environment, where the lecturer is delivering simultaneously to learners in the classroom and online. DBS additionally piloted online proctoring for Master's-level exams. A second pilot was completed for a January intake of Master's students in the summer exam cycle. The proctoring software was introduced as a 'soft' pilot without browser lockdown and other security/punitive measures enabled, in order to test basic features of the system and build confidence.

- Carlow College invested in hardware for both learners and staff to improve the standard of user devices in use. A significant investment was made in upgrading the technology infrastructure of spaces used for teaching. With the introduction of social distancing requirements, these were fitted with a specialised audio/visual system which consisted of a laser projector, extended visual of TV screens, column speakers and a large electronic screen to facilitate delivery of on-campus lectures.

- NCI made investments in dual delivery technology to facilitate the simultaneous delivery of class content to on-campus and remote learners across the college's teaching spaces.

During this reporting period, the spotlight continued to shine on assessment. In addition to work undertaken to raise awareness of academic integrity (discussed previously in section 2.1) private and independent HEIs worked to ensure staff were supported by appropriate policies and guidance as they navigated the implementation of online, take home and open book exams.

- At ICD, a new standards in assessment subcommittee was formed by the Academic Council during the AQR reporting period. Among its objectives was overseeing recruitment of External Examiners, enhancing the procedures around External Examination, and enhancing the approach to Examination Board meetings.

- At Carlow College, guidelines for setting and marking take home exams were developed and included in the rules and regulations in relation to assessment and standards.

- At Setanta College, staff training resources on best practice in assessment were developed and a review of assessment management practices undertaken.

- At Independent College Dublin, changes in assessment methods necessitated by online assessment were approved by the academic council and external examiners, leading to updates in the provider's QA documentation. It was reported that the pivot to online delivery had further developed understanding and capability in the college for ensuring that academic integrity is preserved, particularly in learner assessment, in the online environment.

- At Carlow College, minor changes were made to the assessment of learners policy, plagiarism policy and research ethics advisory policy. Policy documentation was revised to include references to take-home exams.

2.3 The Learner Experience

As the pandemic continued to inhibit social interaction and impact the day-to-day experience of learners across Ireland throughout the reporting period, learner wellbeing remained at the forefront of operations for private and independent HEIs. The AQRs reflected that although a significant focus was placed on supporting learners to succeed in the context of online learning, energy and resources were also directed to wellbeing, pastoral care and social support services. Notably, while HEIs pivoted their existing support services to facilitate remote and virtual interactions with learners, they also developed a range of new supports and initiatives that responded to emerging needs.

Given the breadth and detail of information submitted within the AQRs in relation to this aspect of provision, the examples cited below are noted to be indicative but far from exhaustive.

- At ISB, significant efforts were made to increase the range and type of online resources to learners. Non-academic online or outdoor activities were also facilitated to ensure the well-being of students.

- At ICD, a complete overhaul of the learner handbook took place to ensure that it contains key information for learners on how to succeed online. Pastoral supports shifted online and a trained member of staff provided one-to-one telephone support sessions with learners facing difficulties. The college counselling service, which is independent of ICD, was available free of charge to all learners.

- At Griffith College, additional online resources and academic and personal supports were provided for learners during COVID-19. Library staff also responded by expanding remote services. This

included moving the learning support services (searching, academic writing, referencing, and avoiding similarity) fully online, providing drop-in Zoom sessions for learners to interact with the library in a less formal situation, enhancing document supply with the possibility of scanning and emailing selected sections of texts and facilitating click-and-collect lending of textbooks.

- At Carlow College, new online resources for induction and orientation were developed such as the 'Discover Carlow College' induction and orientation information guide to support the induction programme for new and continuing learners. A dedicated learner information hub was created on the website which provided a central point for learners to access essential information such as safety protocols for COVID-19, accessing college facilities, IT and Office 365 systems, joining video lectures, and accessing the Moodle VLE to ensure a smooth transition to college or the next stage of their programme. The 'Be Well Hour' twice weekly sessions hosted by the counselling service offered a safe online space for students to explore their individual experiences and connect with others. Up to 15 learners attended and feedback indicated that friendship groups were developed and maintained through WhatsApp groups.

- At Independent College Dublin, a wide range of support was made available to learners, from pastoral care and counselling, careers events to wellness supports such as yoga and meditation. Advice and support was offered to learners on sourcing accommodation and designated staff were available to assist learners with any concerns regarding their health and wellbeing. The college enabled learners to run clubs and societies, facilitated connections for learners with cultural and other support organisations and led the development and maintenance of an Independent College Dublin fraternal community amongst both learners and alumni.

- At Dorset College, a peer support group was established to encourage learners to support one another and share information on approaches to wellbeing that helped them. The group's activities also included events such as 5k runs, charity walks, raffles and in-person meetups where possible. The group provided learners with an avenue for maintaining social contacts through periods of public health restrictions.

The value of allowing learners to take the lead in student experience initiatives is reflected in the case study submitted by Dorset College below.

Case Study 5:

Supporting student-led activities: Dorset Social Crew

During the reporting period, the college has expanded and enhanced the role of the Student Experience Lead. The purpose of these changes was to improve student engagement and deliver an enhanced student experience in the context of hybrid delivery.

In October 2021 the Student Experience Lead conducted an audit of events run over the previous 12 months. This audit considered the popularity of events and their attendance, the similarity between events being organised, and feedback from learners as to their quality and suitability.

Prior to the audit, events had been led by the Student Experience Lead. It had been observed that a significant amount of time was being spent organising events, and that engagement was on occasion poor. At the same time, the role of Student Experience Lead was gradually expanding to encompass engagement with learner representatives and pastoral support work.

Feedback from learners had identified a willingness to lead and take responsibility for social events. On that basis, the college established the Dorset Social Crew, allocating a small budget to pay crew members to organise, promote and run events that provide social engagement opportunities for its learners. The Dorset Social Crew concept is based on a similar initiative at the University of Auckland, which has proven successful in improving the quality of events and learner engagement with them.

To date, the initiative has proven successful. While maintaining oversight, the Student Experience Lead has freed up significant hours to manage the delivery of student support and services. Learner feedback suggests that the events organised have been more relevant, and they have been better attended. The college has found that the opportunity to organise social events on behalf of their peers appeals to a different character than the traditional class representative role, and as such this has diversified the voices that engage most closely with the college.

Case Study 5: Supporting student-led activities - Dorset Social Crew

A number of institutions reported on initiatives, progress and ongoing development to ensure that the learner voice is heard in decision-making and throughout quality assurance processes. Examples include:

- NCI reported that throughout 2020/21 the NCI Students' Union (NCISU) and NCI engaged in discussions to review and develop NCI's first formal NCISU/NCI Partnership Agreement. The Partnership Agreement, to be signed in the next reporting period, will be benchmarked against the 2021 National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP)'s Framework for Authentic Student Engagement in Decision Making.

- Carlow College reported on its relationship with the Carlow College Students' Union (CCSU), which facilitates the enhancement of learner voice, representation and engagement in all areas of college life. CCSU has attendance and participation rights in all high-level meetings such as various college committees, Programme Boards, Academic Council, Management Board and Governing Body. As a partner institution with NStEP, Carlow College learner representatives undertake online training programmes which help develop their capacity to represent their peers appropriately and to participate effectively in college fora. NStEP's annual training report noted that 17 of the college's 19 class representatives completed training in 2020/2021.

- ISB reported on enhancements made to the learner voice within the quality assurance process, with learners now represented on the Academic Board.

The use of surveys to capture learner feedback and inform ongoing development was also widely reported. In many instances, the surveys referenced formed part of the HEI's internal quality assurance processes. However, some engagement with national surveys was also indicated. Examples include:

- At NCI, the data presented in the 2020/21 and the forthcoming 2021/22 national student survey reports was to be used to inform the institutional approach to blended and online delivery, including dual delivery technology.

- At Griffith College, the process by which formal learner feedback was collected was enhanced during the reporting period to emphasise a timely closing of the feedback loop. Some modifications to the collection and organisation of the feedback data ensured that a feedback report for every module on a programme could be completed within hours of the feedback form closing, in turn allowing for immediate action on learner feedback. By collecting feedback mid-module, this approach ensures

that modifications and enhancements can be implemented in time to benefit the cohort that delivered the feedback.

- At Hibernia College, closing the feedback loop with students was an area of priority for the QA Office during this reporting period. Work undertaken to develop processes in this area is captured in this extract from a case study submitted by the college.

Case Study 6:

Implementing a New Process for Managing the Lifecycle of End-of-Module Surveys in Hibernia College

Introduction
This case study provides an overview of a project that was undertaken in 2021 to review and streamline the lifecycle of managing end-of-module surveys (EMSs), as facilitated by the QA Office.

Initial Evaluation of the EMS Process
At the outset of this project, it was important to establish the current context and process for the implementation of the EMS process. A number of core matters were identified as part of this review:

- Responsibility of the EMS was shared between the QA Office and the Records and Data Office and ownership of distinct phases of the process was unclear.

- EMSs were being released to students in the VLE, but engagement was inconsistent and often tapered off after early modules.

- Data from the surveys was being drawn down regularly but was not systematically analysed and communicated to the academic team. Consequently, the academic team sought this data on an ad hoc basis, as required.

- No formal process was in place to close the feedback loop with students.

Therefore, it was important as part of the project to ensure clarity of roles and responsibilities of various members of staff in completing this process, to enhance processes for promoting student engagement with EMSs, to improve the presentation and analysis of data and its communications to academic teams and, finally, to put a process in place to formally close the feedback loop with students.

New Process Implementation
This project has resulted in an enhanced lifecycle for managing EMSs. A key process change has been the formalisation of ownership for this process by the QA Office. The following key elements of this process have now been implemented.

Mapping responsibilities, data presentation and data visualisation per module

- A standard operating procedure was developed to set out the specific responsibilities of individual members of staff in completing this process.
- A user-friendly data summary template was created, which is used to present and analyse qualitative and quantitative data. This was applied to all available historic data for current programmes.
- A dedicated document library was created, which can be filtered by module for each programme for ease of engagement of all relevant stakeholders.
- A master end-of-module summary workbook was established for each module for the purposes of programme review so that faculty members could review all feedback relevant to a single module in a single location for the relevant validation period.

Establishing EMS Reports

- An end-of-module report template was created, which contains a snapshot of quantitative data provided during the feedback process and a summary of qualitative themes.
- Reports are initially compiled by the QA Office and are circulated for completion by the academic team who provide responses to each feedback theme.
- Reports are then released to students via the student noticeboard to close the feedback loop.

Promoting EMSs to students throughout programme

- EMSs are released to students via the VLE, and students receive a notification on their VLE calendar when they are available for completion, as was implemented previously.
- Additional notifications have been included on the student noticeboard to increase awareness of EMSs when they are available.
- Further exploration of how to increase student engagement with EMSs will occur in 2022.

Key Outcomes and Learnings

The following key learnings have been identified to date:

- Having a dedicated owner for a process is critical for the consistency and implementation of any process.
- Support of, and ongoing communication with, all individuals involved in the management of a process is important for the success of a project.
- Implementing a new process and migrating an existing suite of data into a new presentation takes a huge investment of time that requires resourcing and careful planning.
- Consistent analysis and presentation of data facilitates streamlined reporting that can feed into other quality assurance reporting requirements, such as programme reports.

The next phase of this project will involve establishing a process to evaluate impact and involve students in the analysis of this process. This may include mechanisms such as formal surveys and data insights outlining engagement with published reports.

Case Study 6: Implementing a New Process for Managing the Lifecycle of End-of-Module Surveys in Hibernia College

The AQRs frequently referenced a commitment to facilitation of an inclusive learning environment in which diversity was valued. This was manifest in a broad range of curricular and co-curricular initiatives and supports across the sector.

- CCT reported on the embedding of EDI within a new strategy and engagement with AHEAD, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning and other CCT partners including As I Am and Not So Different. A CCT universal design toolkit was created for staff, to inform institutional universal design practice in the teaching and learning and learner support context. The college also installed the accessibility block on Moodle to enable learners and staff to adjust Moodle to suit their accessibility requirements.

- Griffith College reported that staff members successfully facilitated two intakes of Griffith and external staff on the UDL digital badge, which promotes inclusive teaching practice and an overall inclusive culture for learners.

- Carlow College reported on links developed with the National Council for the Blind in Ireland (NCBI) to improve access to library material in alternative formats. The NCBI Library Access Services Manager led a Dolphin Easy Reader App information and training session for learners with print difficulties, ARO and library staff. The NCBI Dolphin Easy Reader App gives access via the NCBI Library to over 600,000 digital titles from national and international publishers and learners can browse and download books from NCBI Overdrive, Bookshare and Project Gutenberg. This service is available to any registered learner with a print disability and includes learners with dyslexia, visual impairments/blind, ADD/ADHD, neurological conditions, or on-going illness.

- Carlow College also reported on its 'Let's Chat for 30' initiative. This was a twice-weekly online learning support and assistive technology session offered to learners with disabilities, learning differences and/or long-term illnesses by the Disability Service. Thematic sessions were offered to introduce learners to various assistive and educational technologies, which would assist with remote learning and take-home exams.

- ICD reported that its non-discriminatory pricing sets academic fees at the same level for all students, irrespective of nationality or EU citizenship. Academic support sessions are freely available to all learners and specifically designed to facilitate students with different educational backgrounds who may be embarking on educational programmes in Ireland for the first time.

Notably, a number of providers in this sector maintained and enhanced their employability and careers focused support services for learners. For example:

- Independent College Dublin works with employers to source placements and jobs for learners. Up-to-date information about fields of work, job vacancies, postgraduate courses, and research opportunities are provided. There are opportunities for learners to seek advice and guidance. The college organises careers events throughout the academic year, such as CV clinics and lunchtime sessions for learners with an external consultant who specialises in CV and LinkedIn workshops.

- ICD has also created a careers portal on its Moodle system which includes online support seminars. In addition to hosting content related to interview and career skills, the portal carries updated employment opportunities sourced from professional bodies and recruitment firms.

2.3.1 International Learners

Many providers in this sector have significant numbers of international learners. The AQRs highlight the difficulties faced by this cohort of learners, in particular, as a result of the restrictions imposed by the

COVID-19 pandemic. Providers described the steps taken to support international learners during this period and the other supports specific to international learners that were put in place:

- At DBS, a new strategic objective was identified to develop a support proposition for international students to take account of their requirements arising from living in a different country and learning in a different academic culture.

- DBS also recognised that international learners were amongst those most affected by the loss of the on-campus experience, and facilitated their return to campus along with other more vulnerable groups (e.g., first year learners) when restrictions allowed. From September 2020, teaching delivery was on a hybrid schedule whereby in–person classes were simultaneously broadcast online.

- As a direct result of COVID-19, the Student Experience Leader at Dorset College (whose student population is largely international) created a 'Dorset Community', which includes the following elements: wellness ambassadors; a well good podcast; weekly meetings of class representatives; and social and cultural events both online and in-person.

- At Griffith College, COVID-19 lockdowns resulted in the International Office closing for drop-in enquiries and moving activities online. This, however, resulted in a number of efficiencies for staff and learners: all student support letters were issued electronically and all general enquiries were addressed by email and by phone which improved efficiency and enhanced the user experience as queries were answered more promptly and long in-person queues were avoided. Additionally, the International Office established a sub-committee of senior colleagues who meet twice monthly to discuss high-level strategies pertaining to the ongoing support of international learners.

- Griffith College also reported that the complexities associated with on-boarding new international learners during COVID-19 resulted in positive, long-term enhancements to the information materials provided as part of the onboarding process.

- ICD has a collaboration with the Irish Council for International Students (ICOS) which includes workshops for staff and students on studying and working in a multicultural environment. The outcomes of these workshops are included in all new staff induction sessions.

Preparation for the introduction of the forthcoming International Education Mark was also evident in some providers:

- In July 2021, NCI completed a self-evaluation against the QQI *Code of Practice for Provision of Programmes of Education and Training to International Learners*. The self-evaluation considered NCI's evidence of compliance with the Code of Practice; examples of best practices in key processes; and opportunities for further enhancement in existing service provision. Six key recommendations were made including further capturing international student feedback at key points across the student journey.

- IBAT College (IBAT), updated on a strategic objective identified in last year's AQR to review admission to the BA in Business. The review examined whether the implementation of the admission procedures follow the requirements of QQI's *Code of Practice for Provision of Programmes of Education and Training to International Learners*. Several recommendations in all areas were made to enhance the process. These recommendations have been brought to Academic Council and were considered by the Senior Management Group and the Audit & Risk Committee. In 2020/21, IBAT agreed to be bound by the Key Principles for the Arrival of International Higher Education Students to Ireland 2020/2021. This is discussed in more detail in a case study provided by the college.

- Dorset College created a new role in the sales and marketing department to manage and improve relationships with international admissions agencies. The college has provided training modules to

familiarise agents with the college's admissions criteria and process. Agents are rated depending on the understanding of the admissions process demonstrated in the quality of applications submitted through them and contacted for further training where necessary.

Case Study 7:

Key Principles for the Arrival of International Higher Education Students to Ireland 2020/2021

Prior to the commencement of the 2020/21 academic year the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science invited all HEIs to endorse, accept and be bound by the Key Principles for the Arrival of International Higher Education Students to Ireland 2020/2021 and its successor the International Student Protocol 2021-22. The principles aimed to ensure the safe management of the arrival of international students into Ireland in line with public health requirements. IBAT College Dublin welcomes this initiative and agrees to protocols for the academic years 2020-21 and 2021-22.

A clear description of the entry requirements for international students arriving in Ireland was provided to all new and returning students. In IBAT College we applied the principles to our English language students too. Offer letters were modified to provide information on entry requirements to ensure adherence to government regulations. Communications were sent to students on entry requirements, what fully vaccinated meant. Travel arrangements were requested to ensure staff could provide timely information on current government requirements. Information on what to do post-arrival regarding current restricted movement and post-arrival testing if they developed symptoms of COVID-19 was also provided.

Our view was that ensuring a safe and managed arrival of international learners protects the students, staff, and the wider community.

The office of the Registrar completed weekly reporting to the Department of Further, Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on student numbers relating to pre-arrival, arrival, post-arrival symptom tracking, accommodation, and restricted movement activity. This was based on data collated from the Admissions team and documented interactions between the Student Affairs Coordinator and learners. Colleagues were appraised of the requirements through an information session chaired by the Registrar. Training took place in August 2020 and August 2021.

Case Study 7: IBAT College - Key Principles for the Arrival of International Higher Education Students to Ireland 2020/2021

2.4 Programmes of Education and Training

The validation and revalidation of programmes appears to have continued apace during the reporting period, despite the additional burdens imposed by COVID-19 with which providers were contending. Some HEIs extended their offering to include programmes in new areas, whilst others expanded their offering to include micro-credentials. Relationships with industry remained important in the development of new programmes with HEIs continuing to respond to industry needs.

- SNMCI had a new BA (Hons) in Psychology (Level 8 on the NFQ) validated by QQI in September 2020, whilst a suite of micro-credentials was also developed from existing 'parent' programmes.

- NCI had nine micro-credentials validated by QQI within the reporting period, many within the area of education.

- Following programmatic review in 2020, Setanta now offers three additional programmes. The College's QA policies and procedures for apprenticeships were also evaluated and approved by QQI.

- ICD developed a Postgraduate Diploma in Accounting & Financial Services (NFQ Level 9), which was validated by QQI in spring 2021. This programme attracted funding from the HEA under the Human Capital Initiative.

- Both new providers, Innophama and HID, had their first programmes successfully validated by QQI, an NFQ Level 6 Higher Certificate in Process Digitisation and a BA (Hons) in Business (with exit award) respectively.

- IICP successfully completed a revalidation of its undergraduate suite of programmes as blended learning programmes in April 2021.

- In addition to commencing delivery of blended learning programmes following extension of scope of approval, CCT secured validation of additional programmes at postgraduate level that comprised both major and special purpose awards.

- DBS had two additional programmes validated for transnational provision with EU Business School, from their Munich campus.

The reporting period also saw the withdrawal of a number of existing programmes, typically as part of revalidation processes. At ICHAS, the entire suite of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes was revalidated. The College withdrew its MA in Leadership and Management as the changes required to the programme were major. The College expressed its intention to develop a similar programme in the future.

Important developments in the management and governance of programmes were also reported.

- NCI established a new Executive Programme Lifecycle Management (PLM) Sub-Group in February 2021 to increase transparency and consistency across decision-making structures, while ensuring evidence of programme relevance, currency, quality, viability, and demand.

- NCI also participated in national and European networking and peer review activities to enhance benchmarking and identify peer reviewers to participate in NCI programme validations and revalidations.

- At ISB, course boards were given an enhanced role in programme review and QA generally in accordance with advice received through reengagement. Programme revalidation at the provider was postponed to 2022.

Griffith College detailed its progress in establishing systems for the development of micro-credentials as set out in the extract below from a larger case study submitted by the provider.

Case Study 8:

MICRO-CREDENTIAL AWARDS AT GRIFFITH COLLEGE

Establishing and Agreeing the Process

The Process
Proposals for micro-credential validation are documented in a QQI programme descriptor template, which is accompanied with a Self-Evaluation Report. These documents identify the programme's origin, its programme learning outcomes, and provide typical module descriptor details for the composite modules (if/as appropriate). The documents also set out the rationale and business case for the programme. Protection for enrolled learners is required for any programme that runs to a minimum of one semester. The programme documents, plus fee sheet, are uploaded to QHub, as for any other application process.

The application is pre-screened by QQI officials, who determine whether the programme should be evaluated by desk audit or by panel meeting, and the process for generating the panel report is then, in Griffith College's case, managed by the college's QAE Department under devolved responsibility for validation subprocesses (DR). The college appoints desk auditors within the same framework that applies for major programme validation panel members (under the devolved responsibility designation), and the college instruct the panel that they should apply the same rigour to the validation review and consideration as they would to a major programme.

In the context of desk audit, the external panel members may seek clarification/further information as necessary (i) to clarify an obvious issue/omission, which could otherwise require a condition of validation to be specified in the panel report, and/or (ii) to reach an agreed recommendation on validation. Report templates are available to support both activities, i.e. (i) to seek further information, and (ii) to report the outcome of the panel's deliberations and recommendation to QQI's Programmes and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC).

The decision of validation is made by QQI's PAEC in the normal manner (based on the panel's recommendation) and the panel report is published, post-PAEC. A sample of a previous Griffith College micro-credential programme validation report may be accessed here.

Learning and Outcomes
Griffith College is delighted that the process has been expanded to facilitate the validation of micro-credentials that consist of new modules, that are not part of an existing QQI validated programme within the college. This facilitates the further development of the college portfolio to support application under state-funded job support initiatives such as SpringBoard and July stimulus.

The establishment of this validation process supports the objectives (both commercial and academic) of the Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA) providers – and supports progress towards levelling the competitive landscape (somewhat). The micro-credential validation process is still a time and resource-intensive exercise for both the provider and QQI - not a quick-fix as perceived by some individuals.

Reflections on the Process
At Griffith College we have been delighted to engage fully with these processes with QQI, both within the pilot validation phase, and subsequently to successfully validate additional programmes through this route.

Having DR for the validation subprocesses for micro-credentials is advantageous to providers - to be able to manage a significant part of the process for validating their micro-credentials in-house, namely the identification of the panel, facilitation of their discussion and generation of the Independent Evaluation report (IER). Further approval was required to include micro-credential awards to the range for approval under DR.

We have found that the process of documentation development, initial screening, panel member identification and approval, desk review, and panel report generation continues to be time and resource-intensive for both the provider and QQI.

It is agreed that desk audit worked quite well for the evaluation of the micro-credentials, and while it may have a disadvantage in that it does not allow the evaluation panel to engage directly with the provider, and have questions answered in a discussion, the request for further documentation facilitates this activity adequately, and a site visit remains an alternative option if there are larger issues arising during the evaluation. Griffith College has found that facilitating the panel members coming together (virtually) for a short (one-hour meeting) to agree and support the composition of their report is very useful to complete the reporting process in a timely fashion, and a more productive use of panel members' time.

While the pilot process did not identify the requirement for the provision of additional documentation as part of the validation application, Griffith College has identified panels' requests for further information in relation to teaching staff profiles and sample assessment material as an indication of a gap in this documentation provision – therefore we now provide this information routinely as part of our programme documentation pack. Under the micro-credential pilot project, the experts that were chosen to desk review the micro-credential applications were working in/retired from the public sector. QQI indicated that the national and international experts would continue to be chosen in this manner. Griffith College look forward to opening this desk-reviewer opportunity to colleagues within fellow HECA providers, to both facilitate their development and expertise in this area, and to recognise their professionalism and the role that these providers have played in facilitating the development of this micro-credential validation process within the QQI HE landscape.

Following from that the college would like to see further recognition and promotion of the availability of micro-credentials within the QQI-validated provider sector, and will endeavour to support this recognition when and where possible.

Case Study 8: Micro-credential Awards at Griffith College

2.4.1 Work/Practice Placements

Work placements form an important part of many programmes and are often a statutory requirement for graduate recognition by, or registration with, a professional, statutory or regulatory body (PSRB). The provision of placements and assessment of these during COVID-19 proved a challenge for the sector and required institutions to respond flexibly whilst adhering to statutory requirements. It is clear from the AQRs that HEIs worked collaboratively with PSRBs to ensure that learners met professional accreditation requirements in the pandemic period.

- ICHAS reported that most placements remained available to learners during the reporting period, though some engagements were virtual rather than in-person. To address this, ICHAS, in collaboration with the three PSRBs associated with professional accreditation, developed a pilot programme on the evidence-based use of technologically-enabled, therapeutic engagement. This

pilot was successful and QQI subsequently validated a Certificate in Technologically Facilitated Therapeutic Engagement.

- Conversely, Carlow College reported that placements were impacted significantly by the closure of placement agencies. A Placement Contingency Working Group was established, which worked closely with learners to develop bespoke placement models. Many learners had to complete their placements over summer 2021 and additional sittings of exam boards were necessary to ensure that learners could progress or graduate. There was a high level of engagement on a national level with PSRBs, including CORU and IASCE as well as other key stakeholders such as the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), QQI and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) regarding placement during COVID-19.

- At Hibernia College, COVID-19 resulted in sustained periods of disruption to cohorts on the Professional Master of Education programme; in some cases, placement was cancelled and alternative assessments had to be introduced. The programme team's enhanced use of video technology to address these challenges is described in the extract below from the case study submitted by the college.

Case Study 9:

THE USE OF VIDEO TECHNOLOGY TO ENHANCE STUDENT TEACHERS' LEARNING

Establishing and Agreeing the Process

Introduction
This case study examines an innovative development to the Professional Master of Education (PME) in Primary programme at Hibernia College — that of the enhanced use of video technology to support work-based placements during COVID-19.

Background Context
The PME in Primary programme is one of a suite of education programmes within Hibernia College's School of Education. The programme structure is designed to provide a range of integrated and complementary learning opportunities that support participants in exploring, examining, analysing and critically evaluating contemporary theory, research and practice to develop their professional knowledge, skills and competencies. Over the course of the two-year programme, students complete 24 weeks of school placement in line with Teaching Council requirements. To prepare for their school experience, the students participate in the study of online content, synchronous tutorials, face-to-face (F2F) workshops, seminars, structured observation and reflection, and independent study.

The programme team at Hibernia College considers that this aspect of learning to teach is a critical one and the programme has been designed to ensure that in learning to teach, students are also learning to be teachers. However, the COVID-19 situation resulted in sustained periods of disruption to cohorts on the PME programme; in some cases, placement was cancelled, F2F workshops could not take place and alternative assessments had to be introduced where college staff could not gain access to schools.

The programme team considered the enhanced use of video technology to address these challenges.

Use of Video technology to support student teachers' learning

Early conceptualisations of the proposal in this study came in the form of academic faculty recording and sharing short, asynchronous Zoom lessons with students preparing for school placement (SP). These examples were provided to support students who were being asked to create similar Zoom lessons as part of their adapted SP assessment model. Students responded positively to the recordings, and the academic team saw this as an opportunity to further develop this model by attempting to simulate a real class setting with pupils present.

The academic faculty began the process of developing a bank of recorded lessons that demonstrated good practice and showcased teaching skills and methodologies. The rationale behind this process was to enable learning objectives to be modelled and taught in a realistic school environment. The first of this series of recordings of good practice were recorded over the summer of 2021 after a detailed consultation and development period. Each recording was structured with a brief introduction, playing out of the lesson and reflective commentary from the teacher educator. The reflective commentary specifically highlights the structure of the lesson and the teaching methodologies employed. The lessons were conducted in a Dublin-based primary school with a small group of Fourth Class pupils; the pupils were also interviewed and gave their opinions on the lessons, discussing their own learning and highlights of the lessons.

Further findings

As discussed, SP is an opportunity for students to gain practical and classroom-based experience of teaching, learning and assessment. However, it was noted that some students encounter challenges when employing the transferable skills required to put theory and content from modules into practice. The recordings hold the potential to make these links explicit by interweaving a sample lesson with an explanatory piece from the teacher educator modelling the lesson.

Furthermore, the recordings also hold the potential to be used in the training of SP tutors, enabling them to collaboratively discuss the observed practice and compare to practice they have witnessed on SP.

The cooperating teacher model is a key aspect of the SP process; however, it is one element of the process that is currently very removed from the influence or regulation of initial teacher education (ITE). Inglis (2019) uses Brookfield's critical lens to reveal that teachers acting as cooperating teachers often reject aspects of ITE as unimportant or not relevant to real teaching. Ó Gallchóir et al.'s (2019) study of pre-service teachers finds that the current cooperating teacher model can result in an overly simplified version of good and bad practice and that these teachers can take on the role of gatekeepers of school culture rather than supporters and mentors who exemplify good practice. Therefore, these recordings of good practice created, curated and developed by the academic team as a collaborative process between module leads and the SP team can provide a nuance to these impressions of what constitutes good practice.

Conclusion

Thus far, the video recordings have been successfully shared during SP training. Student responses have been extremely positive, with a request for further lessons to be shared. The effectiveness of these lessons as a resource will develop as we continue to expand the portfolio, creating an online bank of lessons to be used at module F2F days, training sessions and SP preparations.

Case Study 9: Hibernia College - The use of video technology to enhance student teachers' learning

Other HEIs reported reviewing and developing aspects of their placement models or policies during the reporting period:

- At OTC, work continued on the development of a placement model for the proposed Level 7 BA in Social Care (pending CORU approval).

- Setanta developed and approved a work placement policy in 2020.

- At CTC, new placement agreements were introduced for practicums and clinical practice settings. Revised placement packs were rolled out to learners and placement sites. Clarity has been provided with regard to learners seeking extensions due to exceptional circumstances and it is acknowledged that COVID-19 was an exceptional circumstance that delayed many learners from completing placements and associated assignments in a timely manner.

The case study submitted by Carlow College below outlines how an internship module was redeveloped to ensure that learning outcomes could be achieved during a period in which physical attendance at an organisation was not possible.

Case Study 10:

Learner Internships and Achieving the Minimum Intended Programme Learning Outcomes During a Global Pandemic

Establishing and Agreeing the Process

The Internship Module at Stage 3 on the BA (Hons) in Social, Political and Community Studies is a module designed to enable learners to develop core skills in practice; building learner capacity to work effectively in community based civil society organisational settings. Moreover, one of the stated aims of the module is to support learners to develop their knowledge, skills and competencies through the practical application of principles and practices / methods through extensive observation and engagement in the field of community / voluntary / NGO work. As such, the learner internship is usually completed over a ten-week period in a community development and / or non-governmental organisation. Owing to the ongoing impact of COVID-19, the Programme Director, in consultation with the Programme Board, determined that learners were unable to undertake the internship in the normal manner. Accordingly, the Programme Director and Internship Coordinator undertook a process of consultation to establish an alternative and appropriate solution that ensures the specified minimum intended module learning outcomes (MIMLOs) were achieved.

The primary principle that was observed through the redevelopment process was that the internship mirrored, in as far as possible, the experience of the 'face-to-face' internship. Thus, in order to give learners a comprehensive understanding of what was involved in becoming a community practitioner, the Internship Coordinator scheduled 1.5-hour sessions via Teams and Zoom with professionals in the community sector and people with expertise in areas that make up the many dimensions of community-based work. In total, there were nine community organisations that participated in the sessions, two community practitioners and four guest speakers. The focus of the sessions covering community organisations included: gender equality; policy, advocacy and the national context; funding (writing funding applications);

engaging young people in the community; the role of network and links to local government and other stakeholders; working with minorities in community and building a community organisation from a voluntary effort. The focus of the two sessions from the perspective of a community practitioner were becoming an effective and reflective community practitioner and responding to the needs of the Travelling community from a community work perspective. The focus of the four guest speakers explored data protection; Freirean concepts of community development and their application in practice; a day in the life of a Director of a Community Resource Centre; and community challenges of COVID-19 in the community.

The second significant challenge in redeveloping the module was to ensure that all MIMLOs were achieved. The MIMLO that proved the most challenging was MIMLO 5, to 'deconstruct theory in action'. To achieve this MIMLO, the first assessment was modified. Comprising 30% of the overall mark, learners enrolled on the module were asked to facilitate online workshops for Carlow College learners on 'weaving a star', the stars were then on virtual display for International Women's Day 2021. These workshops also contributed to a larger, more global movement, called the One Million Stars Project which started in 2012 with a vision to build more connected, resilient and violence free communities using the power of weaving the star.

The outcome of the modified Internship Module proved successful. This was noted by the External Examiner who commented there was excellent reflection on the learning over the twelve-weeks of alternative practice placement and clear learning was achieved to a similar standard as a face-to-face placement. Regarding the facilitated online workshops, the External Examiner noted that there was high learner motivation with engagement on the One Million Stars Project; this was evident in the quality of portfolios submitted by learners who reflected on their experiences. An unintended outcome of the revised module was the considerable consultation with other academic providers. In particular, the Programme Director noted that this proved beneficial in the building of networks and relationships within the sector.

Case Study 10: Carlow College - Learner Internships and Achieving the Minimum Intended Programme Learning Outcomes During a Global Pandemic

2.5 Staff Development and Support

A significant volume of continuing professional development activity in the sector was focused on developing staff capabilities to teach, assess and support student learning. Although much was focused on the enhancement of teaching and assessment in the context of online and blended delivery, many of the seminars, workshops, showcases and other events indicated a holistic focus that was relevant beyond the immediate context of the pandemic. For example:

▪ At Carlow College a week is set aside in June each year to deliver CPD workshops for academic and professional support staff. For the 2020/21 reporting period, workshops were delivered on teaching in a pandemic: advantages of a flipped classroom; using the rubric function in Turnitin feedback studio; teaching online with MS Teams; hear to help initiatives – peer support; inclusive pedagogies; supporting online learning; information literacy programme for learners; backward design for learning experiences; MCQs, multiple choices of good design; engagement, assessment and feedback of learning activities through sound and vision; activating active learning; and creating educational screencasts.

- In June 2021, ICD hosted its first annual teaching, learning, and assessment conference, designed to provide a forum for knowledge-sharing regarding online education.

- CTC provided training for staff during the year. This included a training day for all supervisors; a training day on providing space for exploring gender identity and a training day on advanced tele-mental health. Individually tailored sessions on delivery of online teaching and use of platforms were provided as required.

- In May 2021, Griffith College facilitated a peer-presented showcase of teaching, learning and assessment activity within the college. The event encouraged lively discussions and interaction on topics as varied as challenges and achievements in the online pivot, universal design for learning, tech tips and tools, learning analytics, open educational resources, and contract/AI-based cheating.

- In April 2021, Gaelchultúr attended the 'An Dialann as Ghaeilge' conference at Dublin City University in April 2021, where representatives of the College presented an academic paper to the conference attendees. In this way, the college encouraged permanent and part-time staff to foster relationships among the working community outside Gaelchultúr. Gaelchultúr's employees, both part-time and permanent, also had the opportunity to build on their relationships in the education sector through the College's membership of the international organisation EAQUALS.

- CEG reported on the establishment of a Centre for Teaching, Learning and Assessment Excellence and the implementation of a peer review and observation process.

A number of providers reported on their efforts to support the wellbeing of their staff, many of whom were working to support learners while managing considerable disruption in their own lives. Activities in this area included the provision of additional support and development opportunities as well as the formalisation of contract and policy documentation that may serve to reduce ambiguities during times of significant uncertainty. Examples of diverse undertakings in this area include:

- At CCT, the college engaged a life coach to deliver two wellness webinars with a focus on reintegration into daily life, and strategies to support wellness. These were provided free of charge to students, faculty, and staff in recognition of the challenges experienced living through a prolonged period of public health restrictions.

- IICP undertook a major revision of staff policies, with the aim of providing staff with a fair and supportive environment that fosters equality and diversity, as well as ensuring compliance with all relevant legislation. There were over 40 new policies which were approved by the Board of Directors in July 2021. Some examples of new policies are the confidentiality policy, the dress code policy, probation policy, data protection policy, equality of opportunity policy and employee assistance programme policy.

- Griffith College integrated a consideration of EDI into its standing orders for academic decision-making and indicated its intention to establish and support an equality, diversity and inclusion working group.

- ISB provided more comprehensive new contracts of employment to all lecturers following recommendations from the reengagement panel. Both online and face-to-face training opportunities were provided.

- At ICHAS, additional equipment was supplied to lecturers and staff who needed to teach or support learning from off-campus locations and all equipment was tested against the QAE standards for teaching and learning. The college also invested in additional staff to manage the process, particularly of workshop-based learning to support the lecturing staff.

- At Setanta College, a quarterly staff newsletter was launched to keep staff informed of all activities in the College. This improvement in communication was seen as a necessity as the College had grown and communication had become more difficult. This initiative also responded directly to concerns raised by staff as identified in the annual staff reviews.

- Carlow College indicated that a flexi-time pilot scheme and hybrid working project were planned actions for the upcoming reporting period.

2.6 Information and Data Management

The investments made by private and independent HEIs in systems and infrastructure to support blended and online learning have been discussed and exemplified in section 2.2 of this thematic report. Notably, equally significant investments were made in information and data management systems that underpinned much operational, administrative and support service provision throughout the pandemic. Whilst many providers in the sector had taken some initial steps toward digital transformation prior to COVID-19, rapid progress in this area was widely acknowledged to be expedited by, if not responding to, the pandemic. A focus on further development of data protection, privacy and security policies was also evident. Some indicative examples of work in this area include:

- Independent College Dublin reported that a key goal of the college is better integration of the data processing and information systems. In this context the college undertook a software development project (AMOS) involving an external technical provider to give better operational and management information and enhance the level of integration among the various subsystems. Significant benefits were obtained through this project in terms of the improvement in quality of the information on learner assessment processing. This was noted to be of benefit to examiners in the submission of examination and continuous assessment marks, and had substantially improved the efficiency of the examination boards.

- At DBS, a new student information system was planned for rollout in the subsequent reporting period. A student engagement dashboard was available on Moodle and data was being utilised to support learner engagement via an 'early alert report' which allows the Data Analytics and Reporting Manager and the Student Engagement Officer to view student data and identify any anomalies, risks, or concerns. The data which comprises the early alert report is at a more granular level than that of the student engagement dashboard. Data is used throughout the student lifecycle, but a particular focus is placed on a number of key 'touch points':

  » *Week 1 – Has the student logged into Moodle and are they attending lectures?*

  » *Week 3 – Has the student taken out a book from the library?*

  » *Week 6 – Has the student submitted their first Continuous Assessment?*

  » *Week 9 – Has the student logged into Moodle, attended lectures, submitted their CAs to date, and paid fees? (AQR ps. 40-41)*

- DBS also identified a need to review its IT networks and systems for vulnerabilities and take action to minimise the risk of ransomware attack as a new strategic objective.

- Griffith College reported that following an extensive review of alternative systems and the college's anticipated future administrative requirements, the college had commissioned the development of a new student information system, to upgrade and replace the existing one. This project is considered a cornerstone of Griffith College's digital transformation efforts. The period under review saw continued investment in the development of this system, in addition to extensive time commitments and support from key college staff to support the system design and testing process of

key modules for managing the student lifecycle. The build and rollout project commenced in 2020/21 with the development of modules to support registration, examinations, exam boards and award classifications. The development project will continue into 2021/22 with the legacy system being retained and run in parallel until the new system is fully commissioned.

- NCI developed new policies in 2020/21 to ensure continued compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (2018) and the Freedom of Information Act (2014). "The refresh process will ensure guidance and training on information and data management is targeted to key stakeholder roles and responsibilities to enhance awareness and understanding of institutional and personal obligations." (p. 13)

2.7 Public Information and Civic Engagement

During this period, some HEIs worked to further refine the processes underpinning their provision of accurate, current and comprehensive information to the public regarding their provision.

- Griffith College responded to an identified gap in existing procedures by establishing a new protocol for the approval of marketing material. This means that immediately prior to publication of material advertising QQI-validated programmes, a member of the QAE team will review the accuracy of their programme details based on the information included on the programme's certificate of validation, namely: title, credits, duration, award type, and delivery modes(s). The existing procedure had provided for a pre-publication check by the relevant faculty; however this check focused primarily on module content and target learner profile. The additional QAE team check was introduced to increase confidence that prospective learners had access to clear and correct information.

- ICPPD reported ongoing work to ensure that QA processes published on the website were up to date and available in user-friendly formats to current and prospective learners. It was noted that the openness and transparency of publicly available policies aligns with ICPPD's principles and ethos. An external marketing company was contracted to re-design the college website with the aim of making it easier to navigate.

The reports reflected that many providers in this sector are engaged in a range of civic engagement activities. Examples include:

- NCI furthered a strategic ambition to develop a suite of online programmes that allow access to those who otherwise would not be able to avail of an NCI education (both fee bearing and free). This is to be achieved through the expansion of quality assured fully online programmes. During the reporting period, NCI developed and launched a new NCI Programme Lifecycle Management Structure (PLM), "which requires programme teams to consider embedding their commitment to social responsibility and sustainability within new validated and revalidated programmes" (p. 25).

- During the reporting period, NCI also designed and secured validation for two new NFQ Level 9 micro-credentials for secondary school teachers who will teach the innovative Pathways in Technology (P-TECH) Level 6 HE programme within three Dublin North-east Inner City (NEIC) partner schools. The aim of PTECH is to provide post-primary students in the NEIC area with an innovative and highly relevant programme that enables them to earn third-level credits. The project supports three progression options for these students, including higher and further education routes as well as directly into employment.

- ICHAS offered a series of free online short courses via Zoom for the public covering areas in relation to mental health during the reporting period. The courses attracted over 700 participants with very positive feedback.

- DBS offers three scholarships annually to local schools in the community. The scholarship covers tuition fees along with a monthly allowance to assist full-time learners during their time at the College.

2.8 External Engagement

This AQR reporting period saw private and independent HEIs looking outwards in their ambitions and interactions with a variety of other stakeholders, including regulatory and professional bodies, national and international peer networks, employers and industry and representative bodies. Membership of representative bodies, such as HECA and its various subcommittees, remained important to HEIs in terms of the access it provided to peer learning opportunities, guidance and a voice in national decision-making structures. As discussed in Section 2.1 of this report, membership of organisations, such as the National Academic Integrity Network, was an important source of learning, guidance and inspiration during the reporting period.

- Griffith College availed of its membership of HECA to seek to be included in the circulation list for the Higher Education Authority (HEA) national surveys to track student and staff experiences of sexual violence and harassment. This engagement was facilitated by the college in April 2021.

- NCI reported that actions are in progress to enhance use of qualitative and quantitative data to inform decision-making and reporting on NCI's responsiveness, relevance, and impact to external stakeholders. Strategic ambitions were identified around global impact, including building on the success of existing Chinese collaborations and enhancing supports for international students, alumni, and stakeholders. To that end, the college's Quality Improvement and Enhancement Plan identifies a range of actions, including to prepare and publish a Collaborative Partnership Guide for use by internal and external stakeholders.

- In addition to its existing Employer Engagement Board and Industry Boards, DBS reported an increasing focus on industry and employer engagement feeding into the development of programmes. It has identified seven strategic objectives in this area, the first of which is to 'Create Work-ready Graduates.'

2.9 Self-Evaluation, Monitoring and Review

A number of the providers in this sector reported on ongoing review and enhancement activities undertaken following a successful reengagement process. In many instances, actions taken responded to panel recommendations. A substantial number of providers also undertook programme review and revalidation processes. Notably, many private and independent HEIs reported on the implementation and use of learner feedback surveys, which has been discussed in Section 2.3 of this thematic report. Other examples of activities reported under this dimension of QA include:

- CCT reported that a number of annual monitoring activities were completed, inclusive of an admissions audit, Board of Examiners review, student satisfaction survey, graduate outcomes survey, staff survey and annual monitoring review of the CCT centre for teaching and learning and library services as well as student services and careers.

- At ISB, an amended annual academic report and a new quality and enhancement report were introduced that align with the AQR. The role of programme boards was also enhanced to provide a further checkpoint for monitoring and enhancing programme quality.

- Hibernia College reported that the Teaching Council had recently updated its schedule for review and accreditation of PME programmes, and Hibernia College was scheduled to engage in this process in October 2022. As a result, the College sought a one-year extension to its validation periods for the programmes and was engaging with QQI in relation to delaying revalidation to later in 2022 to align with the PSRB accreditation process.

- Independent College Dublin had commissioned a root-and-branch review of the library just before the AQR reporting period, conducted by an external library specialist, with a view to assessing library operations, services and appropriate strategies going forward. The report recommendations were implemented by the college and resulted in a substantial improvement of many aspects of the library's offerings and corresponding user satisfaction.

- Independent College Dublin also reported that an important enhancement to self-evaluation and monitoring in the reporting period was the format redesign, and implementation of, the lecturer end-of-semester module report. This was reported to provide excellent qualitative and quantitative feedback for management from the lecturer on the module, its content, delivery, perceived strengths and weaknesses, relevant statistics, and recommendations for improvement.

- NCI reported that a holistic review was also launched to co-design with staff and students a more streamlined student success infrastructure. The initiative responded to the outcomes of the 2019/2020 administration review by seeking to maximise efficiency, effectiveness, quality, and consistency of services across the NCI student and programme lifecycle. The co-design process was reported to be on track and due to be completed within the next reporting period.

2.10 Development of Research Capacity

During this reporting period, a number of private and independent HEIs reported on efforts to develop a research-active culture among faculty and demonstrate research output and impact. Initiatives to develop this area of activity over the reporting period encompassed the development of research systems, strategies and supports.

- Hibernia College reported on the establishment of a digital institutional research repository, which had been identified in 2020 as a priority aim for the research committee as part of its overall strategy to promote and encourage research activity in the college.

- Griffith College reported on the establishment of a research committee during the 2020/2021 academic year.

- IICP reported on the establishment of a framework for ethical review of undergraduate research and that it enhanced its provision of supervision in undergraduate research.

- CCT reported on further progress in the implementation of the CCT research strategy. It was noted that this remains a priority for the College. The year under review saw progress with increased publications and the population of the CCT repository.

- SNMCI reported that its objective to foster a climate of research has been achieved and is ongoing. A research Strategy and Committee is in place; there are research-active staff; the college is participating in the HECA Research Committee and held a student research seminar. It was reported that staff members are supported to attend and to participate in (through research / presentation) conferences, nationally and internationally.

- Carlow College reported on the launch of a research hub in 2020 to support current research and related activities and to drive and enable research agendas. The primary objectives of the research hub are:

    » to support and promote staff research;

    » to foster a research agenda that aligns with College Strategy, Mission and Ethos;

    » to connect the College's research expertise with local and national organisations, communities and institutions; and

    » to play a supporting role in College programme development by identifying, utilising and enhancing existing and potential areas of College research and expertise. (AQR p. 46)

- Independent College Dublin reported on its first research symposium. This one-day symposium was made up of faculty and postgraduate presentations followed by Q&A sessions. The event was reported to be successful, and there are plans to run the event biannually.

Notably, research is also a stated focus within several HEIs' recruitment plans for the subsequent reporting period. For example, Dorset College indicated an intention to recruit research-active associate lecturers in future. DBS indicated an intention to establish a research practice coordinator role in the subsequent reporting period to improve the reliability of data, illustrate a measurable increase in research outputs and work with academic directors to define a research strategy for their disciplines.

Section 3: Quality Assurance Improvement and Enhancement Plans

Some private providers reported that progress on the achievement of strategic goals or full implementation of actions in their quality enhancement plans or post-reengagement action plans were delayed (typically in a planned fashion) in order to allow the provider to fully respond to COVID-19. All indicated that deferred actions would be addressed in the subsequent reporting period (2021-2022). This aspect of reporting is somewhat variable across the AQRs, with some institutions including detailed objectives and action plans and others presenting a less detailed view.

Across the reports, it was evident that many HEIs intended to build upon the progress they had made in building their blended, online and digital teaching, learning and assessment capacity during the pandemic. Objectives for the subsequent reporting period reflected that although less disruption to face-to-face learning was predicted, HEIs would continue working to meet the expectations of learners for whom remote accessibility and good utilisation of platforms and technologies for learning was now normalised. Examples of planned improvements and enhancements in this area include the following:

- Carlow College indicated that the continued development of online resources is a key objective for the college for 2021/2022.

- Griffith College indicated its intention to engage with QQI to pilot the validation of a fully online programme.

- CCT indicated its intention to further develop the infrastructure to support the growth and enhancement of blended learning delivery and technology enhanced teaching, learning and assessment.

- SNMCI indicated its intention to review and enhance its blended learning capability.

- DBS indicated its intention to conduct reviews of the college's principles of assessment to reflect the increased delivery of assessments online.

Ongoing work toward the digital transformation that will underpin not only online pedagogies but enhanced administration and support processes also continued to be a clear priority. Within this, a focus on ongoing measures to support data protection and cyber security were also evident.

- IICP indicated that the college was working to utilise additional functionalities within its information systems, such as a results module and the creation of a CSV file that can be automatically uploaded to QQI's QBS certification platform. A review of the data protection policy, records management and retention schedule was planned to follow training provided to the data protection officer.

- DBS indicated its intention to expand its digital capacity for teaching and learning, and customer service and enable automated solutions to services where appropriate, building on the theme that the learner can access 'however and wherever' they wish. Responsibility for this sits with a working group composed of heads of departments, academic directors and a student representative.

- CCT indicated its intention to continue enhancing the digital capacity of the college through development of staff and investment and enhancement of technical infrastructure.

The AQRs also indicated that focus would continue to be placed on the learner voice in decision-making and learner representation in governance. For example:

- At Carlow College, a full strategic review with CCSU will take place in the 2021/2022 academic year with a view to enhancing existing structures for learner representation and engagement within the college.

- At Griffith College, work will continue with the elected Students' Union representatives to develop and strengthen the participative role of the union in the academic governance of the college.

The AQRs indicated that the upcoming reporting period would also be one in which strategic ambitions for expansion, growth and diversification would be realised. The examples below are indicative of the breadth of intentions stated for the 2021/22 reporting period.

- SCNMI outlined its intention to apply for an extension to its current scope of provision, to include transnational delivery in markets where demand may be higher than in Ireland. SNMCI also indicated its intention to submit a programme of primary education to the Teaching Council and aims to expand provision through sectoral research and benchmarking linked to strategic goals.

- CCT reported its intention to continue the diversification and growth of the CCT student community through measures including, but not limited to, the expansion of part-time provision, blended learning programmes, and offering of micro-credentials.

- DBS stated its intention to progress towards delegated authority[2]. Work in the subsequent reporting period will build upon considerable work undertaken internally, including a mapping and evidence-gathering process against the QQI criteria for delegated authority and a functional review carried out by external consultants. An independent external assessment is in process to review the effectiveness of the central (non-academic) functions of the college to determine how well they support the academic purpose of the institution.

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2   Under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, QQI may delegate authority to a provider to make awards. Providers with delegated authority do not need to apply to QQI for validation of their programmes. Further information is available in QQI's 2016 *White Paper - Procedures and Criteria Relating to Delegation of Authority*

Section 4: Conclusions

This report offers a thematic analysis of the AQRs submitted by private and independent HEIs in 2022. The AQRs reported on activities across the sector during the 2020/21 academic year.

Although the AQRs are now a familiar feature of the Irish quality assurance landscape for public HEIs, they were a new tool for many providers in the independent and private HEI sector during this reporting period. Many providers submitted their first AQR post reengagement with QQI, with reports indicating that QA activity had been focused on completing the process and establishing new structures. Others had more experience of the AQR and were able to capture a breadth of ongoing development and enhancement activity.

As was the case for public HEIs, a consistent theme throughout the AQRs submitted by private and independent HEIs is that although the impacts and strains of the COVID-19 pandemic were ongoing, progress was nonetheless made on the achievement of strategic objectives that transcended the immediate context of the public health emergency. Notably, the AQRs also reflected that many providers within this sector responded proactively and creatively to the challenges to academic integrity that remote and online learning accentuated during the reporting period.

HEIs in this sector placed a strong focus on the wellbeing of learners and attended in particular to the diverse learning and support needs of the cohorts they serve. Some of Ireland's private and independent HEIs enrol a high proportion of international learners who may have been cut off from family and friends during the reporting period. An emphasis was therefore placed on providing personal as well as academic support services. These encompassed social initiatives, peer mentoring and ensuring that learners had ongoing access to remote counselling services. Consistent with trends in the public sector, Ireland's private and independent HEIs also worked to ensure that the learner voice was increasingly heard throughout institutional decision-making and through the systematic use of feedback surveys.

The AQRs also provided an indication of the future direction of travel for providers in this sector. Based on the evidence submitted, COVID-19 has catalysed progress in the sector toward not only blended and online delivery of programmes but digital transformation of administrative and support functions. Moreover, it is evident that the pandemic has added impetus to efforts to diversify the student body and mitigate the risks associated with a high dependence on specific cohorts.