

February 2024

ENQA Targeted Review 2024

Self-assessment Report



Dearbhú Cáilíochta
agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann
Quality and
Qualifications Ireland



CONTENTS

1. PREFACE	6
2. INTRODUCTION	7
2.1 External Quality Assurance of Higher Education	7
2.2 Quality Enhancement and Thematic Analysis	8
2.3 Development of the self-assessment report (SAR).....	8
3. CHANGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM.....	10
3.1 COVID-19 pandemic	10
3.2 Establishment of technological universities.....	10
3.3 New government department	11
3.4 New legislation for Higher Education Authority (HEA)	11
4. CHANGES IN THE AGENCY	13
4.1 New legislative functions	13
4.2 Academic integrity	14
4.3 Conclusion of reengagement – private/independent HEIs.....	14
4.4 Strategy, structure, and staffing	15
4.5 Developments in stakeholder engagement	16
4.5.1 Professional, statutory, and regulatory bodies.....	16
4.5.2 Student engagement	17
4.5.3 The National Framework for Doctoral Education (NFDE) Advisory Forum.....	17
4.5.4 Consultation Framework.....	17
4.6 Developments in QA Guidelines	17
4.6.1 New Topic-Specific QA Guidelines for Providers of Blended and Fully Online Programmes	17
4.6.2 Procedures for the QA of Joint Programmes based on the European Approach ...	18
5. PROFILE, MANNER OF FUNCTIONING AND EQA ACTIVITIES OF THE AGENCY RELATED TO THE FOCUS AREA OF PART 3 ESG.....	20
5.1 Follow-up on recommendations: ESG 3.5 Resources	20
5.1.1 Proposed funding model.....	20
5.2 Standard for enhancement: ESG 3.4 Thematic Analysis	24
5.2.1 Defining Thematic Analysis	24
5.2.2 Strategic Significance.....	24
5.2.3 Types of System-level Analysis.....	25
5.2.4 Strengths	26

5.2.5 Areas for Enhancement	27
5.2.5.1 Planning & Prioritisation	27
5.2.5.2 Data	28
5.2.5.3 Production	28
5.2.6 Value & Impact	29
5.2.7 Dissemination.....	29
5.2.8 Conclusion.....	30
6. DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE AGENCY’S EQA ACTIVITIES RELATED TO THE FOCUS AREA OF PART 2 ESG	31
6.1 Follow-up on recommendations: ESG 2.3 Implementing processes	31
6.1.1 Institutional-Level Evaluation of Private/Independent HEIs	31
6.2 ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance	34
6.2.1 Institutional Review	34
6.2.2 Programme Validation	35
6.2.3 Monitoring	36
6.2.4 Focused reviews	37
7. CONCLUSIONS	42
8. ANNEXES.....	44
8.1 SAR Steering Group Members	44
8.2 Internal and External Stakeholder Meetings	45
8.3 Finding Common Ground Roadmap	46
8.4 Thematic Analysis Case Studies	47
8.5 Thematic Analyses: 2019 – 2023	52
8.6 Summary of Stakeholder Feedback on Thematic Analysis	54
8.7 Mapping Grid ESG 2.1	56
8.8 Report on Content-Infringing Activity.....	62
8.9 Glossary	63

TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Mapping Grid Extract from AQR Template.....	8
Figure 2 Systems Performance Framework 2023-2028	12
Figure 3 Amended Legislation Programme Projects.....	13
Figure 4 Statement of Strategy.....	15
Figure 5 Organogram of QQI directorate structure.....	16
Figure 6 Impact of proposed funding model	21
Figure 7 Proposed funding split (Non-Vote Income).....	22
Figure 8 Timeline of Engagement with DFHERIS on Funding Model.....	23
Figure 9 QQI's Strengths in System-level Analysis	26
Figure 10 QQI HET Major Awards 2012-2023	35
Figure 11 HE Programme Validation 2012-2023.....	36



QQI is the single state agency responsible for the external quality assurance of higher education (HE) and further education and training (FET) providers in Ireland. It is also the national awarding body for FET and for some private/independent HE providers



QQI is a statutory agency whose functions, which span both qualifications and quality assurance in the tertiary education system, are defined in law.



QQI employs 84 staff across four directorates



QQI is committed to a vision of Ireland that offers diverse high quality further and higher education opportunities, enabling learners to reach their full potential through achieving qualifications that are valued nationally and internationally



QQI works with a diverse set of partners and providers in a consultative, collaborative and inclusive manner. We value partnership for mutual benefit.



Part

1.

Background

1. PREFACE

This self-assessment report (SAR) for Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) demonstrates that we conduct our external quality assurance activities in compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (2015), the ESG. It is submitted as part of our targeted review to renew our membership of ENQA and registration in EQAR.

We have undergone two previous full reviews by ENQA (2014, 2019) and welcome the opportunity for a targeted review. This SAR presents the changes that have occurred since the last review; confirms the continuing alignment of our activities with ESG 2.1; addresses those areas for development arising in the 2019 review report; and considers the selected ESG standard for enhancement viz.: Standard 3.4 Thematic Analysis. It has been developed in line with ENQA guidelines for targeted reviews and should be read in conjunction with the [ENQA Review Report QQI 2019](#).

Our work is underpinned by the values of collaboration and partnership with our providers and stakeholders both nationally and internationally. We engage extensively with European and international partners and remain committed to these relationships and mutual collaborations on quality developments and enhancements in the European Higher Education Area and European Research Area. The principles and standards of the ESG as evidenced in the 2019 review report and this SAR underpin and are intrinsic to our work.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

QQI is the sole agency in Ireland with responsibility for the external quality assurance (EQA) of higher education and training leading to awards on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). We have a quality assurance relationship with both public and private/independent higher education institutions (HEIs). Our core EQA activities and incremental changes which have occurred since the last review are summarised in this SAR. Our statutory role and functions are outlined in more detail in the ENQA [Review Report QQI 2019](#); the review panel is also referred to this report.

The public HEIs comprise seven universities, five new technological universities, the University of Medical and Health Sciences (RCSI) and the National University of Ireland, all of which have designated awarding powers, and two institutes of technology which have designated awarding powers to NFQ Level 9 (master's degree level).

QQI provides external quality assurance, is the awarding body and validates (and revalidates) programmes leading to QQI awards in the NFQ for 36 private/independent HEIs (and almost two hundred further education and training providers). For mature private/independent institutions, there are arrangements, namely devolved responsibility, and delegated authority, that allow these institutions to take on more responsibility for managing their quality assurance processes. This is discussed further in Part II of this SAR.

Our approach to quality assurance is based on the ESG principle that HEIs are principally responsible for the quality of the education, training, research, and related services that they provide. Our quality assurance framework includes [Core Statutory QA Guidelines](#) which are applicable to all providers, and supplementary QA guidelines for different types of providers ('sector-specific') and for different topics ('topic-specific'). This [suite of QA guidelines](#), which are aligned to ESG Part 1, make clear that quality is provider-owned. The guidelines are used by providers to inform their internal QA procedures.

One of our functions is to review and monitor the effectiveness of quality assurance in education and training providers. Our [Policy for cyclical review of higher education institutions](#) sets out the scope, purposes, criteria, model, and procedures for quality review of HEIs. Our current cycle of reviews for higher education is called CINNTE, which means 'certain' or 'definite' in the Irish language. The CINNTE institutional review evaluates the effectiveness of an institution's internal quality assurance system, in compliance with the ESG and with the expectations set out in QQI QA guidelines.

Institutional quality monitoring is undertaken through our annual quality reporting (AQR) process and our biennial quality dialogue meetings with institutions. An Annual Quality Report (AQR) is submitted by each public HEI and the larger private/independent HEIs, the report template is explicitly mapped to ESG Part 1 and QQI core QA guidelines (Figure 1). It contains both quantitative and qualitative information and includes case studies on quality topics which are published to our online review library¹. An annual thematic analysis is prepared from the AQRs.

¹ [Quality and Monitoring Review Reports](#).

The AQR is considered further in sections 5.2 and 6.2.

Table 1 Mapping of ESG (2015) to QQI QA Guidelines (QAG)				
AQR Part A Section	QQI QAG Core Sub-section No	QAG Core Sub-section Title	ESG Standard No.	ESG Standard Title
1.0 Internal QA Framework	2.1	Governance and Management of Quality	1.1	Policy for Quality Assurance
	2.2	Documented Approach to Quality Assurance		
2.0 Programme Development and Delivery	2.3	Programmes of Education and Training	1.2	Design and Approval of Programmes
4.0 QA of Research Activities and Programmes			1.9	On-going Monitoring and Periodic Review of Programmes
8.0 Monitoring and Periodic Review			1.5	Teaching Staff
5.0 Staff Recruitment, Development and Support	2.4	Staff Recruitment, Management and Development	1.3	Student-centred Teaching, Learning and Assessment
2.3 Teaching, Learning and Assessment	2.5	Teaching and Learning	1.6	Learning Resources and Student Support
	2.6	Assessment of Learners		
3.0 Learner Resources and Supports	2.7	Supports for learners	1.7	Information Management
6.0 Information and Data Management	2.8	Information and Data Management	1.8	Public Information
7.0 Public Information and Communication	2.9	Public Information and Communication	1.9	On-going Monitoring and Periodic Review of Programmes
2.0 Programme Delivery and Development	2.10	Other Parties Involved in Education and Training		
8.0 Monitoring and Periodic Review				
9.0 Details of Arrangements with Third Parties	2.11	Self-evaluation, Monitoring and Review	1.2	Design and Approval of Programmes
2.0 Programme Development and Delivery			1.9	On-going Monitoring and Periodic Review of Programmes
8.0 Monitoring and Periodic Review			1.10	Cyclical External Quality Assurance
4.0 QA of Research Activities and Programmes	QAG for Providers of Research Degree Programmes			

Figure 1: Mapping Grid Extract from AQR Template

Policy development and review, including review of our QA guidelines, is normally initiated by QQI’s executive, and approved as required by our Policies and Standards Committee. For some areas of work/functions, such as programme validation, we are required to establish policies and criteria and to review them at least once every five years. We are currently working on a revised framework of coordinated policy development, which will detail the roles of committees and groups and identify areas for improvement.

2.2 QUALITY ENHANCEMENT AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS

We conduct thematic analyses of our EQA processes and outputs (and of other data) to identify system-level findings and trends. These analyses provide an evidence base to inform and enhance policy, practice, and processes both within QQI and across our broad stakeholder base. We have identified thematic analysis as the enhancement focus for this targeted review and it is considered further in section 5.2.

2.3 DEVELOPMENT OF THE SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT (SAR)

A project plan for development of the SAR was approved by our Projects Steering Group in May 2023. A cross-functional team was established (see Annex 1 for membership), and a stakeholder

engagement plan and methodology agreed. Internal stakeholder engagement was undertaken through a series of focus groups with our management, staff, Board, and governance committees.

During this time, an external agency was appointed to conduct our Partnerships Survey 2023, which consisted of two elements:

- i. Stakeholder Engagement Survey – an online survey sent to circa 900 stakeholders between May to July 2023.
- ii. Qualitative in-depth interviews with 15 stakeholders between June and July 2023.

Our Partnership Survey was used for external stakeholder engagement on our SWOT analysis and on the standard for enhancement, 3.4 Thematic Analysis. See Annex 2 for a list of internal and external stakeholder meetings.

The development of the SAR has been a very positive and valuable process. Weekly meetings of the project team provided space for robust discussions and reflections on progress since the last review and on the focus area for enhancement. The conduct of staff focus groups for the SWOT was a positive and constructive exercise, as was engagement with the Board and its committees.

This self-assessment report has been agreed by the Steering Group, signed off by QQI's Chief Executive Officer, and submitted to the Board for noting at its meeting in December 2023.

3. CHANGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

3.1 COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Our EQA processes were directly impacted by COVID-19 in March 2020. We were one of the first agencies to respond and adapt our processes in line with ENQA guidance, commencing adaptation of our institutional review process in April 2020 with the first virtual site visit held in June 2020, the learnings from which were shared in ENQA's report [External QA in times of COVID-19](#). From the onset of the pandemic, we worked closely with our institutions, ministry, and other key stakeholders to maintain the integrity, quality and standards of the Irish education and training system. A range of guidelines² were developed and put in place to support institutions in making adaptations to and maintaining the integrity of their internal quality assurance systems.

In 2020 we conducted a high-level preliminary thematic analysis of experiences reported by a range of organisations including public and private providers and learner representative organisations of the impact of modified teaching, learning and assessment arrangements. This report addressed [the impact of COVID-19 modifications to teaching, learning and assessment in Irish further education and training and higher education](#) and contributed significantly to supporting confidence in quality and qualifications and in Ireland's education system's reputation, both nationally and internationally, during this time.

Though we have returned fully to post-COVID activities (for example on-site visits for our institutional reviews resumed in March 2023), we have retained some hybrid elements, such as the online pre-planning meeting for our CINNTE institutional reviews. We have also successfully implemented a hybrid working policy for staff.

3.2 ESTABLISHMENT OF TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITIES

The [Technological Universities Act 2018](#) allowed for the establishment of new technological universities through amalgamations of clusters of institutes of technology. So far, five new technological universities (TUs) have been established:

1. Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin), established January 2019
2. Munster Technological University (MTU), established January 2021
3. Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest (TUS), established October 2021
4. Atlantic Technological University (ATU), established April 2022
5. South East Technological University (SETU), established May 2022

The TUs are tasked with addressing the social and economic needs of their regions and focus on science and technology programmes that are vocationally and professionally oriented. In

² As an example [Building Confidence 1-10-20.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#)

2019 an [addendum](#) to the terms of reference for our institutional reviews was devised to provide supplementary information for new TUs undergoing a review and to support the external review teams conducting the review. The first review of a new TU was completed with the publication of the review report for TU Dublin in 2022³. Our [Review Cycle 2023-2024](#) has been extended to allow for the completion of the institutional review for the remaining four TUs.

3.3 NEW GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT

Since June 2020 QQI is under the aegis of the [Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science](#) (DFHERIS). In May 2022, DFHERIS published its policy platform and work plan on [Progressing a Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge](#). A [National Tertiary Office](#) tasked with increasing collaboration and co-operation between further education and training and higher education to create more diverse progression pathways for learners has also been established. QQI is assigned as the lead agency on specific qualifications and quality assurance actions and initiatives in the work plan. This includes:

'Action 11: Progressing the development of shared quality assurance review process between HE and FET and cross-sectoral publications on the quality of the system'.

Between March 2021 and May 2022, we conducted the first external quality review of Ireland's 16 education and training boards, the public providers of further education and training. These external quality reviews reflected the key elements and processes of the approach to quality reviews that we conduct in our higher education institutions. Our review of the landscape of practice supporting access, transfer and progression in Irish education and training is due to be published shortly.

3.4 NEW LEGISLATION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY (HEA)

The Higher Education Authority (hea.ie) has statutory responsibility for the governance, funding, and regulation of higher education in Ireland. The [Higher Education Authority Act 2022](#) reformed the regulation of higher education and the role of the HEA. The Act provides for a [System Performance Framework 2023-2028](#) and the establishment of performance agreements between the HEA and individual designated HEIs, with annual reporting on agreed measures, including on the use of funding provided. The Performance Framework, which comprises four pillars, reflects national priorities and outcomes for the higher education and research system, as illustrated in Figure 2 below.

3 [Technological University Dublin CINTE Quality Review Report 2022.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#)

Transversal Areas of Impact		Pillars			
	Flexibility, Upskilling and Lifelong Learning	Teaching and Learning	Research and Innovation	Access and Participation	Engagement
Climate and Sustainable Development					
Student Access					
Enterprise					
Region					
International					
Digital Transformation					
Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging					
Institutional Leadership and Culture					
Sectoral and Tertiary Cohesion					

Figure 2: Systems Performance Framework 2023-2028

We have many common and some overlapping and shared responsibilities with the HEA. The [StudentSurvey.ie](#) is co-sponsored by the HEA, the higher education institution representative bodies (the Irish Universities Association [IUA] and the Technological Universities Association [THEA]) and the Union of Students of Ireland (USI). The data gathered from the survey feed into institutional quality assurance and enhancement processes. The HEA also collects student enrolment and graduation data directly via Student Record System (SRS) returns by HEIs. The SRS data provide a rich source of information that is of interest to QQI for both quality and qualifications purposes. There is an overlap between data collected by QQI for the Irish Register of Qualifications and the SRS.

Both QQI and the HEA have separate but related responsibilities for access, transfer and progression, and we share responsibilities in relation to international education; the HEA is the national agency for the Erasmus+ programme, and QQI is responsible for establishing a statutory code of practice for the provision of education and training to international learners and the associated International Education Mark (IEM).

We have an existing [Memorandum of Understanding](#) with the HEA for administrative cooperation, to avoid duplication of activities and to identify areas of collaboration. The updated legislation gives legal status to the MOU. The fourth MOU, which will be published in 2024, will reflect this and other impacts/changes arising.

4. CHANGES IN THE AGENCY

4.1 NEW LEGISLATIVE FUNCTIONS

QQI was assigned several new functions under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019. The Amended Legislation Programme (ALP) of projects was put in place to focus on the planning and development of new statutory regulations, codes, policies, and associated procedures to establish and implement these functions. A comprehensive programme of stakeholder engagement with a wide range of stakeholders underpins the design and implementation of our new functions and activities, which include:

- An International Education Mark (IEM), to be known as TrustEd Ireland, with the aim of ensuring that international learners in the Irish higher education and English language sectors are afforded protection and a quality and consistent learning experience.
- The inclusion in the NFQ of the awards of Listed Awarding Bodies (LABs), who are responsible for the QA of their associated providers.
- Due diligence regulations for the assessment of the capacity and capability of private/independent providers, to inter alia deliver programmes of education and training and provide adequate support for learners.
- The establishment and management of a new national learner protection fund.
- Measures to counter the facilitation and promotion of contract cheating and to support academic integrity.

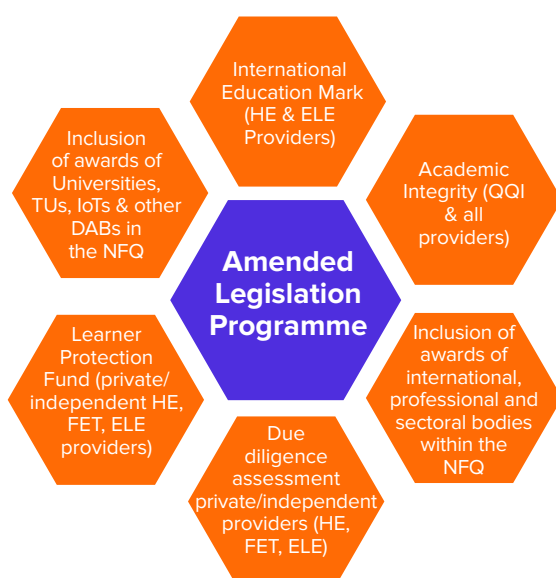


Figure 3: Amended Legislation Programme Projects

The majority of these functions had not yet come into law⁴ at the time of this SAR's development. As no new external quality assurance activities in relation to these functions have been commenced they are not within the scope of the terms of reference for this targeted review.

4.2 ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

The 2019 amended legislation provided a legal basis for the prosecution of those who facilitate or promote learner cheating and identified QQI as the body responsible for bringing prosecutions under the Act. In November 2019 we established the [National Academic Integrity Network \(NAIN\)](#). Members are drawn from all public HEIs, the larger private/independent HEIs, representative bodies, including the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), and the Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA). NAIN now has more than 120 members – 17 are student/student representative members. The network has developed a suite of national resources and tools ([Academic Integrity Lexicon and Principles](#), [Academic Integrity Guidelines](#), [the Framework for Academic Misconduct Investigation and Case Management](#)⁵ and [Generative AI Guidelines for Educators](#)⁶), and holds workshops, webinars, and masterclasses for providers. Development activities include a focus on identifying and initiating relevant areas of research and developing a framework for professional development with regard to academic integrity. In 2023, QQI and NAIN contributed two chapters to the 2nd edition of the [Handbook of Academic Integrity](#)⁷. We chair the ENQA academic integrity working group and are one of the Irish national delegates to the Council of Europe ETINED platform. We are also represented on the [National Research Integrity Forum](#).

The [Global Academic Integrity Network \(GAIN\)](#), a joint initiative of QQI and [TEQSA](#), the Australian HE regulator, was launched in October 2022 and is a consortium of QA agencies, qualifications authorities and other organisations. The network aims to facilitate the sharing of information, data, and approaches with regard to contract cheating and academic fraud. It now has 30 members from around the globe, including UNESCO, and is endorsed by ENQA, the European Network for Academic Integrity (ENAI) and the Council of Europe.

We have also established monitoring and reporting mechanisms with advertising and social media platforms⁸. Over 220 pieces of content (advertisements, posts, pages) have been removed from platforms since these processes were established in 2021. (A report on content infringing activity is included in Annex ⁸).

4.3 CONCLUSION OF REENGAGEMENT – PRIVATE/INDEPENDENT HEIS

Of the current 36 private/independent HEIs offering QQI awards, 28 had previously been accredited by HETAC, the antecedent QA agency. QQI legislation required that these institutions' quality assurance procedures be approved by QQI. The process by which this evaluation and approval was carried out is called [Reengagement](#) and it took place over a three-year period starting in July 2018.

4 In Irish law, a new Act can be commenced in full or individual sections of an Act can be commenced at different times.

5 [Third-level colleges to agree standard approach to student cheating in exams | Independent.ie](#).

6 [How colleges will change exams and assessments to stop use of AI to cheat | Independent.ie](#).

7 Hackett, S., Kavanagh, Y., Kelly, W., MacLaren, I. (2023). Enhancing Cultures of Academic Integrity in Irish Higher Education, and Draper, M., & Boland, M. (2023). Contract cheating: Legal, regulatory and policy responses. In S. E. Eaton (Ed.), *Handbook of Academic Integrity* (2nd ed.). Springer (forthcoming).

8 [Social media giants and online marketplaces remove ads that offer academic cheating services to students | Independent.ie](#).

This was a demanding and meaningful process, through which institutions’ corporate and academic governance and quality assurance was initially reviewed by each institution itself, and then evaluated by expert panels on behalf of QQI. Of the 28 HEIs that underwent reengagement, eight had significant amendments mandated prior to approval. The reengagement process was designed to integrate with other QQI processes i.e., programme validation, monitoring, and review to ensure that each HEI was operating with baseline approved QA procedures. Reengagement is discussed further in section 6.1 below.

4.4 STRATEGY, STRUCTURE, AND STAFFING

Our fourth [Statement of Strategy 2022-24](#) was devised in a challenging external context, which included a range of infrastructural and policy changes in the tertiary education system and ongoing recovery from the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this strategy we set out ambitious priorities with a greater focus on measures to directly enhance opportunities for learners while at the same time continuing endeavours to build and enhance a culture of quality in a diverse set of education and training providers. Objectives and key performance indicators are defined within four strategic priorities, with their implementation supported by two strategic enablers. The strategy is implemented and monitored through an annual corporate plan.

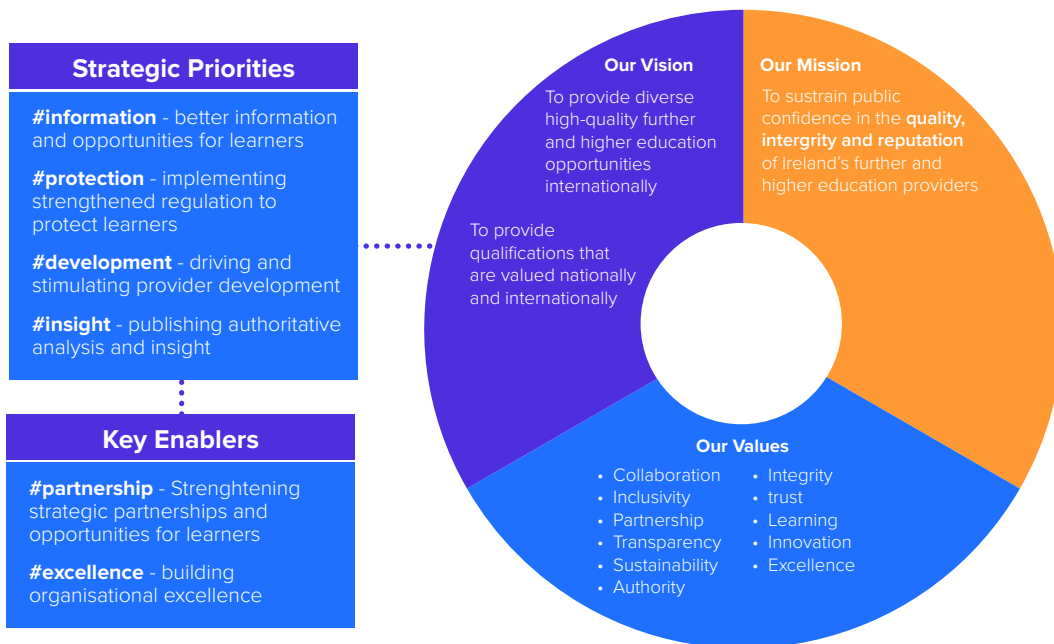


Figure 4: Statement of Strategy

At the time of the last ENQA review, a workforce planning process was underway and in 2021 a submission was made to the government department for additional posts. This was approved, and since 2021, 36 new staff have joined QQI bringing the full complement of staff to 84. To support strategy implementation, an organisational restructuring was undertaken in November 2021, creating four directorates and the Partnership Division. The Partnerships Division has strengthened our collaborations with key partners, in particular with learners, providers, professional, regulatory/statutory bodies and with European and international partners.

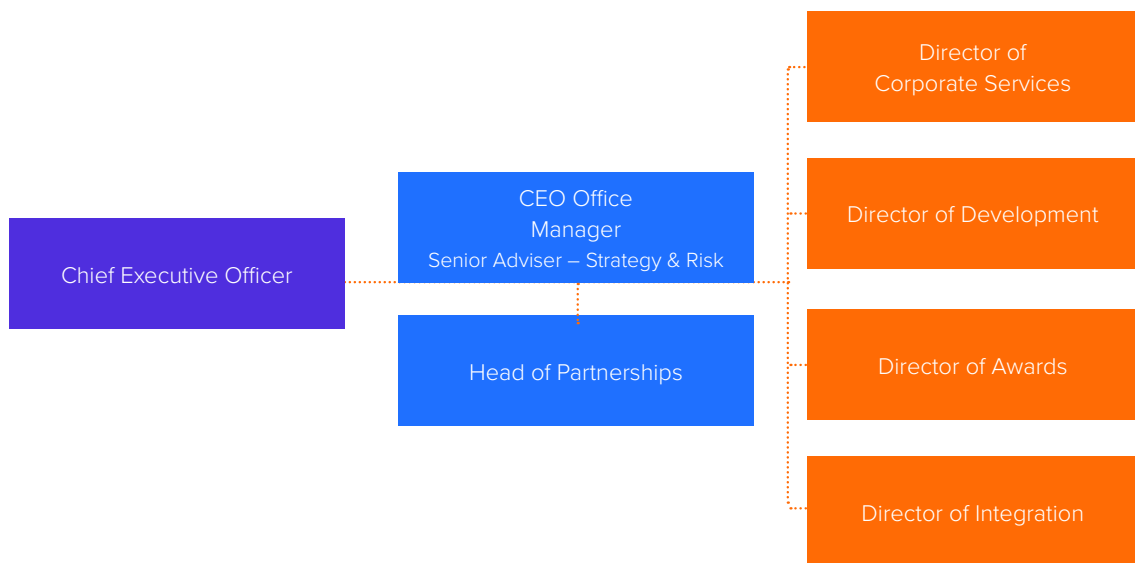


Figure 5: Organogram of QQI directorate structure

4.5 DEVELOPMENTS IN STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

4.5.1 Professional, statutory, and regulatory bodies

Professional, statutory, and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) play a crucial role in the higher education system; through their programme accreditation and approval processes, PSRBs have a significant impact on the curricula, teaching, learning and assessment of programmes. To assist in the identification of complementary and mutually supportive approaches between PSRBs, the institutions and QQI, we established a successful programme of engagement, [Finding Common Ground](#), to facilitate exchange and discussion with and between PSRBs.

In 2021, we also adopted a set of [accreditation principles for](#) endorsement by PSRBs, HEIs, and QQI itself. To date, 16 PSRBs, 15 public HEIs and 8 private HEIs have endorsed the principles⁹. The impact of the principles is beginning to be evident, with two PSRBs (Engineers Ireland and the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland [NMBI]) having made reference to the document in their revised standards and criteria and examples of PSRB/HEI collaboration in a number of areas, including the pilot processes that aim to align – and reduce unnecessary administrative burden of – professional and academic accreditation processes (NMBI, Society for Chartered Surveyors Ireland [SCSI]). See Annex 3 for a roadmap of this engagement.

⁹ Note that several of the public providers were institutes of technology that were subsequently dissolved following the establishment of technological universities; the principles are currently under consideration for endorsement by South East Technological University (SETU) and Atlantic Technological University (ATU).

4.5.2 Student engagement

The National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) is an initiative of QQI that is managed in collaboration with the HEA and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI). NStEP currently works with 25 HEIs to explore and further embed student-staff partnerships in those institutions and to increase opportunities for student engagement across the HE sector. 2021 marked a milestone for NStEP as it launched its 2022-2025 strategy and a new framework, [Steps to Partnership](#), to support authentic student engagement in decision-making. NStEP works closely with QQI and USI to recruit and train students to participate in quality assurance review panels. We are a member of the steering group for [StudentSurvey.ie](#) which was designed to learn more about how students experience higher education, and of the [StudentSurvey.ie](#) Analysis and Impact Group collaborating to develop [Tools to Support Analysis](#).

4.5.3 The National Framework for Doctoral Education (NFDE) Advisory Forum

We co-chair [the National Framework for Doctoral Education](#) (NFDE) Advisory Forum with the HEA. The aim of the forum is to support excellence in all forms of doctoral education. The NFDE is based on a set of principles that were refreshed in 2023. The Forum offers stakeholders the opportunity to discuss issues concerning the provision of doctoral education. Membership includes students, funders, HEIs and representative bodies, Government departments, and agencies. We support two working groups of the Forum and have partnered with sectoral colleagues to develop [www.myphd.ie](#), a microsite hosted by QQI. We also lead the work of the Postgraduate Student Engagement working group with USI and HEI representatives.

4.5.4 Consultation Framework

Consultation with our stakeholders is a core part of how we work. We consult informally through dialogues and discussions during the development and/review of our policies, processes, and procedures. Our consultation [framework](#), which was revised in 2022, guides our approach to formal consultation. We publish written responses to our formal consultations on our website. We also publish our own submissions to external consultations.

4.6 DEVELOPMENTS IN QA GUIDELINES

4.6.1 New Topic-Specific QA Guidelines for Providers of Blended and Fully Online Programmes

COVID-19 was a watershed for online learning as institutions rapidly pivoted to emergency remote teaching, learning and assessment. In Ireland, demand for online learning continues to grow. We recognised that our QA guidelines for blended learning needed to be revised to support this growth. New [QA Guidelines for Providers of Blended and Online Learning Programmes](#) have been developed. These guidelines, which replace previous guidelines on blended learning, were published in October 2023.

4.6.2 Procedures for the QA of Joint Programmes based on the European Approach

As Irish public HEIs have designated awarding body status and are self-accrediting, we have not had a demand for QA procedures based on the [European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes](#) (although some HEIs utilise the European Approach in their internal QA system). Following a request from one of our institutions to act as the external QA agency for the external quality assurance of a joint programme based on the European Approach, we have commenced work on establishing procedures for the quality assurance of joint programmes using the European Approach.



Part 2.

Focus Area

5. PROFILE, MANNER OF FUNCTIONING AND EQA ACTIVITIES OF THE AGENCY RELATED TO THE FOCUS AREA OF PART 3 ESG

5.1 FOLLOW-UP ON RECOMMENDATIONS: ESG 3.5 RESOURCES

In its 2019 report, the review panel concluded that we had adequate staffing and financial resources to carry out our functions. However, the panel were of the view that our funding model did not enable our EQA activities to be organised as efficiently or effectively as they could be. The conclusion of the panel for this standard was 'substantially compliant', with one recommendation:

'Continue to work with the Department of Education and Skills to improve the funding model so that the agency can take a longer-term approach to planning and not be so vulnerable to fluctuations in on-demand income'

As at time of our 2019 review our funding structure consisted of the following sources:

- direct funding from DFHERIS to deliver on statutory functions
- fees paid by higher and further education and training providers for 'on-demand' services, such as programme validation
- QQI certification fees; and
- a small percentage from relationship fees from public higher education institutions.

This remains the funding structure at the time of this targeted review.

5.1.1 Proposed funding model

In June 2021 we submitted a new funding model proposal to DFHERIS. The proposal sought to

- increase income predictability by increasing fixed charges and reducing variable income
- reduce our reliance on certification income
- commence a new relationship fee arrangement with the ETB sector (comparable with the HE sector)
- update our fees to reflect the 'real' cost of services provided
- prepare for the financial impact of delegated authority and legislation changes.

DFHERIS requires that any new services or responsibilities of QQI must not result in additional costs to the Irish Exchequer. In the proposed funding model, several specific funding initiatives have been identified including:

1. An increase in programme validation fees

The current fee structure does not compensate QQI for the cost of undertaking the quality assurance and evaluation process for the validation or revalidation of programmes. The fees have been unchanged since 2012. A significant increase has been proposed.

2. An increase in public HEI relationship fees

Relationship fees with the public HEIs have fallen in real terms due to inflation, the added cost of additional services provided, and the reduction in the number of institutions following the establishment of technological universities. An increase in the relationship fee payable by each public HEI is proposed to reflect the real cost to QQI of the services provided to this sector.

3. The introduction of an ETB relationship fee

It is proposed that a flat annual relationship fee be introduced to replace ETB certification fees, as current ETB certification income is variable in nature. The charge will provide for periodic reviews of ETBs and will substantially reduce the administrative burden of processing certification invoices for all parties. The proposal has been welcomed by the ETBs and the FET funding agency, [SOLAS](#).

4. Planned commencement of the IEM in 2024

The costs of operating the IEM will be recouped from the IEM fund. On implementation, we will be able to recoup full costs incurred by administration of the IEM.

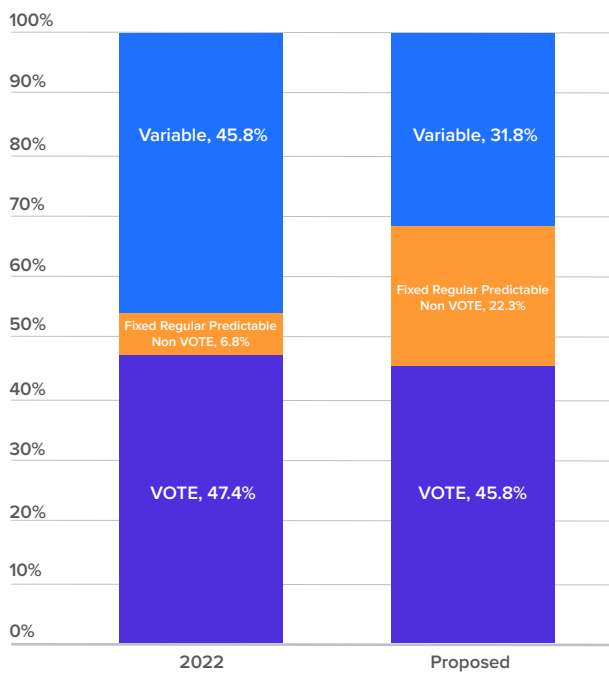


Figure 6: Impact of proposed funding model

Impact of New Financial Model on QQI finances

In the proposed model, our variable annual income will fall from 46% (in 2022) to 32%. Fixed predictable income will increase¹⁰. VOTE¹¹ income will remain at 46%.

In the non-VOTE income categories, certification fees will fall from 35% of income to 15%. Validation fees will increase from 8% of income to 14%. New categories of private HEI relationship fees and ETB relationship fees will commence with increases in the rates for public HEIs. Together these relationship fees will provide 19% of QQI’s income on a fixed basis.



Figure 7: Proposed funding split (Non-Vote Income)

Engagement with DFHERIS

As recommended by the review panel in our 2019 review report, we have engaged extensively with DFHERIS on our funding model proposal. The inaugural quality reviews of the 16 ETBs concluded in 2022, and this created the expectation of an annual relationship fee arrangement with this sector. In mid-2022, we revised the submission to DFHERIS presenting a shorter, more prescriptive document indicating our preferred options and rates.

In tandem with the preparation of a revised funding model proposal, as outlined in 4.1 above, we have been working on the Amended Legislation Programme for the implementation of new statutory and regulatory functions. In 2023, DFHERIS advised that the funding model proposals would not be considered in isolation – rather they will need to accompany the amended legislation proposal so that all facets of funding could be considered together.

¹⁰ QQI received additional one-off funding in 2022 relating to DFHERIS COVID response. It is included in the total income figure for the graph for audit purposes.

¹¹ VOTE income refers to the grant receivable by QQI from DFHERIS

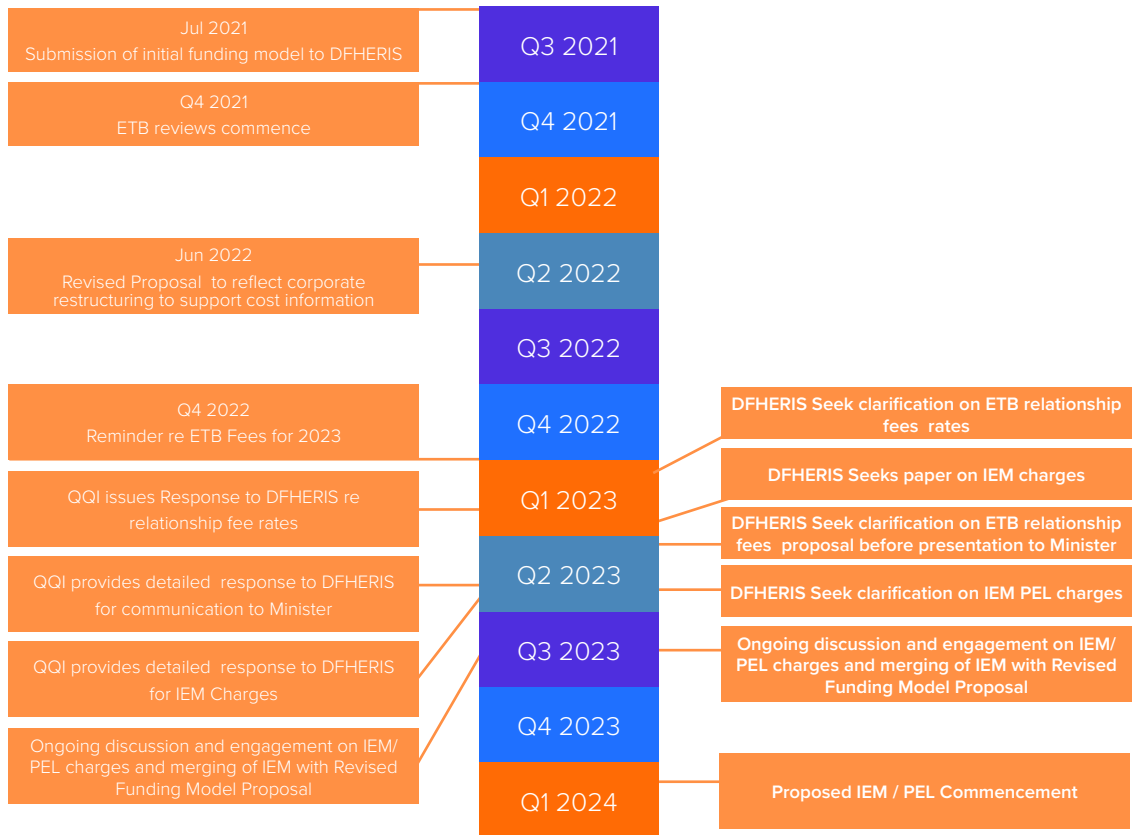


Figure 8: Timeline of engagement with DFHERIS on funding model

5.2 STANDARD FOR ENHANCEMENT: ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

5.2.1 Defining Thematic Analysis

The definition of thematic analysis in the ESG centres on data on programmes and institutions obtained by agencies in the course of their EQA activity. Whilst QQI undertakes analyses of this nature (see 5.2.3), we conceive our role in thematic analysis to be broader than its construction in the ESG (but to a purpose that is similar). As much of our HE system is autonomous, a reliance primarily on the outputs of EQA for thematic analysis would limit what we can contribute through this work. The 2019 amendments to QQI's establishment legislation provided a specific additional statutory remit (section 9(2)(g)) to publish reports of our reviews, evaluations and determinations as considered appropriate. This complements a core remit to "advise the Minister in relation to national policy on quality assurance and enhancement" (section 9(1)(c)).

We consider internal and external quality assurance as two elements of a much larger ecosystem of quality assurance and qualifications that encompasses a broad spectrum of stakeholders. As a national QA agency, we believe we have a responsibility to provide thought leadership and stimulate fresh perspectives on existing and emerging system-level issues pertaining to the quality of tertiary education and qualifications. The type of analysis required to adequately inform considerations of this nature, to respond to issues that move more rapidly than our EQA activities, and which require a deeper level of interrogation, often goes beyond the findings of our routine external quality assurance activities and involves discrete investigations and evaluations in areas of interest, progressed in partnership with our broad stakeholder network. These include, for example, analyses that rely on secondary material; analyses based on direct engagements with students, academic staff, professional bodies, and employers; and analyses that are not strictly within the parameters of what might be considered to be 'quality assurance' in the ESG. It is this broader conceptualisation of our thematic analysis that underpins this self-assessment.

5.2.2 Strategic Significance

Thematic analysis is a key strategic focus for QQI. Since our last review, QQI's work has been guided by two three-year Statements of Strategy, both of which strongly signalled the strategic importance of our analysis activity. We are cognisant that the nature of our remit, functions and relationships with stakeholders places us in a unique position to provide visibility of activity, policy, practice, and learning – and the implications of these – within and across the tertiary education sector and to drive the evolution of these at all levels of the system. As a quality assurance agency, we are concerned not just with quality in individual institutions but at the level of the tertiary education system. We view our thematic analysis activity as an essential part of our role in providing an evidence base to inform decision-making on policy, processes, and practice, both within QQI and externally. Our analyses are [cited](#), for example, by the Evidence for Policy Unit within DFHERIS as contributing to "the evidence base underpinning the contribution of the tertiary system to society and to individuals". They also form part of the evidence base for QQI in [responding to consultations](#) by other public authorities and in informing the nature of our relationships and memoranda of understanding with key strategic stakeholders such as the HEA. Our analyses provide a key source of evidence relating to private/independent HEIs, data on which is not collected elsewhere in the HE system. They also provide a vehicle to enhance QQI's visibility, both domestically and internationally.

Until quite recently, thematic analysis activity has been relatively dispersed across the organisation, with policy/operational units largely assuming responsibility for the analysis of the data and outputs associated with their own activities. This has sometimes proved challenging, with the capacity of staff to engage in or manage this work often limited by competing operational priorities. In November 2021, QQI instituted a number of changes to its organisational structure to support the delivery of its current Statement of Strategy, including the establishment of a Research & Innovation Division (R&ID) in recognition of the strategic importance of thematic analysis for QQI. This development has enhanced QQI's capacity to progress and disseminate its existing thematic analysis activity (see Case Study 1, Annex 4) and, more significantly, has provided a locus for the strategic planning, management, and delivery of thematic analysis activity in new areas to support the work of QQI and the broader tertiary education sector.

5.2.3 Types of System-level Analysis

Our thematic analyses are primarily qualitative analyses which seek to interpret (usually text-based) data (e.g., AQRs, cyclical review reports etc.) to identify system-level trends and issues. Some of our analyses adopt a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis (e.g. an analysis currently underway on degree classifications) and in some cases may be primarily quantitative (e.g. [QQI's early exploration into Micro-credentials in Higher Education, 2014–2020](#)).

i. Analyses of EQA Processes & Outputs

These are analyses of processes and outputs (such as monitoring reports, self-evaluation reports, external review reports etc.) arising from QQI's external quality assurance activity. The most prominent example is the thematic analysis undertaken every year of the AQRs submitted by HEIs as part of QQI's quality monitoring arrangements (see Case Study 1, Annex 4). Other examples include:

- In 2020, we published a [thematic analysis](#) of the reengagement process for the approval of provider quality assurance procedures and scope of provision. The analysis identified the main themes arising from the reports of the independent review panels and identified aspects of the process that may need to be adjusted to enhance its effectiveness. This is discussed further in 6.1.
- In 2021, we published a [mid-cycle analysis](#) of the review reports arising from the current institutional review cycle. This analysis identified and analysed the key themes and topics arising in the CINNTE institutional review reports published by April 2020. This is discussed further in 6.2.

ii. Topical Analyses

These are analyses of discrete aspects of tertiary education that have potential implications for the quality of education, training, and awards. The origins of, and drivers for, the areas of focus for topical analyses are multiple and diverse. They arise from issues identified:

- by QQI:
 - in the operation of our functions (e.g., through provider monitoring);
 - in response to broader sectoral or societal developments (e.g., we are planning to undertake an analysis relating to the advent of artificial intelligence); or

- in response to issues of systemic or public concern (e.g. the [Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning & Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education](#) (hereafter ‘the TLA report’). We are also currently engaged in an analysis of degree classifications, partially in response to public and media discourse on grade inflation).
- by stakeholders through our various engagements with them (e.g. the [Review of Consortia-Led Apprenticeship in Ireland](#) arose from the [Action Plan for Apprenticeship](#)).

A full list of thematic analyses completed since QQI’s last review by ENQA is included at Annex 5.

5.2.4 Strengths

As part of our self-assessment process, we sought feedback from a selection of internal and external stakeholders on their perceptions of QQI’s thematic analysis activity and if and how they find it useful. A summary of the uses and users of our thematic analyses is outlined at Annex 6. Stakeholders have suggested that the nature of QQI’s status, remit and mode of operating equips the organisation with particular strengths in the conduct of thematic analysis. These are outlined in Figure 9. In our Partnership Survey 2023, 83% of respondents rated QQI’s Insights (the brand under which most thematic analyses are published) as good or excellent.

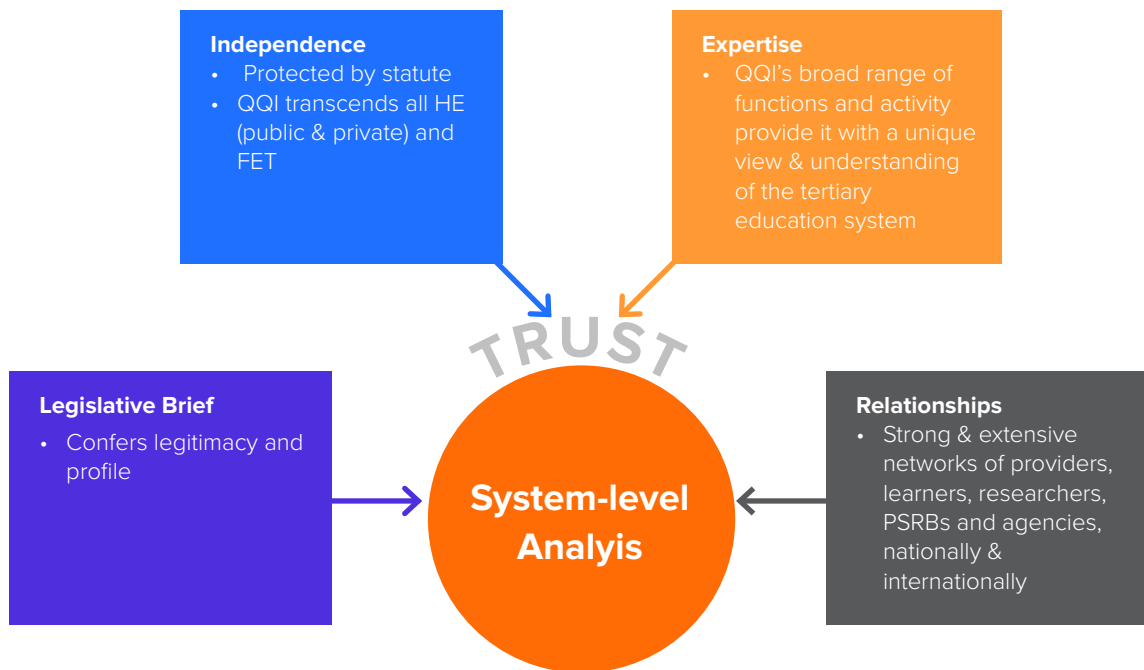


Figure 9: QQI’s Strengths in System-level Analysis

5.2.5 Areas for Enhancement

5.2.5.1 Planning & Prioritisation

The requirements and timing of our thematic analyses of EQA outputs are generally predictable, which facilitates timely business planning and resource allocation. Our topical analyses, which are a significant and increasing element of our thematic analysis work, are sometimes less predictable, which poses challenges for planning – both for QQI and for external parties involved in the production of the analyses. As capacity and resources are finite, we intend to adopt a more strategic approach to the planning and prioritisation of our thematic analysis activity. A strategic priority identified in our 2023 Corporate Plan is the development and publication of a three-year Research & Innovation programme of work, which will seek to ensure that decision-making and resource allocation associated with thematic analysis is aligned with organisational priorities. In preparing this, there are several areas of development that require particular consideration:

a. Stakeholder involvement in identifying areas of analysis

Given the extent of the users and uses of our thematic analysis, we wish to consider the mechanisms through which stakeholders might have opportunities to suggest ideas and identify areas in which thematic analysis by QQI could support the assurance and enhancement of quality and qualifications across the sector. The needs of some stakeholders, such as DFHERIS, are particularly significant for QQI and some of our thematic analysis activity features in our annual agreements with the Department. Given these various stakeholder interests, it will also be necessary to manage expectations in relation to what can be progressed within the resources available.

b. Prioritisation

Whilst our broad remit and stakeholder base is a strength, it can also be challenging to determine priorities for thematic analysis within the resources available, balancing the needs and interests of stakeholders with our own interests, independence, and leadership and challenge functions. Decision-making on prioritisation will be informed by engagement with key strategic groups in the organisation – including the Partnerships Division – to determine organisational priorities.

c. Governance

The governance unit that currently oversees decision-making on the planning and resourcing of thematic analysis is our Projects Steering Group (PSG), comprising the Executive Management Team and an external representative. Most thematic analyses also feature as items in our annual Corporate Plan and are subject to quarterly progress monitoring to our Board. A shift to a more strategic approach to thematic analysis – particularly one involving multi-annual commitments – may warrant more dedicated governance arrangements within our corporate governance infrastructure.

d. Ensuring scope for responsiveness

Whilst a multi-annual programme of work will support internal and external business and resource planning, tertiary education and society in general is currently experiencing a period of significant

change, uncertainty, and volatility. In recent years, we have at times opted to undertake thematic analyses at short notice in response to unexpected and pressing events/issues that have arisen which have carried significant implications for the tertiary education sector. We consider this flexibility, agility, and responsiveness to be a strength and will seek to ensure that it is not inhibited in future approaches to planning and governance.

5.2.5.2 Data

The absence of a national data strategy for the tertiary education sector restricts our capacity to undertake analyses in some areas. We see significant potential to produce valuable system-level analyses (such as the analysis of degree classifications in which we are currently engaged) – and in doing so to reduce the administrative burden of data collection, the potential for inconsistency, and the potential for data blind spots – by establishing greater coherence and alignment of data collection across key agencies in the sector. Combined with enhanced data-sharing at this level, this would enable greater leveraging and triangulation of data to yield richer evidence with which to inform policy and broader decision-making. The current policy direction towards a unified tertiary system is an obvious example of where our unique knowledge and understanding of the various parts of the system leave us exceptionally well-placed to combine and interpret the various data streams to support policy development in this area.

5.2.5.3 Production

Our thematic analyses are conducted either internally by QQI staff or, following a procurement process, by suitably qualified external contractors. We are able to fund externally commissioned analyses from our core income (as thematic analyses are part of the service we provide to institutions in return for payment of the relationship fee) and are not reliant on seeking external funding to support this activity. We are, however, constrained in our capacity to establish new staff posts and whilst there can be clear benefits to outsourcing the production of thematic analysis (see Case Study 1, Annex 4), there is a potential opportunity cost in the development and assimilation of knowledge by staff in QQI. This also applies internally (albeit to a lesser extent) where the R&ID assumes responsibility for co-ordinating thematic analysis of data collected and managed by other divisions in QQI. Ensuring an appropriate balance of projects that are undertaken in the relevant policy/operational divisions, produced by the R&ID or outsourced will therefore be a core consideration in planning future thematic analyses.

The potential for thematic analyses to be undertaken on a collaborative basis with stakeholders or other partners such as occurred with the TLA report, and our degree classifications project (see Case Study 2, Annex 4), is another possibility we intend to explore further. Such an approach is, however, dependent on the willingness and capacity of the participants: stakeholders have identified that the extent to which they would want, or be able, to participate in collaborative approaches would depend on the area under analysis, whether it is of sufficient interest or relevance, and whether they have the capacity to engage.

Related to this, we intend to further develop our connections with the research community engaged in research on tertiary education with a view to increasing our awareness of existing projects and initiatives that may have relevance to our own analysis, collaborating with research partners on existing or new projects of mutual interest, and potentially further stimulating and developing this community.

In both scenarios, we will need to establish measures to ensure that its independence and impartiality, and that of the analysis, is not undermined.

5.2.6 Value & Impact

In prioritising the selection of thematic analyses, we wish to focus our resources on the projects that have the most potential value and impact. However, given the diverse uses and users of our analyses, this is often difficult to establish. We have previously benefitted from peer review of our analysis from colleagues in international agencies (e.g., AQ Austria and NVAO colleagues have reviewed our annual thematic analysis of AQR) and intend to further utilise this approach, broadening the designation of 'peers' to include institutional and other stakeholders. In planning future analyses, we will also reflect on the balance of broad versus focused analyses and potential measures to capture engagement (e.g., stakeholder engagement measures, data analytics, bibliometrics etc.) and impact.

A further consideration in terms of impact is that where the findings of analyses signal the need for, or create stakeholder expectations of, a response or action by QQI, we may not have the capacity to progress the matter in the short term (or, on occasion, the medium term) in the light of our other priorities. For example, stakeholders have indicated that the [Evaluation of the Comparability of the Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate Qualifications](#) raised expectations that QQI would take further action in relation to these awards. Whilst such outcomes/expectations can sometimes be difficult to predict, this will need to be a consideration both in planning and prioritising our programme of analyses and in communications concerning the production and publication of analyses to appropriately manage and ensure clarity of stakeholder expectations.

5.2.7 Dissemination

The primary mode of disseminating our thematic analyses is publication on the QQI website – normally as part of our [Insights](#) series – and promotion internally and externally via our various communications and social media channels. In some cases, these are complemented by events (e.g. [webinars](#) or [in-person](#) events) at which the findings of the analyses are outlined, and stakeholders are afforded an opportunity to seek clarifications and to discuss the outcomes. We consider that there is scope for more targeted engagement with key national and international stakeholders (such as the European Quality Assurance Forum) to enhance the dissemination of our thematic analyses.

A common theme arising in feedback from stakeholders is that their capacity to engage with large, complex documents is limited. They have also expressed a desire for the language and format of publications to be more accessible and user friendly (see section 8 SWOT analysis). Where appropriate, we will explore approaches that seek to distil key messages in an accessible way (for example, our [Insight on Assessment: Learner Perspectives](#)). However, in many cases, the technical detail of our analyses is important to its audience, so we intend to reflect on how we might incorporate multi-dimensional approaches to dissemination, e.g. the development of shorter summaries in Plain English that distil key messages and implications tailored for specific stakeholder audiences; live briefing-style events such as webinars or 'Lunch and Learn' sessions; and greater adoption of multi-media approaches, such as podcasts, graphics, videos, animation etc.

Another consideration is the shelf-life of our analyses. While some (e.g., the annual thematic analysis of the AQRs) are naturally superseded by subsequent iterations, others have longer-term relevance. Stakeholders have noted that as personnel change over time, current staff may be less familiar with older analyses which remain relevant. We intend to explore opportunities to revisit analyses of this nature and to reflect on if/how the area has changed in the intervening period.

5.2.8 Conclusion

This targeted review comes at a timely juncture as we begin to implement a more strategic approach to our thematic analysis work. Conducting the self-assessment has been a valuable experience and provided a welcome focus for engagement with internal and external stakeholders on the role and value of this work and how it might evolve. We would appreciate the views and perspectives of the review panel on the issues and challenges outlined in the preceding section – and in particular on possible criteria on which to base the prioritisation of areas of analysis.

6. DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE AGENCY'S EQA ACTIVITIES RELATED TO THE FOCUS AREA OF PART 2 ESG

6.1 FOLLOW-UP ON RECOMMENDATIONS: ESG 2.3 IMPLEMENTING PROCESSES

In its 2019 report, the review panel found QQI to be *substantially compliant* with this standard. The panel noted that where we had implemented our EQA processes, the processes were clearly defined, implemented consistently, and published. They also noted the EQA processes were successful and valuable in the assurance and enhancement of quality in higher education providers. The exception to this was in the implementation of some processes for private/independent HEIs. At the time of the last review, no cyclical reviews had commenced in the private/independent HE sector, as the process of approving these providers' quality assurance procedures through reengagement¹² with QQI had not been completed. In its report, the panel recommended that we:

'Accelerate and complete reengagement and institutional review with independent providers'.

6.1.1 Institutional-Level Evaluation of Private/Independent HEIs

(i) Reengagement

Since our last review, we have completed institutional evaluation of the QA procedures of 36 private/independent HEIs. By the end of 2021, all 28 private/independent HEIs formerly registered with one of our antecedent agencies had had their QA procedures evaluated and approved and had completed reengagement. The process was implemented in line with our EQA processes and is consistent with ESG 2.3. It comprised the following elements:

- a self-evaluation report submitted by the provider
- evaluation of the providers' QA procedures by an independent external panel of experts
- a site visit (for the majority, this was conducted virtually, during COVID-19 restrictions)
- a panel report which informs QQI decisions on QA approval
- a formal response from the provider, addressing the recommendations of the panel report

¹² Following its establishment in 2012, reengagement was a one-off process QQI put in place for providers of the antecedent agencies to enable those providers to establish: 'Quality assurance procedures approved by QQI in accordance with either Section 29 or Section 30 of the 2012 Act as relevant providers' [Reengagement Process Guide.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#)

Reengagement was a one-off EQA activity for all FET and HE private/independent providers that had previously been approved by our antecedent QA agencies, to enable these providers to have their QA procedures approved under the 2012 Act. As reengagement was completed in 2021 for all private/independent HEIs, this activity has ceased and a change report was submitted to EQAR in September 2023. All reports on reengagement are published on our website at [Reengagement Reports](#).

A thematic analysis of the reengagement process was conducted in June 2020, the purpose of which was to identify improvements and enhancements at this time. The analysis consisted of a desk review and questionnaire and follow-up meetings with institutions and panel members. The [Reengagement Report](#) and our [Response to Thematic Analysis on Reengagement](#) were both published. This thematic analysis concluded that both the institutions and panel members found the reengagement process to be a positive experience which had led to improvements in institutions' internal quality assurance.

The main themes arising from the panel reports related to academic governance and the need to maintain clear separation between academic and commercial decision-making. Panel members reported that the process was implemented consistently and was fit for purpose. The report also included suggestions and recommendations on how the process could be improved. As a result, process improvements were implemented, including for example, the commencement of standing panels, the production of 'frequently asked questions', a glossary of reengagement terms and a mentoring process for new panel report writers. Though the reengagement process has ceased, this also led to a number of improvements in our validation processes, such as the (i) introduction of online surveys for providers and panel members, (ii) mentoring for new report writers, (iii) interactive Q&A sessions for providers on the validation process, (iv) improved publications of the outcomes of the validation process, i.e., the validation certificate.

(ii) Implementing institutional review of private/independent HEIs

Institutional review of private/independent HEIs could not commence until the process of QA approval through reengagement had been completed.

There are provisions in the 2012 Act which enable us to delegate authority (DA) to a provider to make awards and as such become an awarding body in its own right. As programme validation in the four large private/independent HEIs currently accounts for 60% of our total HE programme validation activity¹³, strategically, delegating authority to this group would significantly reduce the high volume of operational activities and resources associated with this function. DA is a strategic priority included in our [Statement of Strategy 2022-24](#) under the objective to

'facilitate increased autonomy and flexibility for mature providers by enabling them to pursue delegated authority to make their own awards'.

¹³ Validation activity is measured within a fixed period and uses bundles as the unit of evaluation and the preferred measure of validation activity. A bundle can comprise one or more programmes but constitutes what is presented to a panel. On this basis, the four HEIs referred to here comprise 60% of the total HET programme validation activity covering the period, January 2019 to date.

In line with this objective, over the past 18 months, we have been working on the development of a framework for the implementation of delegated authority (DA), including updating the criteria, procedures and establishing ministerial regulations. The process for DA requires a statutory instrument detailing the ministerial regulations of the conditions to be met by institutions seeking DA. These conditions have been completed and were submitted to DFHERIS for consideration in May 2023 for ministerial approval.

We had hoped to progress with the roll out of DA in 2024 with a combined DA and institutional review process for these institutions. However, we underestimated the time required to develop and approve regulations, and rather than delay the process further, we are commencing the implementation of CINNTE review for these four mature private/independent HEIs prior to accepting requests for delegated authority. These four institutions have completed reengagement and have had their QA procedures approved for some time. Some have been given devolved responsibility¹⁴ for parts of the programme validation process and integrated into our institutional monitoring cycle through the submission of AQRs and participation in quality dialogue meetings¹⁵.

Therefore, a two-phased approach will be implemented: (i) the first component, institutional review, will take a holistic and enhancement-led approach, (ii) the second component, the assessment for DA, will be a compliance-based process. This phased approach gives each HEI scope to address recommendations that may emerge from an institutional review process before proceeding to an assessment for DA.

The terms of reference, handbook and review schedule have been established for the external review of these four institutions, and the four reviews will be concluded by Q4 2024.¹⁶

For the remaining 32 private/independent HEIs, there is an interdependency between our EQA functions and awarding body functions. Many of these institutions are small and specialist in nature, with a single or mono-programme relationship with QQI as an awarding body. These institutions are subject to programme validation and required to undertake programme review and periodic revalidation. We conduct close and frequent monitoring through our certification and awards data, and regular formal and informal interactions with these institutions. All have successfully completed an external evaluation of their internal QA as part of the reengagement process which concluded in 2021. We have not yet developed an institutional review model and process for this cohort of institutions, any such model would need to be fit for purpose and proportionate. The time required to develop and implement such a model will be additional to our current strategic timeframe, but it is proposed to publish an issues paper for consultation in 2024.

¹⁴ QQI can [devolve responsibility \(DR\)](#) for some parts of the validation process to a provider who has shown the capacity to do this reliably. A provider who has DR is responsible for those parts of the evaluation process between screening (done by QQI) and finalisation of the panel report. The main difference between DA and DR is that, in DR, the validation decision is still made by QQI.

¹⁵ The submission of AQRs and the introduction of quality dialogue meetings started in 2021.

¹⁶ <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2023-12/cinntte-handbook-for-independent-private-providers.pdf>

6.2 ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

A core principle of the ESG and of our approach to quality assurance is that HEIs have primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance. Our EQA activities, which operate at institutional level (e.g., CINNTE) and programme level (e.g., validation for private/independent HEIs), ensure that institutions have appropriate internal QA procedures in place, and that these are implemented effectively. The 2019 ENQA review panel report found that our quality assurance policy framework

'comprehensively align to and meet standards and guidelines in Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines'.

Our EQA activities remain fully compliant with ESG 2.1, these comprehensive and interrelated activities include:

- Shared **QA infrastructure** which comprises of **Core QA Guidelines** applicable to all providers: these are aligned to the ESG and supplemented by **sector-specific and topic-specific QA guidelines**.
- **QA approval process** confirming that a provider's internal QA system is consistent with QQI core QA guidelines.
- **Programme validation** and **revalidation** (following review) for private/independent providers offering QQI awards.
- **Monitoring**, through an AQR process and QQI awards function.
- **Cyclical institutional review**, through our CINNTE review process.
- **Focused reviews** on the effectiveness of a provider's internal QA.

A detailed mapping grid demonstrating compliance with ESG 2.1 is provided in Annex.7 .This grid is in the same format used in our 2019 SAR, with the inclusion of updated policies and procedures/ guidelines, and further detailed mapping references, for example for validation and revalidation, and monitoring.

6.2.1 Institutional Review

In March 2020 we commissioned Dr Achim Hopbach to conduct a mid-cycle thematic analysis of the outcomes of the CINNTE institutional review reports. This analysis found that the reviewed institutions:

- 'made good use of the cyclical review process to facilitate sound self-evaluations;
- have implemented effective quality assurance arrangements that comply with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and have regard to QQI Guidelines;
- have established and implemented quality assurance arrangements based on governance

structures that are effective and ... efficient in assuring the quality of the institutions' activities' (p.7).

However, the author noted inconsistencies in our review teams' report structures and detail and found that although the CINNTE review objectives encompass teaching and learning, as well as research, the review reports focus primarily on teaching and learning – in particular, the learning experience, and the evaluation of the quality assurance of research was not addressed to the same extent. It was noted that whilst the review reports did contain some analysis on research, this related primarily to the 'institution's research profile and relevant external framework/ contextual conditions' rather than the institutional arrangements for the quality assurance of research activity, and reflected the information provided by institutions in their self-evaluation reports.

Since the mid-cycle analysis, several process improvements have been undertaken to address some of these shortcomings, including implementation of a review report template and enhancements to institutional and review team briefings, with a focus on considering quality assurance of research. In addition, we have been developing our team's knowledge and skills and models of EQA of research have been explored, for example through staff mobility in the Bologna thematic peer groups¹⁷. However, we recognise that the quality assurance of research activity is an area that needs further development.

6.2.2 Programme Validation

Figures 10 and 11 below show the trends of HET major awards made in the period of QQI as an awarding body, and the corresponding programme validations/revalidations. The increasing trend towards higher NFQ levels is noticeable, especially at NFQ Level 9, master's level. There are a small number of HEIs with a lot of programme activity at NFQ L9, which has implications for our validation processes.

QQI Major Awards - HWT

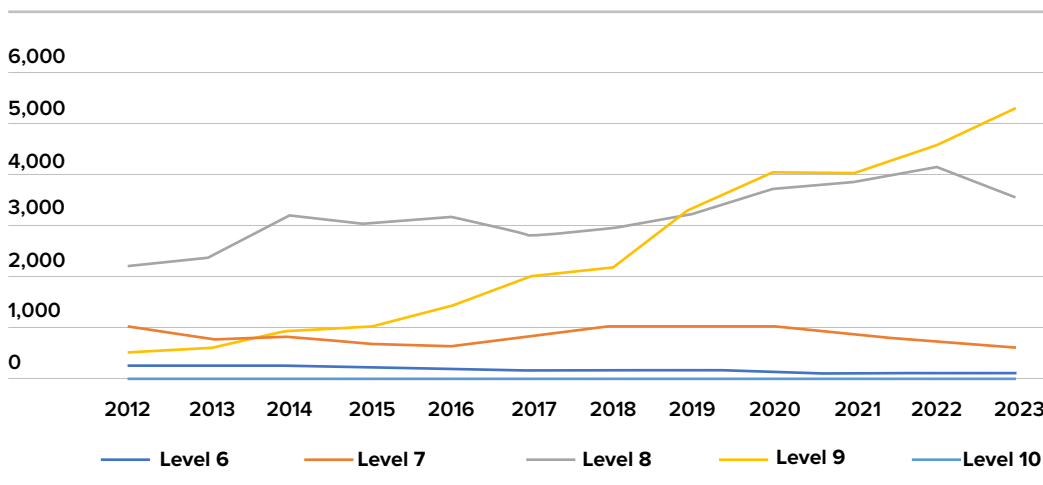


Figure 10: QQI HET Major Awards 2012-2023

¹⁷ Mobility to Hcéres, Nov 2022, topic, EQA of Research.

Level 9 Major Awards - Programme Validation

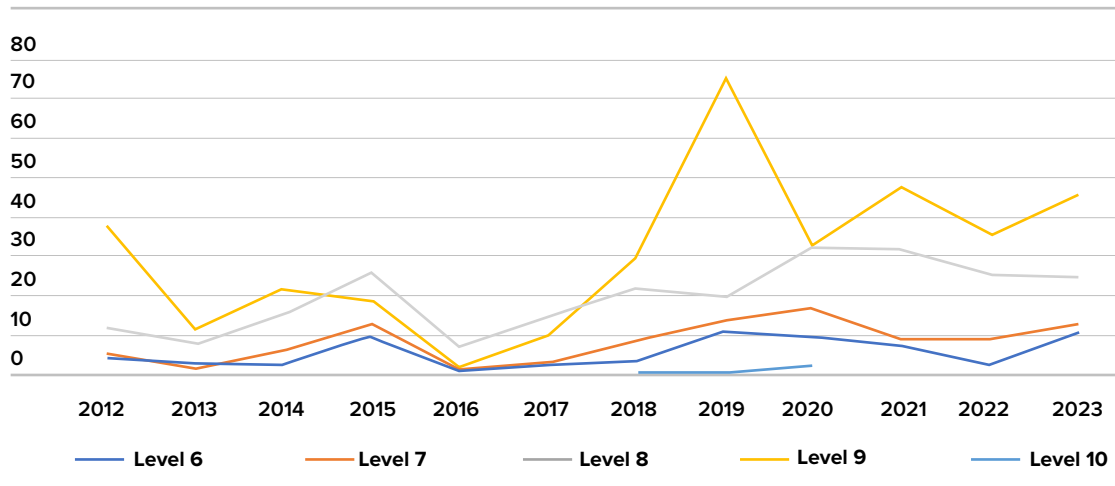


Figure 11: HE Programme Validation 2012-2023

We have conducted a review of our documentation requirements for HE programme validation i.e. the programme descriptor and associated guidance. This review was done in consultation with the HEIs, and experienced panel members and the revised documentation will go live in January 2024. A review of our validation policy and criteria is planned to commence in 2024.

6.2.3 Monitoring

The AQR and biennial quality dialogue meetings are the basis for our monitoring of public HEIs, and those mature private/independent HEIs that will be undergoing CINNTE institutional review. While the AQR process for public HEIs is well embedded, it was introduced for the first time in 2021 for the 17 private/independent HEIs that had completed the reengagement process in the previous year. It became clear, however, that this reporting process and instrument (which was designed for large, multi-programme institutions) did not suit all of these providers, many of whom are small/niche institutions. As the awarding body for private/independent HEIs, we have access to and use a range of data, such as certification and grade distribution data, validation activity and follow-up on conditions of validation, to monitor these providers. There is regular interaction, both formal and informal meetings, and contact with these institutions.

The remainder of the private/independent HEIs completed reengagement during 2021. In order to reduce the burden of reporting and duplication with QQI awards reporting requirements, we made the decision that, except for those four private/independent HEIs seeking delegation of authority, private/independent HEIs would not be required to submit an AQR but are invited to submit case studies for inclusion in our [QA Case Studies Database](#). We acknowledge that this approach was not universally welcomed by these institutions and some have continued to submit AQRs on a voluntary basis for the past two years of reporting. This arrangement will continue until a new monitoring framework is in place.

Earlier this year we published an independent external analysis of the AQR process and template. The report, [QQI Insight - An Independent Evaluation of the QQI Annual Quality Reporting Model](#), found 'it is evident that the AQR (or near equivalent reporting process) has a valuable role to play'

The authors also noted that the AQR process could be more visible and have greater impact, but ‘first and foremost, that the current and future purpose of the AQR needs to be clarified and honed’ (p.3). A case study on the thematic analysis of the AQRs is available in Annex 4.

The AQR evaluation was useful and though its focus was primarily on the AQR process, it also provided an impetus for a more strategic discussion on our monitoring function. Monitoring also arose as a core theme in discussions with the panel during our ENQA progress visit in December 2022. We recognise that we need to clarify what our monitoring functioning is trying to achieve, to consider the added value of monitoring, and the outcomes rather than the inputs/processes. When we come to develop a new monitoring framework, there will be a number of questions to be addressed, such as:

- How do we differentiate and/or integrate monitoring across our different functions?
- What information and data, quantitative and qualitative, do we need from institutions?
- How do we ensure relevance and proportionality?

In addressing these and other questions, the role of new technology, enhanced digitalisation and artificial intelligence are all important: these have also arisen in our SWOT both as areas of some current weakness and as opportunities for development. A project for the development of a new monitoring framework was commenced in summer 2023 but due to limitations on project resources it is on hold until 2024. Our Projects Steering Group concluded that further exploratory discussions of our monitoring framework are required, which may result in a programme of projects.

6.2.4 Focused reviews

Our focused review process was deemed to be ESG compliant in our 2019 review report, but it had not been implemented at the time of our 2019 review. Our legislation provides for a focused review of the effectiveness of a provider’s QA procedures from time to time or in response to concerns that have come to our attention in relation to the implementation and effectiveness of those procedures. Focused reviews in relation to programme validations have been carried out previously but in December 2022, we conducted our first institutional-level focused review of the internal QA of a private/independent HEI.

The review focused on the management of QQI-validated programmes and their associated practice placements and sought to confirm that QA policies and procedures had been fully implemented and managed effectively for those validated programmes requiring professional recognition and accreditation. A team of three reviewers was convened and a one-day site visit conducted. The review concluded in June 2023 with the submission of the review team’s report and the subsequent approval of the recommendations made through our Approvals and Reviews Committee (ARC). This focused review has significance as it involved one of the four private/independent HEIs intending to seek DA and undergoing its CINNTE institutional review in 2024, therefore it is important to ensure the focused review team’s recommendations are fully addressed in advance of the CINNTE institutional review. A follow-up report in response to the recommendations is due to be submitted by the institution in question in December 2023.



Part 3.

SWOT Analysis

As our SWOT analysis took an organisation-wide approach it includes some topics related to activities which are outside the scope of the ENQA targeted review. Coincidentally, we will soon start work on the development of our strategy statement for 2025-2027 and as this SWOT can potentially help with that, we considered it both worthwhile and efficient to engage all staff and our Board and its governance committees in an organisation-wide SWOT analysis.

Workshops were held with management, staff, the Board and governance committees and a follow-up survey was conducted with all staff to identify priority areas in each category. MAXQDA thematic analysis software was used to identify the key themes arising from the feedback and to distil the key topics arising, which were discussed and agreed by our SAR project team.

SWOT ANALYSIS

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statutory independence • Considered trusted and authoritative • Positive organisational culture • Professionalism, integrity, and commitment of staff • Relationships with stakeholders, collaborative and consultative approach • European and international relationships, leadership, and profile • Single agency across the tertiary system, systems-wide insights and impact • Stability and acceptance of the NFAQ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gaps in cross-organisational planning and decision-making • Limited awareness of QQI's work outside core external stakeholders • Underdeveloped relationship with/within some core stakeholder groups • Inefficiencies in some processes and over-complexity in some documentation • Some ICT systems are not user-friendly and need improvement • Quantitative Data – definition, collection and utilisation • Capacity to implement all new regulatory functions
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal cross-functional engagement, communications and decision-making • Leadership and impact across the tertiary system • ICT systems development and digitalisation with further integration of processes • IEM – at forefront in providing assurance on quality of Irish HE and English language education • New stakeholder relationships and communications channels • Leverage artificial intelligence in our work. • Enhance and develop governance of the NFAQ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff turnover • Cybersecurity attack/event • Artificial Intelligence – disruptive impact in tertiary education • Threats to Academic Integrity • Instability of funding model – could impact on ability to deliver on new functions • Rapidly changing qualifications landscape undermining the NFAQ • Legal challenge to implementation of new regulatory functions

Staff are overwhelmingly positive about the organisation culture and working environment: they consider the organisation and their colleagues to be very supportive and that the hybrid working policy has enhanced work-life balance. A consistent theme arising is that we are a trusted and valued agency, with professional and committed staff and a positive organisation culture. Our strengths clearly align to our strategic values which are evident and embedded in how we work internally and externally with our providers and partners. The results from our Partnership 2023 survey¹⁸ further confirm this, with stakeholder engagement seen as a core strength and the professionalism and proactiveness of our staff as a standout feature of our organisation.

“I would hold them up as a model of how professional engagement should look like”

Survey respondents also noted our international profile, the general feedback being that we are leaders in this space, a respected organisation internationally which projects a positive view of Ireland’s education system.

However, a clear message was received from both the focus groups and survey results that our IT systems are letting us down, with ‘clarity’ and ‘ease of use of systems’ seen as needing critical development. Opportunities were identified for ICT system improvements and further digitalisation of processes. Aligned to this is the opportunity to explore artificial intelligence as a tool which could be potentially transformative in the enhancement of quality processes and supporting academic quality.

However, the update of IT systems and social media needs improvement

QHUB

- Not widely used by our stakeholders, bar the registrar teams, who have heard that it is not an intuitive system.

WEBSITE

- New website is more seen to be more interactive than the previous iteration, but respondents noted that it can be difficult to find all the information needed.

SOCIAL MEDIA

- Seen as a strength by those who use these channels – however uptake is still low.
- QQI is seen as having a strong presence on Twitter, and is noted for highlighting insights and details from global events.
- Linked In posts are deemed useful to highlight new reports.

Though we are considered to have good communications and social media presence, stakeholders are of the view that some of our publications are academic and overly complex. We heard of the need for the language and format of publications to be more ‘user friendly’ and a desire to ‘de-mystify the work’ and disseminate more widely. There are some suggestions from the survey which could be progressed, such as creating a short bulletin of reports, highlighting key findings and relevant audience.

Informing future strategy

An additional TOWS¹⁹ matrix is being developed to identify some potential activities aligned to the SWOT which might be progressed in 2024: this will be available to the review panel during their visit. This process will inform the next Statement of Strategy 2025-2027 (to be finalised in 2024) and will provide a robust basis on which to develop the strategy. The development of the SAR and SWOT was an opportunity for all staff, the Board and committee members to reflect on our work, organisation, how we work and who we engage with, from multiple perspectives. It was a good cross-organisational learning opportunity. The SWOT showed there is consensus on many issues and themes, which will be considered further in the development of our new strategy. We will also complete a PESTLE²⁰ analysis to provide a sharper focus on our external operating environment and review our achievements to date. These and the SWOT will help us identify strategic priorities for 2025-2027.

¹⁹ A TOWS is an extension of the SWOT, which provides further analysis on the same elements.

²⁰ A PESTLE analysis will consider the external factors – Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal and Environmental – that influence our work.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The five-year period since our last review has been one of significant development and change for QQI. The 2019 legislative amendments confer significant new regulatory functions and responsibilities on QQI, including the:

- awarding of the IEM assessed against a comprehensive new suite of quality assurance guidelines and codes of practice for the HE and English language sectors.
- recognition and listing of awarding bodies on the NFQ.
- establishment and management of a national learner protection fund.
- strengthened regulatory powers to counteract contract cheating.

We recognise the challenges ahead in the implementation and integration of these new functions which will need to be considered in the development of our next Statement of Strategy 2025-2027.

During this time, 34 new staff members have joined QQI, representing just over 40% of our current full staff complement. The onset of the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic in spring 2020 had a significant impact on our working arrangements and external quality assurance processes and of course on those of our institutions. It also demonstrated the great resilience and adaptability of the organisation and many innovations in digital and online processes have been adopted and embedded in how we operate.

The higher education system in Ireland has undergone significant regulatory and structural change, with the establishment of five new technological universities (through the consolidation of institutes of technology) between 2019 and 2022. The internal quality assurance system for the new technological universities continues to transition and develop: the review of the effectiveness of their IQA systems has been completed for one institution and will be undertaken for the remainder through our CINNTE review process in 2024.

The first CINNTE reviews in 2024 for the four private/independent HEIs planning to seek delegation of authority is a key milestone for QQI and the private/independent sector, illustrating the growing maturity and ambitions of these institutions. There is a huge diversity in the size and scope of the 36 private/independent HEIs and we recognise that a one-size-fits-all model and process for external QA (monitoring and review) would be neither proportionate nor appropriate. The outcomes of these first four reviews will impact not just on the individual institutions but also on QA enhancements in the private/independent sector and we commit to working with the sector on the future development of an external QA model(s).

We will be concluding our CINNTE review cycle in 2024 with the review of the new TUs and four private/independent HEIs. The tertiary education landscape and Government policy in progressing the development of a more unified tertiary education system means that we will have an evolving diversity of providers and provider relationships, both as an external QA body and as an awarding body. The HE/tertiary landscape globally and in Ireland continues to experience a significant rate of change, including the impact of technology on teaching, learning and assessment; the evolving nature and needs of students and society; the rapid development and impact of artificial intelligence (AI); and the impact of migration and climate change. As our current

review cycle nears completion, it is timely to reflect on and reimagine our approach to quality assurance. To stimulate thinking and discussion, we commissioned a discussion paper on the Irish quality assurance system from an independent expert, Professor Paul Giller. At the time of writing, the paper is due to be published imminently.

We are continuously improving our own processes and are committed to enhancements of our ICT systems, digitalisation and exploring the potential of AI. We recognise the challenges in the latter, including security risks and the potential for bias in any AI outputs²¹, as well as sustainability issues associated with the use of AI (not least of these is the immense carbon footprint associated with the training and use of AI models)²². Some examples could include:

- Supporting the production of thematic analyses/insights and validation/review reports.
- Undertaking documentary analysis e.g., analysis of policies/other QA information.
- Translating, proofreading, and accessibility checking of documents.
- Supporting the provision of benchmarking data for institutions.
- Analysing internal QA processes/standard operating procedures.
- Creating content for website/social media.
- Using a ‘chatbot’ feature on our website search.

This is by no means an exhaustive list but demonstrates the potentially transformative impact of GenAI tools.

Finally, in selecting the standard for enhancement, we recognise the strategic importance and impacts of our work in thematic analysis and commit to further development and enhancement of our capacity for and delivery of thematic analysis to stimulate improvements in and support our quality assurance system.

21 See, for example, [Generative AI Takes Stereotypes and Bias From Bad to Worse \(bloomberg.com\)](#).

22 See, for example, [Some experts see AI as a tool against climate change. Others say its own carbon footprint could be a problem. - CBS News](#).

8. ANNEXES

8.1 SAR STEERING GROUP MEMBERS

Self-Assessment Report Steering Group	
Andrea Durnin	Senior Manager, Tertiary Education Monitoring and Review
Dr Anna Murphy	Senior Advisor, Strategy and Risk
Dr Anna Murphy	Senior Manager, Programme Management Office
Dr Bryan Maguire	Director of Integration
Laura Flynn	Head of Partnerships
Mairéad Boland	Senior Manager, Academic Integrity Regulation and Strategic Partnerships
Marie Gould	Head of Tertiary Education Monitoring and Review (Project Manager)
Dr Pdraig Walsh	Chief Executive Officer
Dr Peter Cullen	Head of Research and Innovation
Roisín Morris-Drennan	Senior Manager, Research and Innovation
Walter Balfe	Head of Quality Assurance

8.2 INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDER MEETINGS

Internal Stakeholder Meetings (SWOT Analysis)

Focus group meetings to inform the SWOT were held with the following internal stakeholders:

- Management Focus Groups (3 groups)
- Staff Focus Groups (4 groups)
- Programme and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC)
- Policies and Standards Committee (PSC)
- Programme Awards and Committee (PAEC)
- Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee
- QQI Board

Separate focus group meetings were held with Divisional Heads and Teams on Thematic Analysis.

External Stakeholder Meetings (Thematic Analysis)

Focus group meetings through the Partnership Survey 2023 were held with a range of stakeholders, the following were asked additional questions on Thematic Analysis:

- Principal Officer, DFHERIS
- Education Director, Royal Irish Academy Ireland (RIAI)
- Head of Skills, Engagement and Statistics, Higher Education Authority
- Director of Academic Affairs, Technological Higher Education Association (THEA)
- Data Analyst, THEA
- Director of Learning, Teaching and Academic Affairs, Irish Universities Association
- Director of Quality, University of Limerick
- Vice President, Academic Affairs, South East Technological University

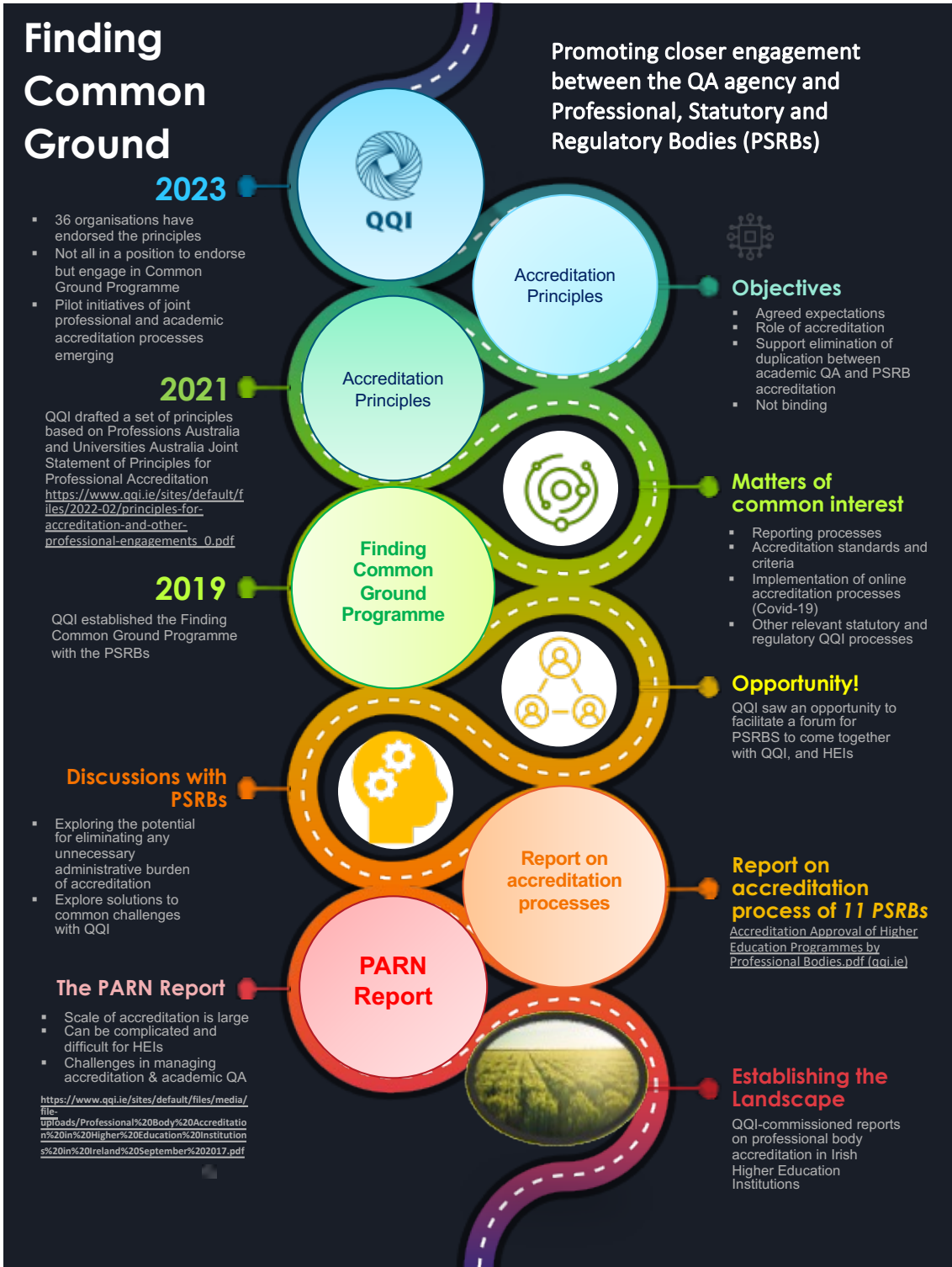
In addition, focus group meetings were held with:

- Senior Leaders of Designated Awarding Bodies
- Senior Leaders of private/independent HEIs/representatives of the Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA)
- Student Representative Bodies: AHEAD, USI, ICOS
- Representatives of Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies from QQI Finding Common Ground Programme

Note to author:

Can you supply the link to the graphic below. Thanks.

8.3 FINDING COMMON GROUND ROADMAP



8.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDY 1: ANNUAL QUALITY REPORTING

Context:

The Annual Quality Report (AQR) is the central strand of QQI's quality assurance monitoring and reporting arrangements for higher education institutions (HEIs). Individual HEIs submit an AQR to QQI providing the following information in respect of the preceding academic year:

- Part A: a record of the institution's current QA policies and procedures and their third party engagements;
- Part B: the QA activities, developments and enhancements undertaken during the reporting period and their impact, as well as planned quality enhancement activities for subsequent reporting periods;
- Case studies showcasing examples of good practice in quality assurance and enhancement.

AQRs are a well-established practice in the public higher education sector and QQI has produced thematic analyses of the institutional AQR submissions in this sector for the past six years. Examples may be found in the [Our Insights](#) section of the QQI website. Annual quality reporting for private/independent higher education providers commenced in 2021, following the reengagement process for this sector. For the past two years, in addition to the thematic analysis of AQRs submitted by public HEIs, a separate thematic analysis has been undertaken in respect of AQRs from private/independent HEIs. These reports are also available on the QQI website.

The thematic analyses were originally undertaken by staff in the Tertiary Education Monitoring and Review Unit (TEMRU), which is the functional unit responsible for the design and administration of QQI's monitoring and review framework for the HE sector, including the AQR process. However, given the significant operational demands on this unit, capacity to undertake the analyses was limited, sometimes resulting in a time lag between receipt of the AQRs and the production of the analysis. This challenge became particularly acute following the reengagement of HEIs in the private/ independent sector, resulting in a more than doubling of the number of HEIs to be managed as part of TEMRU's monitoring and review activities.

In 2022, in support of and in partnership with TEMRU, the Research & Innovation Division (R&ID) assumed responsibility for co-ordinating the production of the thematic analyses of the AQRs. This has resulted in a number of innovations to the process:

Production:

Where previously these thematic analyses have been primarily undertaken by QQI officials, the R&ID commissioned external contractors with relevant knowledge and experience to undertake the analyses for the AQRs submitted in 2022 and 2023. This approach is considered to have a number of benefits:

- The externality of the analysis enables an additional level of objectivity, with the analysis based directly on the text of the AQRs and undertaken by individuals with specific expertise in thematic analysis. It is thus less likely to be influenced by institutional knowledge or relationships QQI staff may have and has introduced a higher level of criticality.

- Enhanced quality assurance of the report arising from the involvement of other parties and perspectives (R&ID and the external contractors) in addition to TEMRU staff.
- It enables clarity and predictability on the timeline for production, ensuring that the publication of the analysis is within a timeframe that provides greater relevance and utility for stakeholders²³.

Format:

Hitherto, separate analyses have been undertaken in respect of each subsector of the HE landscape, i.e. separate reports for the [public](#) and [private/independent sectors](#). For 2023, a single report ([Quality in Irish Higher Education Institutions](#)) has been produced, which retains discrete analyses at the subsector level but also includes an overarching system-level dimension. This enables greater consistency in the approach to analysis across the subsectors (whilst recognising their respective differences), better facilitates cross-sectoral comparison and adds an additional level of analysis of trends and developments at a system-level.

Dissemination:

Dissemination of the analyses has primarily involved the provision of advanced briefing to officials in Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science (DFHERIS), the provision of copies of the analyses to HEIs and publication on the QQI website, with key findings highlighted to a broader stakeholder base through internal and external communications channels, website news items, and social media. In addition to these channels, the findings of the 2023 analysis were presented at an in-person event, '[Quality in HE: Sectoral Findings & Enhancement Showcase](#)', which also provided an opportunity for institutional representatives to present case studies of quality enhancement initiatives. This development was instituted in response to a recommendation arising from of an independent evaluation of the AQR process (see below), which identified an appetite among stakeholders "for the AQR and thematic analysis reports to be linked to, or followed up with, sector-wide, in-person events focused on enhancement and the sharing of good practice". Stakeholder feedback on the 2023 event will be collected and analysed to inform the design and delivery of future such dissemination events.

Evaluation:

In late 2022, as part of QQI's commitment to the enhancement of our processes, an independent evaluation was commissioned to consider the usefulness of the AQR model in fulfilling its intended purpose and identify recommendations on how it might be improved and enhanced. The evaluation²⁴, which was informed by key stakeholders in the sector, included consideration of the usefulness of the thematic analyses. It found that:

- Two thirds of the public HEIs and 79% of private/independent HEIs that engaged with the evaluation reported that the thematic analysis reports are an effective and useful reference point for them.

²³ The thematic analysis of the 2023 AQRs was completed and published within four months of receipt of the final AQRs, in contrast to some previous years where the report was published a year later.

²⁴ [QQI Insight - An Independent Evaluation of the QQI Annual Quality Reporting Model.pdf](#)

- The level of awareness of the analyses among DFHERIS officials is variable (although some confirmed that they are regularly received and may be sent to the Minister), but it was considered that they have the potential to inform departmental policy and decision-making.
- QQI staff were generally, though not unanimously, positive about the benefits of the thematic analysis report (however, it should be noted that only a limited number of QQI staff engaged with the survey methodology used to support this conclusion).
- Substantial differences in the volume, level of detail and content of the AQRs make it difficult to produce a true thematic analysis as the source material does not capture the entirety of activities or facilitate comparison of like with like. The evaluation team considered that “this undermines the trustworthiness of these reports, as gaps or omissions in the original reports do not necessarily reflect an absence of activity within a provider or the sector as a whole”.

In addition to a number of recommendations to enhance the content of and reporting process for the AQRs, the evaluation recommended that QQI:

- Give consideration to a range of methods for promoting the AQRs and thematic analysis reports, including social media and in-person events, such as workshops and conferences centred on or informed by these documents.
- Emphasise the publication of AQRs and thematic analysis reports to key stakeholders in the DFHERIS and HEA.

The R&ID invited the evaluation team to present its findings to QQI staff and subsequently to sectoral stakeholders during the AQR Sectoral Findings & Showcase event, encouraging reflection and discussion on the issues raised. The need for changes to the AQR will be considered in the context of QQI’s planned review of its monitoring framework and R&ID and TEMRU will continue to engage with QQI’s Partnerships Division and Communications team to enhance the promotion of the analyses.

CASE STUDY 2: ANALYSIS OF THE VARIATION IN HONOURS BACHELOR’S DEGREE CLASSIFICATIONS 2012-2022

Context:

In response to changes in the classification profile of honours bachelor’s degrees (HBDs) over the past 10+ years (including an increase often noted in the media in the proportion of degrees awarded with first class honours), QQI has instigated a project to undertake an analysis of a variety of data associated with identified themes or dimensions of higher education provision to explore the factors that might influence some of the observed trends.

As the awarding body for all HBDs awarded in the private/independent sector that are included in the NFQ, QQI is able to readily monitor and explore trends of this nature with institutions offering HBDs leading to QQI awards. In contrast, as our public higher education institutions are designated awarding bodies (DABs) in their own right, the only data directly available to us emerging from EQA activity are the outputs from annual quality reporting, biennial dialogue meetings and cyclical review. As the focus of these is largely on the establishment, operation and implementation of institutional quality assurance procedures and enhancement initiatives, they are unsuited to the sort of focused analysis we consider necessary to explore topics of this nature.

QQI has previously attempted to conduct thematic analysis of activity in the public HE sector on the basis of data shared voluntarily by institutions and/or publicly available data (i.e., on institutional programme validation). However, this has proven problematic in terms of identifying and collecting data that are correct and comparable; selecting the most appropriate and effective analytical methodology; and in interpreting diverse data from different institutions and what they represent. Direct engagement with institutions on the nature of this data and how it can be interpreted has proven to be an important dimension in ensuring the reliability (and thus credibility) of analyses of this nature.

A collaborative approach

Given the complexity of potential factors impacting on the variations in HBD classification profiles, we believe that an effective exploration of the possible causes of these trends will need to be comprehensive and include analysis of a range of quantitative and qualitative data.

As it is in the interests of all of the DABs and their students to gain a clearer understanding of what degree classifications signify and the forces that influence them, QQI has engaged with the institutions to agree a collaborative project to progress an analysis in this area. Over a period of several months, we engaged with nominated institutional representatives to discuss, refine, and agree a project methodology and timeline.

The main elements of the project are:

1. Programme Case Studies

Initial analysis of system-level data on degree classifications shared with QQI by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) indicates variability in degree classifications profiles and trends at a programme level. We have asked institutions to prepare case study analyses in respect of a small sample of programmes that meet certain criteria. The analyses will be conducted in accordance with an agreed standard template and will consider a range of factors including:

- Programme structure, content and learning outcomes
- Teaching and learning
- Assessment
- Quality assurance and enhancement processes
- Student profiles

We consider that the academics and other institutional staff directly involved in the provision of the selected programmes are best placed to understand the operation of those programmes in their unique institutional context and the factors that might contribute to local changes in classification profiles. It is therefore intended that the primary analysis of programmes will be done by those individuals.

2. School/Faculty Information

Institutions will provide data on benchmarking and moderation practices in operation at a school or faculty level in respect of the programmes selected for case studies.

3. Institutional Information

Institutions will provide information on:

- institution-level approaches to classification, e.g., benchmarking, moderation, norm/criterion-based referencing etc.
- the intended purposes of classification, what they are intended to signify, if/whether it is important that they are consistent and how the classifications system can best be explained.

4. Meta-analysis

QQI will conduct an anonymised comparative meta-analysis of the inputs 1-3 above and produce a report exploring the variations across the system.

Benefits

Whilst the project is still in the early stages of implementation, a number of benefits are already evident:

- There is a shared understanding of the purposes and benefits of undertaking this analysis and of the mutual interests of all parties in contributing to the evidence base to inform consideration of the issue.
- Engagement with DABs in discussing and refining the methodology and terms of reference has been valuable in understanding the types of, and differences in, data and processes in institutions; where challenges are likely to arise; and what can practicably be achieved within a reasonable timeframe. This has helped to ensure clarity of expectations and will hopefully minimise challenges in the delivery of the project.
- The involvement of institutional programme and other staff means that:
 - the analysis will benefit from a significantly broader and deeper extent of programme-level data and expertise than would otherwise have been possible; and
 - the project benefits from significant additional analysis capacity.
- The process of engaging with institutions on this project has prompted reflection and discussion on patterns in, and approaches to, grading and classification in institutions more broadly. This by-product of the project is considered particularly valuable.

8.5 THEMATIC ANALYSES: 2019 – 2023

Title	Author/s	Year	External Additional Costs
Report on Award Classification Distributions for QQI Higher Education and Training Awards 2012-2017	QQI	2019	
Accreditation/Approval of Higher Education Programmes by Professional Bodies	QQI	2019	
Making Sense of Qualifications: Views of Recruitment Professionals in Ireland	QQI	2019	
Quality in Irish Higher Education 2020	QQI	2020	
The Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education A QQI Evaluation	QQI	2020	
Certification of QQI Major Awards 2014-18	QQI	2020	
QQI Reengagement - Thematic Analysis	External commission	2020	€9,500
Evaluation of the Comparability of the Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate Qualifications	External commission	2021	€77,774.00
Mid-Cycle Analysis: CINNTE Review Reports	External commission	2021	€10,200.00
QQI Insight on Assessment	QQI	2021	
QQI Insight on Higher Education Quality & Qualifications	QQI	2021	
QQI Insight on Quality in Irish Private/Independent HE Institutions	QQI/Some external input	2021	€2,000
QQI Insight on Quality in Irish Public Higher Education Institutions	QQI	2021	
A thematic analysis of reports on the approval and review of programmes of higher education in the universities, RCSI and DIT in the period 2015-2018	External commission	2021	€54,500
A thematic analysis of reports on the accreditation/ approval/review of programmes of higher education by professional and regulatory bodies in the period 2015-2018	External commission	2021	
A thematic analysis of reports on the accreditation/ approval/review of programmes of higher education in the institute of technology sector in the period 2015-2018	External commission	2021	
Reporting by Awarding Bodies on the Approval and Re-approval of Programmes of Higher Education in Ireland: A Thematic Approach	External commission	2021	
E-Proctoring in Theory and Practice: A Review	External Commission	2021	€5,000.00

QQI early exploration into Micro-credentials in Higher Education, 2014–2020	QQI	2021	
A Review of Consortia-Led Apprenticeships in Ireland	External commission	2022	€84,075.00
An Independent Evaluation of the QQI Annual Quality Reporting Model	External commission	2023	€36,892.00
Quality in Irish Private/Independent Higher Education Institutions	External commission	2023	
Quality in Irish Public Higher Education Institutions	External commission	2023	
Quality Assurance of Further Education and Training in the ETB Sector: Sectoral Report	External commission	2023	€31,722.52
QQI Insight on Assessment: Learner Perspectives	QQI	2023	
Quality in Irish Higher Education Institutions	External commission	2023	€15,720.00
From Counting to Cultivating Successful Participation: A Review of the Landscape of Practice Supporting Access Transfer and Progression in Irish Education and Training	External commission	2023	€37,134.50
Total			€364,918.02

8.6 SUMMARY OF STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK ON THEMATIC ANALYSIS

To inform our self-assessment process, QQI conducted a series of meetings with internal and external stakeholders to gather their perceptions of, and views on, our thematic analysis activity and if and how it is used. We conducted eight meetings with QQI functional leads; three meetings with institutional representatives; one meeting with representatives of the professional, statutory, and regulatory bodies represented in QQI's Finding Common Ground programme; and two meetings with (three) organisations representing students. The outcomes of those discussions are summarised below.

1 Purposes

QQI's thematic analyses are considered to serve multiple potential purposes, including:

- Describing, and increasing awareness of, practices and issues in the HE system;
- Combining and triangulating data to produce system-level implications and learning;
- Identifying trends to inform planning;
- Providing a source of benchmarking (and thus an informal instrument of accountability) for QQI and external stakeholders;
- Stimulating and supporting sectoral discussions on future needs and directions.

The need for QQI's thematic analyses to be independent and to question and challenge the status quo at all levels of the tertiary education system – including in QQI – is a notable theme arising from our engagements with stakeholders. This stems from a sense of QQI's obligation as a public agency to protect the interests of the public – particularly the learner – who may not otherwise have much voice or agency.

2. Users and Uses

QQI's analyses have both internal and external uses. The following examples demonstrate the influence of mid-cycle thematic analyses internally in the enhancement of QQI's processes and the operation of EQA:

The 2020 [QQI Reengagement Thematic Analysis](#) (see 6.1.1) was intended to identify aspects of the process that may need to be adjusted to enhance its effectiveness and to provide further information to support future applicants. Whilst the majority of HE providers had completed reengagement at the time of its publication, the report resulted in a number of adaptations to the process which were introduced for the reengagement processes of the remaining HE and FET providers. These included the creation of standing panels to ensure greater consistency and understanding of the process by review panels and pooling of disciplinary expertise; the introduction of a shadowing process for new panel members; and the production of a [Glossary of Terms and Frequently Asked Questions](#) to aid providers in navigating the reengagement process.

- Thematic analyses have also prompted innovations in QQI's quality assurance monitoring and review processes.
 - The annual thematic analysis of AQRs has informed revisions to the format and content for annual quality reporting by HEIs, including its explicit alignment with the ESG. This

analysis also provided the catalyst for an expansion of the use of case studies in AQRs as a means of evidencing and amplifying quality enhancement initiatives and innovative practice. In addition to the widespread adoption of case studies by HEIs in quality reporting, QQI has now established an [online repository](#) of institutional case studies and hosts an annual showcase event to further support peer learning.

- The findings (see 6.2.1) of a [mid-cycle thematic analysis](#) of the review reports arising from the CINNTE institutional review cycle for the public HEIs were shared through a webinar with the institutions and, in response to the findings, revisions were made to QQI’s pre-review briefings for institutions and review teams.

Externally, stakeholders have reported that their scope of vision is sometimes quite narrow and QQI’s thematic analyses, in focusing on other parts of the HE system, afford them a greater understanding of how their own experience relates to “the bigger picture”. PSRBs, for example, have cited the recommendations arising from an analysis of [Accreditation/ Approval of Higher Education Programmes by Professional Bodies](#) as being particularly useful and much referenced in developing their processes.

“This has delivered a huge amount of value to my organisation ... we used this insight to undertake a peer-review of our own procedures”

Stakeholder Comment
QQI Stakeholder Engagement Research

In HEIs, there are varying levels of awareness of QQI’s thematic analyses, depending on the internal constituency (e.g., institutional leaders, quality assurance and enhancement staff, academic staff, professional staff etc.) and the subject of the thematic analysis. Some subjects are deemed to be of greater interest and relevance than others and the extent of their impact varies accordingly. For some institutions involved in delivering apprenticeship for example, QQI’s [Review of Consortia-Led Apprenticeships in Ireland](#) was impactful and informed the development of processes. However, feedback suggests that analyses are most commonly used in institutions to inform and contextualise, for benchmarking purposes and to inform strategy.

Stakeholders also emphasised the value of QQI’s thematic analyses as an effective mechanism for amplifying challenges and issues that are of concern to their stakeholders. [Quality in an Age of Diminishing Resources](#) (published in 2016), for example, drew attention to the impacts of the significant reduction in funding experienced by the sector. Our analysis of [The Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education A QQI Evaluation](#) and the recent [Insight on Assessment: Learner Perspectives](#) were cited as being impactful in bringing attention to the views of, and challenges experienced by, stakeholders – particularly for more marginalised groups, e.g. learners with disabilities. It was suggested that QQI’s profile provides greater exposure to these issues and our status and credibility lend greater weight to them. QQI’s analyses of this nature can therefore be used by representative and advocacy organisations as a lobbying tool, which can sometimes be more powerful and effective than relying solely on their own findings as they are deemed to be more reliable ‘evidence’.

“Really useful exercise, don’t think there’s any other organisation as well placed to conduct this research”

Stakeholder Comment
QQI Stakeholder Engagement Research

8.7 MAPPING GRID ESG 2.1

ESG Part 1	Shared QA Infrastructure for all QA Activities	QA Approval Process	Programme Validation and Revalidation	Monitoring	Cyclical Institutional Review	Focused Review
<p>1.1 Policy for quality assurance</p> <p>Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders.</p>	<p>The Core Statutory QA Guidelines (QAG) underpins all QQI quality assurance activities.</p> <p>Core QAG 2.1 Governance and Management of Quality</p> <p>1.1 Governance 1.2 Management of quality assurance 1.3 Embedding a quality culture</p> <p>Core QAG 2.2 Documented Approach to Quality Assurance</p> <p>2.1 Documented policies and procedures 2.2. A comprehensive system</p> <p>Policy and supplemental QA guidelines Policy on QA Guidelines QA Guidelines Independent/Private Providers QA Guidelines DABs QA Guidelines Institute of Technology QA Guidelines Apprenticeship QA Guidelines Research Degree Programmes</p>	<p>QA Approval Process confirms a new provider's internal QA is consistent with QQI guidelines.</p> <p>Policy and criteria for provider access to initial validation of programmes</p> <p>Current providers can extend their scope of provision by having their QA procedures approved against topic-specific QA Guidelines</p>	<p>As stated in Policy and criteria for validation of programmes, a provider must have their QA procedures approved to access programme validation</p> <p>Section 3: Prerequisites for programme validation</p> <p>Section 4: Validation in the context of a particular provider (4.1-4.4)</p> <p>Core validation criterion 17.1 The provider is eligible to apply for validation of the programme</p> <p>Core policy is supplemented by: Policy for collaborative programmes, transnational programmes and joint awards Research degree programme policy and criteria QA Guidelines for Providers of Blended and Online Learning Programmes</p>	<p>Monitoring is conducted through an Annual Quality Report (AQR) process.</p> <p>HEI submit an AQR with information on their internal QA activities.</p> <p>The AQR template is mapped explicitly to ESG Part 1.</p> <p>In addition, we hold biennial quality dialogue meeting with institutions.</p> <p>Monitoring Policy</p> <p>The AQRs are published in Quality and Monitoring Review Reports</p> <p>An annual thematic analysis of themes arising in the AQRs is published. Thematic analyses of annual quality reporting</p>	<p>The Policy for Cyclical Reviews sets out QQI's model for cyclical reviews, which is aligned to the ESG.</p> <p>QQI's institutional review process, CINNTE, confirms compliance with the ESG and QQI statutory QA guidelines. It evaluates the effectiveness of an institution's internal QA system.</p> <p>The objectives and review criteria (referenced to the ESG) are contained in the terms of reference.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review terms of reference CINNTE Handbook for Technological Universities CINNTE Handbook for Designated Awarding Bodies Addendum for review of TUs <p>Institutional review reports are published in Quality and Monitoring Review Reports</p>	<p>QQI may conduct a focused review of a provider's QA procedures from time to time, as it considers appropriate, or in response to concerns that have come to its attention in relation to the implementation and effectiveness of a provider's QA procedures.</p> <p>The Procedures for Focused Reviews by QQI of the Implementation and Effectiveness of Provider QA Procedures sets out the procedures that will be implemented by QQI when carrying out a focused review.</p>

ESG Part 1	Shared QA Infrastructure for all QA Activities	QA Approval Process	Programme Validation and Revalidation	Monitoring	Cyclical Institutional Review	Focused Review
<p>1.2 Design and approval of programmes</p> <p>Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes. The programmes should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes. The qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.</p>	<p>Section 2.3 of Core Statutory QA Guidelines (QAG) addresses programmes of education and training.</p> <p>Core QAG 2.3 Programmes of Education and Training</p> <p>3.1 Programme development and approval</p> <p>3.2 Learner admission, progression and recognition</p> <p>3.3 Programme monitoring and review.</p> <p>Section 9 addresses information and communication</p> <p>The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) provides the awards and standards infrastructure for higher education</p> <p>The Irish Register of Qualifications which is managed by QQI, includes all quality-assured, recognised qualifications offered by public and private HEIs.</p>	<p>The core QAG and validation policy are the primary reference documents for external panels in evaluating a provider's internal QA for approval.</p> <p>The approval process focuses heavily on how a provider implements, manages and governs programme design, approval and review.</p>	<p>The Policy and criteria for validation of programmes describes the process for approval and reapproval (following review) of programmes.</p> <p>Core validation criteria 17.2 The programme objectives and outcomes are clear and consistent with the QQI awards sought.</p> <p>This criterion requires that for each programme the minimum intended programme learning outcomes (MIPOs) are specified consistent with the relevant QQI awards standards and therefore the NFQ.</p> <p>Our Policy for Determining award Standards outlines how QQI award standards are developed and aligned to the NFQ.</p> <p>Our suite of higher education and training awards standards is published in QQI Awards standards</p>	<p>AQR Part A Section 2.0 Programme Development and Delivery</p>		<p>Ref – DBS report</p> <p>A focused review of Dublin Business School (2023)</p>

ESG Part 1	Shared QA Infrastructure for all QA Activities	QA Approval Process	Programme Validation and Revalidation	Monitoring	Cyclical Institutional Review	Focused Review
<p>1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment</p> <p>Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.</p>	<p>Sections 2.5 Teaching and Learning and 2.6 Assessment of Learners of Core QAG are relevant.</p> <p>QAG 2.5 Teaching and Learning Specifically, 5.1 guides that the learning environment ‘encourages a sense of autonomy in the learner, while encouraging adequate guidance and support for the learner’.</p> <p>Also, Core QAG 2.3 requires that programmes are designed with the involvement of learners.</p>	<p>The QA approval process evaluates a provider’s policy and procedures for</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Teaching and Learning (ii) Assessment of Learners <p>for completeness and effectiveness.</p>	<p>This is addressed in a number of core validation criteria.</p> <p>Core validation criterion 17.5(b) ‘In so far as it is feasible the programme provides choice to enrolled learners so that they may align their learning opportunities towards their individual educational and training needs.’</p> <p>Core validation criterion 17.8 (b) ‘Learners can interact with and are supported by others in the programme’s learning environments including peer learners, teachers and where applicable supervisors, practitioners and mentors.’</p> <p>Core validation criteria 17.9 There are sound Teaching and Learning Strategies</p> <p>Core validation criteria 17.10 There are sound Assessment Strategies</p> <p>Assessment and Standards sets out our expectations on assessment and takes a learner-centred approach.</p> <p>Section 2.11(3)(f) states ‘Teachers and learners share in the responsibilities for effective learning. Learners’ involvement in the construction of assessment tasks and criteria can enhance learning.’</p> <p>Our Effective Practice Guidelines for External Examining addresses external moderation of assessment.</p>	<p>AQR Part A Section 2.3 Teaching, learning and assessment</p>		

ESG Part 1	Shared QA Infrastructure for all QA Activities	QA Approval Process	Programme Validation and Revalidation	Monitoring	Cyclical Institutional Review	Focused Review
<p>1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification</p> <p>Institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student "life cycle", e.g., student admission, progression, recognition and certification.</p>	<p>Section 2.3.2 Core QAG Learner admission, progression and recognition, requires that 'there are pre-defined and published regulations, which are consistently applied, covering all areas related to learner admission, progression recognition and certification of awards.'</p> <p>QA Guidelines for DABs</p> <p>Section 6.1 Procedures for certification.</p> <p>Policy and Criteria for Access, Transfer and Progression, Section 4 deals with Entry Arrangements and</p> <p>Section 5 with Information provision for learners</p>	<p>The QA approval process evaluates a provider's policy and procedures with regard to the core QAG and for compliance with QQI's policy on Access, Transfer and Progression.</p>	<p>Core validation criterion 17.4 The Programme's Access, Transfer and Progression Arrangements are Satisfactory, addresses all elements of ATP for programmes leading to QQI awards.</p> <p>For those programmes leading to QQI awards, assessment is the responsibility of the provider. A provider uses QQI's secure online system to submit learner results. QQI certification is issued once verified checks are undertaken.</p>		<p>CINNTE review evaluates the extent to which an institution's procedures are in keeping with QQI policy for Access, Transfer and Progression.</p>	
<p>1.5 Teaching staff</p> <p>Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of teachers. They should apply fair and transparent processes for recruitment and development of the staff.</p>	<p>Section 2.4 Core QAG Staff Recruitment, Management and Development addresses this, and requires that a provider takes 'responsibility for the quality of its staff and for providing them with a supportive environment that allows them to carry out their work effectively.'</p> <p>Also relevant, Section 6 Topic Specific QA Guidelines for Research Degree Programmes</p>	<p>The QA approval process evaluates a provider's policy and procedures for staff recruitment, management and development with regard to the core QAG for completeness and effectiveness.</p>	<p>Core validation criterion 17.6 (a) – (f) 'There are sufficient qualified and capable programme staff available to implement the programme as planned', address this for QQI validated programmes.</p>	<p>AQR Part A Section 5 Staff Recruitment, Development and Support</p>		

ESG Part 1	Shared QA Infrastructure for all QA Activities	QA Approval Process	Programme Validation and Revalidation	Monitoring	Cyclical Institutional Review	Focused Review
<p>1.6 Learning resources and student support</p> <p>Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided.</p>	<p>Section 2.7 Core QAG Supports for Learners deals with student support and learning resources, including pastoral care supports.</p> <p>Section 2.5.4 Learning Environments and 2.6.1 Assessment of learning achievement are also relevant.</p>	<p>The QA approval process evaluates a provider's policy, procedures and resources for learner supports.</p> <p>The procedures are evaluated with regard to the core QAG for completeness and effectiveness.</p>	<p>This is addressed in a number of the core validation criteria, namely,</p> <p>17.6, 17.7, 17.8, 17.9, 17.10 and 17.11.</p>	<p>AQR Part A Section 3 Learner Resources and Supports</p>		
<p>1.7 Information management</p> <p>Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.</p>	<p>Section 2.8 (8.1-8.7) Core QAG Information and Data Management addresses this directly.</p>	<p>The QA approval process evaluates a provider's policy, procedures and resources for information management.</p> <p>The procedures are evaluated with regard to the core QAG for completeness and effectiveness.</p>	<p>Core validation criterion 17.12 The Programme is well-managed 'the programme includes intrinsic governance, quality assurance, learner assessment and access, transfer and progression procedures that functionally interface with the provider's general or institutional procedures'.</p>	<p>AQR Part A Section 6 Information and Data Management</p>		
<p>1.8 Public information</p> <p>Institutions should publish information about their activities including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to-date and readily accessible.</p>	<p>Section 2.9 (9.1-9.3) Core QAG Public Information and Communication addresses this directly.</p> <p>Section 5 Policy and Criteria for Access, Transfer and Progression, which deals with information provision for learners is also relevant here.</p>	<p>The QA approval process evaluates a provider's policy, procedures and resources for providing and managing information for the public.</p> <p>The procedures are evaluated with regard to the core QAG for completeness and effectiveness.</p>	<p>Core validation criterion 17.4 addresses programme information requirements as specified in our Policy and Criteria for Access, Transfer and Progression</p>	<p>AQR Part A Section 7 Public Information and Communication</p>		

ESG Part 1	Shared QA Infrastructure for all QA Activities	QA Approval Process	Programme Validation and Revalidation	Monitoring	Cyclical Institutional Review	Focused Review
<p>1.9 Ongoing monitoring and periodic review</p> <p>Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure they achieve objectives set for them and respond to the needs to students and society. These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned.</p>	<p>Section 2.11 Core QAG Self-Evaluation, Monitoring and Review addresses this. 'Review and self-evaluation of quality, including review of programmes of education and training, research and related services is a fundamental part of the provider quality assurance system.'</p> <p>Section 2.9.3 Core QAG Publication of quality assurance evaluation reports is also relevant to this standard.</p>	<p>The QA approval process evaluates a provider's internal monitoring process and procedures, including process for systematic feedback from stakeholders.</p> <p>The procedures are evaluated with regard to the core QAG for completeness and effectiveness.</p>	<p>As outlined in the Policy and criteria for validation of programmes section 13 programmes are validated for a specified period of time, this is normally for five years. A provider who wishes to continue to offer the programme beyond this time must have the programme revalidated.</p> <p>Validation may be reviewed by QQI and may be withdrawn if the conditions of validation are not being complied with by the provider.</p> <p>Core validation criterion 17.12 (f) is relevant to this standard.</p>	<p>AQR Part A Section 8 Monitoring and Periodic Review and Section 2 Programme Development and Delivery</p>		
<p>ESG Part 1</p>	<p>Institutional Review – CINNTE</p>					
<p>1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance</p> <p>Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis.</p>	<p>All higher education institutions are required to undergo periodic (at least every seven years) external quality review. Planned reviews are published in CINNTE Schedule 2023-2024</p> <p>Our Policy for Cyclical Reviews sets out the purpose and approach to review. Our current review process, called CINNTE, is in keeping with Parts 2 and 3 of the ESG and contains the following elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The publication of a terms of reference. • Submission of an institutional self-evaluation report (ISER). • An external assessment and site visit by a team of reviewers. • The publication of a review report with findings and recommendations. • Follow-up procedures which include publication of an implementation plan and follow-up report. <p>Review reports are published on our Quality and Monitoring Review Reports library.</p>					

8.8 REPORT ON CONTENT-INFRINGING ACTIVITY

Summary of reporting activity between QQI and advertising, publishing and social media platforms with regard to content infringing s.43A of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act 2012 (as amended)

Platform	Pieces of content reported	Pieces of content removed or restricted for Irish audiences	Pieces of content reported but not removed or restricted
Distilled SCH (Adverts.ie; DoneDeal) <i>Reporting commenced August 2021</i>	20	20	0
Gumtree <i>Reporting commenced November 2022</i>	6	6	0
YouTube <i>Reporting commenced July 2022</i>	75	59	16
Facebook <i>Reporting commenced July 2022</i>	103	83	20
Instagram <i>Reporting commenced July 2022</i>	95	70	25
TikTok <i>Reporting commenced November 2022</i>	132	61	71
TOTAL	431	299	132
TOTAL (%) (rounded to nearest whole number, where necessary)	100%	69%	31%

Note: Content which has not been removed or restricted may be reported on more than one occasion, due to it appearing again in online searches. This may lead to apparent increases in the total pieces of content for any given platform.

8.9 GLOSSARY

AI	Artificial Intelligence
ALP	Amended Legislation Programme
AQR	Annual Quality Report
ARC	Approvals and Reviews Committee
CINNTE	QQI's Institutional review cycle
DA	Delegated Authority
DAB	Designated Awarding Body
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
ELE	English Language Education
ENAI	European Network for Academic Integrity
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQA	External Quality Assurance
ESG	European Standards and Guidelines
ETB	Education and Training Board
ETINED	Ethics, Transparency, and Integrity in Education
FET	Further Education and Training
GAIN	Global Academic Integrity Network
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IEM	International Education Mark
IoT	Institute of Technology
IQA	Internal quality assurance
IUA	Irish Universities Association
NAIN	National Academic Integrity Network
NFDE	National Framework for Doctoral Education
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NStEP	National Student Engagement Programme
NUI	National University of Ireland
PESTLE	Political, Economic, Sociological, Technological, Legal and Environmental
PSC	Policies and Standards Committee
PSG	Projects Steering Group
PSRB	Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body
QA	Quality Assurance
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RCSI	Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland
Reengagement	A process by which providers previously approved by the antecedent agencies demonstrated that their quality assurance aligned with QQI Core QA guidelines.
SAR	Self-assessment Report

SOLAS	Irish: An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna, 'Further Education and Skills Service'; the state agency overseeing the FET sector in Ireland
SRS	Student Record System
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats
TEQSA	Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (Australia)
THEA	Technological Higher Education Association
TLA Report	Refers to QQI report 'The Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education'
TOWS	Threats, Opportunities, Weaknesses, Strengths
TU	Technological University
TU Dublin	Technological University Dublin
UNESCO	United National Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USI	Union of Students in Ireland
VOTE income	VOTE income refers to the grant receivable by QQI from DFHERIS

