

White Paper Procedures for Focused Reviews of Programmes of Education and Training Validated by QQI

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agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann
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CONTENTS

CONTENTS	2
1. Overview.....	3
2. Procedures	3
2.1 Notification of Provider that QQI will Initiate a Focused Review	5
2.2 Development of Terms of Reference	5
2.3 Consultation with Relevant Other Authorities	6
2.4 Appointment of a Review Team	6
2.4.1 Role of QQI in the Review	8
2.5 Programme Review Document	9
2.5.1 Completing the Programme Review Document	9
2.5.2 Content of the Programme Review Document	9
2.5.3 Submission of the Programme Review Document to the Review Team.....	11
2.6 Consideration by the Review Team of Provider Documentation	11
2.7 The Review Meeting and / or Site Visit(s)	12
2.8 The Review Reports.....	13
2.9 Provider Response	13
2.10 Consideration of the Outcomes of the Review by QQI	14
2.11 Withdrawal of Validation.....	14
2.12 Publication of Review Documentation	14
2.13 Post-Review Follow-Up	14
2.14 Appeal	14

1. Overview

This document sets out the procedures that will be implemented by QQI when carrying out a focused review of a provider's validated programme(s) of education and training.

A focused review is intended to:

- determine that the programme(s) continues to meet QQI's validation criteria established under Section 44(1) of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012;
- confirm that the programme(s) complies with conditions set by QQI under Section 45(2) of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012; and
- evaluate any other concerns that may give rise to reasonable grounds for withdrawal by QQI of validation of the programme(s).

In accordance with Section 46 of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012, QQI may conduct a focused review of a provider's validated programmes from time to time, as it considers appropriate, or in response to concerns that have come to its attention in relation to the validated programme(s). A focused review may be carried out concurrently with review(s) under other sections of the 2012 Act as part of the same process, as QQI considers necessary and appropriate. (For more information on the kinds of concerns that may give rise to a focused review of validated programmes, please refer to QQI's policy on monitoring.)

A provider may itself request that QQI carry out a **focused** review of its programme(s).

2. Procedures

Reviews of validated programme(s) are carried out under Section 46 of the 2012 Act. They are based on internationally accepted and recognised principles for review and accord, where relevant, with Part 2 of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*¹ (ESG). As noted above, a review of validated programme(s) carried out under Section 46 of the 2012 Act may be conducted in conjunction with other types of review.

Procedures for **focused reviews** of validated programme(s) will include the following elements:

¹ The ESG are available at www.engq.eu

- 1) Formal notification of a provider that a focused review of its validated programme(s) is being initiated by QQI and that terms of reference for same are being developed.
- 2) Development of terms of reference for the review, which will be communicated to the provider in advance of the review. The timing of the publication of the ToR will be determined on an individual basis, but in any case, will be published with the final report at the conclusion of the review process.
- 3) Consultation by QQI with the Higher Education Authority (HEA), where the provider under review offers programme(s) leading to higher education and training awards. Where appropriate, QQI will consult with SOLAS where the provider under review offers programme(s) leading to further education and training awards. Where the provider under review offers programmes that span further and higher education, or where the programme(s) under review is a tertiary education programme, QQI will consult with both the HEA and SOLAS.
- 4) The appointment of an independent (to QQI and the provider) expert review team.
- 5) A documented provider statement on the programme(s) under review (hereafter “the Programme Review Document”), which addresses the terms of reference for the review.
- 6) Consideration by the review team of the Programme Review Document and identification of any gaps and / or additional information required by the review team.
- 7) An assessment of the documentation submitted and a meeting with the provider (which may include a site visit) by the review team.
- 8) Production of a review report, including findings and recommendations by the review team.
- 9) Provider to confirm the factual accuracy of the report and prepare a response to the review team report, including a plan with a timeframe for implementation of any changes recommended, if appropriate.
- 10) Consideration by QQI of the review team report and provider’s response and decision as to approve or not to approve the report and its outcomes.

- 11) In the event of a proposed withdrawal of approval by QQI of programme validation, an opportunity for the provider to submit observations to QQI on the reasons given for the proposed withdrawal.
- 12) Publication of the terms of reference (if not previously published), the review team report, provider response and any other conclusions issued by QQI upon completion of the review.
- 13) Agreement of a timeline and process for follow-up with the provider.
- 14) A statutory appeals process for providers in the case of withdrawal of validation.

While these procedures will apply to all focused reviews of programme validation, the details of the arrangements in each case will be proportionate to the context and terms of reference of each provider and review.

Failure by a provider to co-operate with QQI in the conduct of the review, for example, by not submitting its Programme Review Document or other evidential documentation within agreed or set timelines, or by not facilitating meetings and site visits as stipulated in the terms of reference, will not terminate a review. Rather, the review will proceed on the basis of the evidence which can be established and elements of the review procedures which can be facilitated.

A fee applies to focused reviews of programme validation conducted by QQI and must be paid within one month of completion of the review².

2.1 Notification of Provider that QQI will Initiate a Focused Review

QQI will formally notify a provider that it will instigate a focused review of the provider's validated programme(s) and that terms of reference are being developed. QQI may meet with the provider to discuss the review process and anticipated timelines for same.

2.2 Development of Terms of Reference

Terms of reference specific to the individual provider, their context and their programme(s) will be drafted for each review. The terms of reference will be submitted to the provider for comment in

² For further information on applicable fees, please refer to the QQI website

advance of the review. Feedback from the provider will be taken into consideration where appropriate.

The terms of reference will:

- Set out the background and context for the review
- Identify the statutory basis for the review
- Set out the purpose of the review and identify any concerns to be considered by the review team
- Identify the criteria for the review (e.g. relevant criteria published by QQI and any other relevant policy and criteria)
- Identify those other agencies and bodies with whom QQI has consulted prior to commencing the review
- Establish the procedures and indicative timeline for the review. The context of the provider and the issues being considered in the ToR will be taken into account when determining the timeframe for the review.

2.3 Consultation with Relevant Other Authorities

Where the programme(s) to be reviewed lead to higher education and training awards, QQI will consult with the Higher Education Authority (HEA) before commencing the review. Where appropriate, QQI will consult with SOLAS where the programme(s) under review lead to further education and training awards. Where the provider of the programme(s) delivers programmes that programme(s) that lead to further education and training and higher education awards, or where the programme under review is a tertiary education programme, QQI will consult with both the HEA and SOLAS.

2.4 Appointment of a Review Team

QQI will appoint the review team. As with all reviews conducted by QQI, the review team will be comprised of independent experts whose impartial and considered advice will inform QQI's decision on the outcomes of a review. While the review team is appointed by QQI, QQI will not seek to influence the outcome of a review and providers are offered an opportunity before the review team is appointed to highlight any possible conflicts of interest that may exist. Review

team members will not be QQI employees. A member of the QQI executive may act as secretary to the review team and / or observe the review team visit to the provider. Where QQI is secretary to the review team, it will act to support and assist the review team in its activities, which will remain impartial and independent of QQI influence. Both the provider and the proposed review team members will be asked to declare any conflicts of interest, and QQI will determine whether these are relevant to the review. In this way, QQI will ensure an appropriate and entirely independent team of reviewers is selected. QQI has final approval over the composition of each review team.

QQI will make every effort to ensure that there is appropriate gender representation on the panel of review team members.

Composition of the Review Team: The number of review team members conducting a review will be determined on a case-by-case basis having regard to the individual context of the provider and the concerns (if any) being investigated. The review team will consist of carefully selected, trained and briefed reviewers who have appropriate skills, experience and competence to perform the review. The review team will operate under the leadership of the review chairperson.

The review team will typically consist of:

- a review chairperson – a reviewer who is a (serving or former) senior leader within a provider of the same type as that whose programme(s) are under review (e.g. further education and training (FET) provider; higher education and training (HET) provider, English language organisation (ELTOs) etc.). In the case of providers offering HET, the Chairperson will usually have experience as President/Registrar or Deputy President;
- a reviewer with experience and understanding of the subject area and / or programme type under review; and
- a student representative selected enrolled or recently enrolled on a similar programme to that under review.

Other reviewers may be appointed, as appropriate, depending on the issues to be considered, as set out in the terms of reference. The principles of competence and independence will be exercised when appointing the review team. The provider will have no role in the appointment of the review team, other than to confirm that there are no conflicts of interest, and will not liaise

directly with the review team except in the context of the designated meeting between the review team and the Provider.

2.4.1 Role of QQI in the Review

In accordance with the functions set out in the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012, QQI will:

- Develop and publish terms of reference for the review
- Contact, confirm and appoint review team members
- Consult with other agencies, bodies as appropriate
- Plan and facilitate the review process
- Provide all relevant documentation to the review team.
- Support the review activities of the review team and advise the team on criteria and policy
- Act as a point of contact between the review team and the provider
- Organise visits in cooperation with the review team and the provider
- Provide induction to the review team
- Seek legal advice, where required
- Prepare report for agreement by the review team
- Provide a copy of the report to the provider to confirm factual accuracy and make any corrections as appropriate
- Submit the review report and all associated documentation to the appropriate QQI governance structure for consideration and decision and communicate the outcomes to the provider
- In a case where withdrawal of validation by QQI is proposed, it will inform the provider and state the reasons for the proposed withdrawal. In so doing, QQI will inform the provider that within one month it may submit any observations on the proposed withdrawal in writing to QQI. QQI will consider any written observations made. Should QQI continue to consider that withdrawal of validation is appropriate, QQI will notify the provider in writing of the withdrawal; the date from which it is effective and the reasons for the withdrawal.
- Provide a copy of the final report to the provider and publish the report (including the observations of the provider)
- Agree a schedule with the provider for follow-up on any recommendations made on foot of the review.

2.5 Programme Review Document

The provider will complete a Programme Review Document outlining how it delivers its validated programme(s) and any changes made to same since validation. The Programme Review Document will address any particular issues identified in the terms of reference for the review.

The Programme Review Document, together with the terms of reference, are the primary documents used by the review team. This provides the review team with the documented evidence, or references to evidence, to support claims that the programme(s) continues to meet the validation criteria and conditions. The Programme Review Document may be supplemented by other evidence sources as appropriate. Following receipt of the Programme Review Document, the review team may request additional information as necessary.

2.5.1 Completing the Programme Review Document

It is the responsibility of each provider to devise its own systematic and critical process for completing the Programme Review Document. In preparing its Programme Review Document, the provider should have close regard to the objectives for the review and the criteria set out in the terms of reference.

2.5.2 Content of the Programme Review Document

The key function of the Programme Review Document is to delineate the performance of the programme(s) with respect to each objective set out in the terms of reference ('ToR'). The response to each objective in the ToR should be clearly marked and highlighted in the Programme Review Document, the emphasis being on demonstrating how the provider has evaluated the programme against the objective. The provider should set out its own view on the programme under each sub-heading and articulate the basis for that view, including references to evidence and supporting materials.

The purpose of the Programme Review Document is to provide the review team with sufficient information and evidence to assess the ongoing compliance of the programme(s) with validation criteria and conditions. The Programme Review Document may contain the following elements (though not necessarily in this order) where appropriate:

- A brief description of:

- o the context of the provider
 - o the provider's collaborations (where relevant)
 - o how the Programme Review Document was compiled.
- A brief, clear and simple explanation of:
 - o the provider's own internal quality assurance procedures as they pertain to the programme(s) under review
 - A brief, clear and simple description of:
 - o the programme(s) under review; their delivery and associated learner and staff data; and
 - o any changes to the programme(s) and its delivery from the time of validation and a rationale for such changes
 - Address any other objectives set out in the terms of reference and submit any additional evidence sources requested in the ToR or by the review team.

The Programme Review Document should lead to conclusions about the programme with respect to the objectives set out in the terms of reference. The Programme Review Document may, where appropriate, also contain an index to supporting documentation and supplementary evidence.

It is the responsibility of each provider to determine the most appropriate format for its own Programme Review Document, taking into account its profile and context and the terms of reference for the review. As the ToR for each review will be particular to the provider and programme(s) in question and any concerns or issues being examined, it is not possible for QQI to generate a one-size-fits-all template for the Programme Review Document. However, QQI, in liaison with the review team, will provide any clarifications required by the provider in completing the Document. The provider is required to provide a comprehensive but concise Programme Review Document (normally less than 30 pages – not including appendices).

The provider may include other annexes, but the number and length of these should be limited to what is considered by the provider to be strictly necessary in order to support the assertions and argumentation in the Programme Review Document. Any additional information should be related to the key objectives and criteria of the review and an index provided for same. The index should clearly indicate the relevance of the material and link it explicitly to the Programme Review Document and the objectives and criteria of the review. Electronic copies of all documentation must be submitted.

2.5.3 Submission of the Programme Review Document to the Review Team

The Programme Review Document should be read and endorsed by the head of the provider before being sent to QQI. This is to confirm that the senior management team has accepted the Programme Review Document as an accurate reflection of the programme(s) under review. The provider should also ensure that the Programme Review Document is made available to all staff or students who will meet the review team.

The provider is required to submit the Programme Review Document (electronically) to QQI on or before the date set out in the terms of reference. Upon receipt, the Programme Review Document will be distributed to the review team members. QQI and the review team will respect the confidentiality of the Document and the information contained therein. The provider is also welcome to make the Programme Review Document and appendices available through a password-protected, intranet facility for the review.

2.6 Consideration by the Review Team of Provider Documentation

Following receipt of the Programme Review Document, the review team will hold a planning meeting. This meeting will provide the review team with an opportunity to share reactions, views and comments on the Programme Review Document that will ideally have been received a minimum of 2 weeks in advance of the planning meeting. The review team may identify gaps in the documentation received to date and request that the provider clarify any questions and or submit additional material at this time. Adequate time will be allocated to providers to prepare and submit such documentation ahead of the meeting with the review team. QQI may also make additional documentation available to the review team. Such documents will be shared with the provider.

2.7 The Review Meeting and / or Site Visit(s)

The review will include at least one meeting between the review team and the provider and may include a site visit to the premises of the provider, though more than one visit may be necessary in some circumstances. This review meeting and or site visit has a number of key functions:

- to enable the review team to share, face to face, the impressions gained from the pre-visit information;
- to gather and explore evidence, in meetings and interviews with key staff, on the programme(s) under review;
- to compile information and produce material to be used in the draft report.
- to further inform the review team's preliminary findings and to communicate these in person;
- to identify any areas of particularly good practice to be commended and any recommendations for improvement

The schedule for the review meeting(s) will be designed to provide the review team with an opportunity to meet a diverse group of staff (academic and non-academic) and students relevant to the programme(s) and its delivery. Students and staff should be prepared to have an open and honest exchange with the review team.

All meetings between the review team and attendees are private and confidential, with no other member of provider staff permitted to be present, even as observers or note takers. Providers are expected to communicate with the review team at the meeting through relevant staff and not through legal representation. All meetings will be kept strictly to time by the Chairperson.

While every effort should be made by the provider to enable the review team to meet with a diverse group of people, it is possible that diary clashes or prior commitments might result in a few key absences during the review visit. In such cases, QQI will liaise with the provider to explore alternative opportunities for the individual(s) to contribute to the review. This might be achieved via video calls, or email correspondence. If this approach is required, the exchange will be undertaken in advance of the final day of the review visit. Where possible, two members of the review team will participate and make a note of the exchange, to be shared with the other review team members.

The review team will follow the programme agreed by the Chairperson.

QQI may attend meetings during the review visit to ensure the robustness of the review process.

2.8 The Review Reports

The review will conclude with a report(s) of the review team, which will be considered by QQI.

The report(s) will set out the finding of the review team in relation to the programme(s).

The key findings to be made by the review team relate to:

- 1) whether the programme(s) continues to meet QQI's validation criteria established under Section 44(1) of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012;
- 2) whether the programme(s) complies with conditions set by QQI under Section 45(2) of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012; and
- 3) any other concerns that may give rise to reasonable grounds for withdrawal by QQI of validation of the programme(s).

On foot of their findings, the review team may:

- 1) Recommend that QQI continue to validate the programme(s);
- 2) Propose conditions, for approval by QQI, with which the provider must comply in order to continue to avail of validation of the programme(s);
- 3) Recommend that QQI withdraw validation of the programme(s), where:
 - i) The programme(s) has failed to comply with validation criteria and conditions; or
 - ii) There are other reasonable grounds for withdrawing validation of the programme(s),

In the interests of equity and reliability, the review team will set out in its report the grounds for each of its findings and recommendations. Where appropriate, the review team will commend a provider's delivery of a programme(s) or aspects thereof.

2.9 Provider Response

Following receipt of a draft review report(s), the provider will have two weeks in which to comment on matters of factual accuracy. The provider may also prepare a response to the review team report(s), which may include a plan and a schedule for implementation of any recommendations made by the review team.

2.10 Consideration of the Outcomes of the Review by QQI

The review team report(s), the factual accuracy confirmation (if any) and provider response (if any) will be considered by QQI. Following consideration, QQI may:

- Take no further action
- Make recommendations to a provider in relation to the validated programme(s)
- Propose withdrawal of validation

2.11 Withdrawal of Validation

Should QQI propose to withdraw validation, QQI will inform the provider and will state the reasons for the proposed withdrawal. The provider will have one month from the service of this notice in which to submit observations in writing to QQI in relation to the reasons given for the proposed withdrawal.

Where, following consideration of the written observations, QQI continues to consider that withdrawal of validation should take place, it will provide notice in writing to the provider of its withdrawal of validation from such date as it considers appropriate, having regard of the interests of enrolled learners. This date will not precede the date on which notice of withdrawal is served.

2.12 Publication of Review Documentation

QQI will publish the terms of reference (if not already published), the review team report(s), and any response to the report provided by the provider. All relevant agencies and bodies with a vested interest in the provider or its programmes will be informed of the review and its outcomes.

2.13 Post-Review Follow-Up

At the conclusion of the review, QQI will agree with the provider a timeline and process to follow up any recommendations made during the review. Initial follow-up will occur not later than 12 months following the review.

2.14 Appeal

The provider may appeal a withdrawal of validation to the Appeals Panel. Further information on the statutory appeals process can be found [here](#).