

Thematic Analysis
of the CINTE Review Reports of
Independent and Private
Higher Education Institutions

QQI INSIGHTS.



Dearbhú Cáilíochta
agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann
Quality and
Qualifications Ireland

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INTRODUCTION

The thematic analysis presented in this report identifies the key themes and topics arising within the CINNTE institutional review reports of the four independent and private higher education institutions (HEIs)¹, the site visits of which were conducted in 2024, namely,

- (i) Dublin Business School (DBS)
- (ii) Hibernia College
- (iii) Griffith College (GC)
- (iv) National College of Ireland (NCI)

The CINNTE cycle of reviews conducted by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), is an element of the broader quality framework for institutions composed of quality assurance (QA) guidelines, each institution's internal QA system, submission of annual quality reports (AQRs), and biennial quality dialogue meetings. This analysis seeks to provide insights into the effectiveness of QA processes and within these institutions arising from the findings of the CINNTE review process and review team reports.

1 The CINNTE review reports are available in QQI's reviews library, <https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/quality-assurance-education-training/reviews>

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for the thematic analysis is structured using the objectives for the review as the framework. This framework also guided the prompts for Microsoft Copilot which was used to assist in identifying the key themes, see below. The analysis and themes arising are organised under the headings of the key objectives for the reviews as outlined in the [Terms of Reference](#):

1. **Governance and Management** – to review the effectiveness and comprehensiveness of the governance and management of quality throughout the organisation.
2. **Teaching, Learning and Assessment** – to evaluate the arrangements to ensure the quality of teaching, learning and assessment within the provider and a high-quality learning experience for all learners.
3. **Self-Evaluation, Monitoring and Review** – to evaluate the arrangements for the monitoring, review and evaluation of, and reporting on, the provider’s education, training and related services (including through third-party arrangements) and the QA system and procedures underpinning them.

The thematic analysis generally focuses on the following questions:

- What are the key themes and topics addressed in the review reports?
- What are the key findings presented in the review reports?

APPROACH

This thematic analysis was conducted combining both generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) and traditional manual analysis of the review reports². Using the licensed version of [Microsoft 365 Copilot](#) (MS Copilot), a browser-based AI tool,³ a desk review was undertaken by one QQI executive staff member on each of the four reports, with MS Copilot being assigned the role of a research assistant, extracting and synthesising the key themes within the core headings of the framework.

In parallel, a separate desk analysis was undertaken by another QQI executive staff member manually extracting and documenting the key themes. Neither staff member communicated on the findings from the data until the individual analysis was complete. Following this, the themes and insights were compared; through discussion and collaboration the final set of themes were identified.⁴ In considering the five levels or tiers of assistance by GenAI⁵, for the purpose of this thematic analysis, it is categorised as level 3.

Level	Prompt example
(1) Basic editing, such as checking spelling and grammar or suggesting synonyms.	'Check the spelling and grammar in this paragraph and suggest synonyms for repetitive words.'
(2) Structural editing, such as paraphrasing, translating or improving the structure of the text in its flow or coherence.	'Paraphrase this lengthy sentence to improve clarity and flow.'
(3) Creating derivative content, such as summarising, creating titles and abstracts, rewriting or generating analogies.	<p>'Taking the role of research assistant, summarise the findings of the review team under the topic of 'Governance and Management of Quality' for the review report of [X] institution'.</p> <p>'As a research assistant, consider the review report for [X] institution and summarise findings of the review team on Academic Integrity'.</p>
(4) Creating new content, such as completing, continuing or expanding text or brainstorming ideas.	'Continue the text to explain the key question being addressed. Show why it is important, drawing parallels or analogies where you see fit'.
(5) Evaluation or feedback, such as assessing the quality of the writing or finding weaknesses in it.	'Review the introduction and highlight logical gaps or areas that need further development'.

² This aligns to QQI strategic commitment to 'publish system-level analysis of our annual monitoring and period evaluation of providers, using artificial intelligence where appropriate'. QQI Statement of Strategy 2025-2027

³ This forms part of a pilot within QQI in testing GenAI in external QA processes.

⁴ This integrated methodology was adapted from the case study *The use of Generative AI in qualitative analysis: Inductive thematic analysis with ChatGPT* | Journal of Applied Learning and Teaching

⁵ Adapted from Table 1, Techniques for supercharging academic writing with generative AI (Lin, Zhiceng 2024)



SECTION 1: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In 2024, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) initiated the institutional reviews of the four largest independent and private higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ireland. These reviews are part of QQI's CINNTE cycle of reviews, which has been extended to include the independent and private HEIs alongside publicly regulated institutions. These providers were prioritised based on their intention to seek delegated authority (DA) when it becomes available.

QQI's CINNTE review process evaluates the effectiveness of institution-wide QA procedures to enhance the quality of education, training, research and related services.

The CINNTE review process is aligned with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015). Discrete terms of reference and a handbook were developed specifically for the review of independent and private providers; these were published in late 2023.

The institutional review site visits concluded in Q4, 2024, with the publication of all review reports by Q2, 2025. The review process includes self-evaluation reports, external assessments through desk reviews and on-site dialogues by an external review team, and the publication of review reports with findings and recommendations.

The inclusion of independent and private HEIs in the CINNTE review cycle marks a significant step towards enhancing the quality and accountability of higher education in Ireland, fostering trust and public confidence. By extending the review process to these institutions, QQI aims to ensure that all HEIs, regardless of their regulatory status, adhere to high standards of QA and continuous improvement.



SECTION 2: METHODOLOGY USED TO PREPARE THE ISER

The Institutional Self-Evaluation Report (ISER) is a key component of the CINNTE review process, providing the institution with an opportunity to reflect on practices and examine how effectively it assures and enhances the quality of its teaching, learning, research and service activities, to support the achievement of its strategic goals. The self-evaluation process is a reflective and critical evaluation completed by the members of an institution's community, including learners, staff at all levels of the organisation, and external stakeholders.

This thematic analysis examines the methodologies employed by the four institutions in developing their ISERs, highlighting common themes and approaches.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

All four institutions adopted an inclusive approach to stakeholder engagement in the development of the ISER. This included forming ISER working groups with representatives from various departments and conducting a range of consultation activities with stakeholders, including staff, students and external partners ensuring a wide range of perspectives and insights.

Review teams acknowledged and recognised the efforts by the institutions to engage with stakeholders, although there was some variation in the extent of engagement. In one instance the review team reported that participation of more diverse stakeholders, such as external examiners and employers/placement providers, would have been beneficial, and in another, the team noted that while there was active engagement with student groups, it was disappointing to see no student representative on the ISER working group.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The institutions employed diverse data-driven approaches in the development of their ISERs, gathering quantitative and qualitative data from various sources such as student surveys, staff feedback and institutional performance metrics. Examples cited in the reports include staff feedback and data from student focus groups and external examiner reports. Other good examples included the production of case studies following a peer review exercise to showcase examples of internal quality reviews, good practice and areas of enhancement.

It was noted that the shared analysis of data created a sense of buy-in, invoked a sense of shared purpose with stakeholders and supported meaningful engagement with the review process. One institution earned a commendation for their approach to institutional review and the support and guidance provided to the institution community. However, in another institution, it was observed that incorporating more metrics and statistical data could have offered more quantifiable support to the narrative and conclusions presented in the ISER. It was further noted that some institutions had limited participation of students in ISER working/development groups.

REFLECTIVE AND EVALUATIVE APPROACH

The review teams noted that the ISERs demonstrated a strong commitment to critical reflection and continuous improvement across the institutions, identifying key areas for enhancement and setting out action plans. All institutions generated recommendations for future actions and improvements in QA processes within their ISERs.

ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC GOALS

The ISERs were closely aligned with the strategic goals and objectives of each institution, ensuring relevance and focus on key areas. Review teams noted that existing strategic indicators were relevant for monitoring quality, understanding the student journey and effectively utilising data from programme review processes. The alignment of these indicators was also seen as a mechanism to ensure that the process of self-evaluation would support the institution's mission and future development.

It was also noted that strengthening formal QA processes with systematic, data-driven monitoring and the alignment of actions could further enhance effective QA governance. Where institutions reported projected growth, the review teams recommended that planning and development processes should be consolidated into fully integrated strategic management frameworks. Similarly, it was recommended that institutions prioritise strategic workforce development plans to identify and acknowledge the staff resources needed to support growth, and to move away from the informal and commendable 'all hands-on deck' approach. This would ensure that the roles and responsibilities of staff in cross-functional processes are clear, up to date and appropriately defined.

IDENTIFICATION OF KEY AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Each ISER identified several key areas for improvement, including enhancing student support services, improving assessment and feedback processes and strengthening governance and management structures.

These recommendations aim to enhance the effectiveness of the ISER methodology and contribute to the continuous improvement of QA processes within these institutions.



SECTION 3: GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

Governance and management structures are crucial for ensuring the effectiveness and comprehensiveness of QA within HEIs. This thematic analysis examines the effectiveness of QA governance and management processes across the four institutions, highlighting the common themes arising in the good practice and identified areas for improvement.

Review teams found that in the main, the institutions have established solid governance structures to oversee their QA processes and ensure a clear demarcation between the corporate and academic structures. These structures typically include a board of directors, an academic board, a senior leadership team (SLT) and various subcommittees of the academic board. These multiple committees oversee various academic and operational elements of QA to monitor the effectiveness of QA and enhancement processes. While the separation of corporate and academic structures is essential, in one institution, the Academic Dean (who is also the Academic Board Chair) was appointed to the Board of Directors to ensure an academic perspective was included in the Board's planning and decision making. It was also noted that within the same institution a board member was currently working and supporting digital learning staff on a specific AI project. In other institutions, the inclusion of independent non-executive directors on academic and quality sub-committees and the establishment of sub-committees for managing risk were commended as welcome QA enhancements by review teams.

However, review teams also noted that governance structures can be overly complex and duplicative and have encouraged institutions to remain alert to these issues and to regularly monitor and streamline their governance processes to avoid unnecessary complexity. In one instance, the review team identified certain remedial actions to ensure that documented details of academic committees remain accurate, up to date and easily accessible to all stakeholders at a central point.

QUALITY ASSURANCE POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

All four institutions have documented and formalised their procedures and processes and have established QA handbooks/manuals containing academic policies and procedures. Review teams noted these policies are periodically reviewed and updated and in all institutions quality handbooks/manuals are, for the most part, the primary and centralised source of information on internal QA processes that relate to the breadth of institutional activities.

Review teams have recommended that handbooks/manuals are kept up to date through a continuous review cycle that reflects a culture of continuous improvement and ensures accurate information is provided in a single source. In one institution, the review team recommended the consolidation of existing planning and development processes into a fully integrated strategic management framework to ensure that these processes are documented and have a dependable reference point thus supporting both transparency and accountability.

To further strengthen these processes, review teams found that in some cases institutions would benefit from a clearer definition of quality in their own context. They recommended developing clear, measurable quality indicators based on data to inform decision-making and provide insights for the governing body, senior management, and faculty.

STAFF RECRUITMENT, MANAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

Institutions follow recruitment policies to ensure candidates meet the required qualifications and experience. The recruitment process includes competency-based interviews and verification of qualifications and references. Continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities are provided, with policies to support staff growth and recognition of and adherence to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) requirements. However, there were some common observations by review teams noting that institutions should work to safeguard and monitor structured and transparent approaches to career progression and performance management. Review teams further advised that institutions should be cognisant and ensure an optimum balance of full-time faculty and associate faculty to support strategic priorities.

Institutions with research focused priorities have also been encouraged to initiate workload management models that provide time and capacity for research.

Review teams found good EDI practices embedded into specific staff training in recruitment and selection, dignity and respect, mental health and other EDI related topics extending to inclusive language guidelines, pronoun use, and LGBTQIA+ supports.

Institutional commitment to EDI is also evident through awards and memberships. One institution has successfully renewed its Athena SWAN bronze award and is now seeking a silver award. A second institution also reported its plans to apply for a bronze award through engagement with the Athena SWAN Charter. This same institution is also a member of Advance HE.

The findings of review teams indicate that institutions have succeeded in creating a quality culture through EDI with faculty and staff demonstrating a strong commitment to their students. In some instances, the review teams suggested that institutions should ensure all staff are thoroughly familiar with respective quality handbooks/manuals and their contents through regular mandatory training sessions, particularly when updates and changes are made. Other evidence of EDI practices is noted in teaching practices and the learner environment in section 4.

PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT, APPROVAL AND SUBMISSION FOR VALIDATION

Review teams found that in the main the institutions have sound processes for programme development, approval and submission for validation. Three of the four institutions have devolved responsibility from QQI.⁶ Good practice has been identified by review teams and in one institution the programme development model is divided into a number of stages focusing on the development and review of potential new programmes that includes external evaluation using mock panels to ensure programmes meet academic, industry and regulatory standards. The involvement of stakeholders, including students, faculty, and industry partners, in the programme

⁶ QQI may devolve some responsibility to the provider concerned for arranging the independent evaluation report. Section 6.2 of Core Policies and Criteria for the Validation by QQI of Programmes of Education and Training addresses the devolution of responsibility

development process helps to foster transparency and inclusiveness within the institution, as well as ensuring that programmes are aligned with market needs and student expectations.

ACCESS, TRANSFER AND PROGRESSION (ATP)

Inclusive access policies promote diversity and ensure fair admission processes. Pathways identified through the review process include standard entry, non-standard entry, Central Applications Office (CAO) applications, direct applications, and mature applications. Review teams found there was evidence of good assessment processes for non-standard entry applicants, ensuring learners meet eligibility criteria.

While review teams could be assured of effective ATP policies, the pathways offered and the applicants seeking entry into these institutions varies widely. In one institution, the focus is on lifelong learning, beginning with early years education. Specific initiatives aimed at providing interventions to support preschool children in areas of social deprivation, as well as supporting second level students to build ICT skills are establishing strong networks with these communities and expanding potential pathways into higher education.

GOVERNANCE AND OVERSIGHT PROCESSES FOR STUDENT ASSESSMENT AND RESULTS DATA

It was evident to the review teams that institutions place great importance on the integrity of student assessment and the accuracy of results data. Institutions' QA governance and oversight processes ensure that assessments are fair, transparent and aligned with learning outcomes.

Review teams saw evidence of regular audits and reviews of assessment processes being conducted to maintain high standards of academic integrity and reliability of results data. In all institutions, external examiners provide feedback, and results are ratified by the relevant academic committee.

Review teams noted that all institutions had undertaken substantial work and developed policies in academic integrity in line with national and international best practice. They have also been proactive engaging in national and international networks focused on academic integrity. One institution completed an in-depth research study on GenAI, informing their new GenAI policy and creating the new Academic Integrity Champions Network (AICN) to support greater awareness of acceptable and unacceptable uses of GenAI, engage in peer learning events and share research findings based on this research.

For institutions with a focus on developing research, it was recommended that an approach to academic integrity specifically directed towards research and research-based programmes should be adopted.

PUBLIC INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS

Institutions ensure clear and transparent communication with stakeholders through various channels. Public information, including policies and procedures, is made accessible to ensure stakeholders are well-informed. Regular meetings with various stakeholders, including faculty, students, and external partners, are held to discuss updates, gather feedback, and make decisions. Institutions use digital tools to facilitate communication and information sharing.

For most institutions, review teams made recommendations in this area to guide and support the bolstering and strengthening of strategies in place. In one institution, the review team advised improving ICT capabilities and ensuring staff received appropriate and regular training. In another institution, the focus was on increasing engagement with staff and students to promote QA services available and to encourage greater participation in QA activities by students.

Review teams have advised institutions to strengthen approaches to information and communication particularly in circumstances where significant growth in student numbers is planned. Not only should the approach be strengthened but mechanisms should be developed to ensure effectiveness.

OTHER PARTIES INVOLVED IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Institutions collaborate with various educational and professional bodies to enhance programme offerings and ensure they meet industry standards. This includes partnerships for programme delivery and professional accreditation. Institutions engage with industry advisory boards for each discipline area, consisting of industry professionals who provide insights and recommendations to ensure the curriculum remains relevant and up to date with industry trends.

Review teams noted that building strong partnerships with industry was important for building opportunities for internships and placements for students across all institutions, especially for international students. It was further noted that placements and internships were highly valued and seen as beneficial to students with one recommendation that these should be extended across a wider range of programmes. One institution has been commended for their proactive approach which has helped to maintain relationships with third-party providers, support consistent alignment and communication across all collaborations and strengthen educational offerings.

Review teams recommended the importance of consolidating procedures for collaborative provision centrally and ensuring appropriate and robust governance structures for oversight of the quality of delivery with partners. Other recommendations included promoting partnerships with industry, community and voluntary partners to demonstrate strategic importance within an institution and to publicise the benefit to students and the wider community.

RESEARCH, ENTERPRISE AND INNOVATION

Research, enterprise and innovation are supported through dedicated policies and initiatives aimed at fostering a research culture and encouraging innovation among faculty and students.

Institutions have developed and are committed to comprehensive QA frameworks to support each of these activities, often with an emphasis on sustainable growth and strategic alignment.

Institutions offer internal funding and support applications for external research grants to encourage faculty and students to engage in research assignments. In one institution, a research repository has been established to compile the research outputs of both staff and students. These outputs are also published in an annual journal series, established by the institution and now in its seventh edition, which enhances students' profiles and confidence and supports further external publication of their research. Financial support has also helped advance research initiatives and foster a research culture within the institution.

Conversely, some institutions are seeking to expand their research objectives and/or current research activity from enterprise-oriented applied research to other areas such as research programmes. While independent and private HEIs do not have any QQI validated research degree programmes, some have established collaborative partnerships with other degree awarding HEIs to make doctoral and master's degrees by research more accessible.

Review teams have acknowledged that while some institutions have included research as a key strategic priority there is need for more specific and measurable planning that set out key targets and KPIs and ensure effective monitoring of progress.

IDENTIFIED AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

For objective one the following common topics are flagged by review teams as being some areas for improvement and enhancement.

- Complexity and duplication of governance structures; institutions are encouraged to streamline their governance processes to avoid unnecessary complexity.
- Increase student engagement across governance structures.
- Ensure governance processes incorporate evidence-based strategic analyses and follow-up to inform decision making based on internal monitoring and review processes.
- Prioritise communication and dissemination of QA policies and processes and ensure consistent implementation across the institution.
- Strengthen staff development and review the optimum balance between fulltime and part-time teaching staff through strategic workforce development plans, especially where projected growth in student numbers is flagged as a strategic priority.
- Systematic monitoring and follow-up; institutions would benefit from more systematic, data-driven monitoring and follow-up.
- Institutions with strategic priorities in research should establish a specific approach to academic integrity in learning and research and develop workload management models to support staff who are research active.

Each institution demonstrated a commitment to maintaining effective QA governance and management systems and methodologies. These methodologies contribute to the overall effectiveness of the CINNTE review process and the continuous enhancement of QA in HEIs.



SECTION 4: TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

Teaching, learning, and assessment are fundamental components of HEIs. This thematic analysis examines the findings of the review teams in the policies, processes and practices employed by the institutions in ensuring the quality of teaching, learning, and assessment, highlighting common topics arising.

Review teams have consistently confirmed the institutions' dedication to maintaining high standards in their teaching, learning and assessment practices. Programmes are designed by expert faculty and undergo a multi-layered approach towards validation. Policy focuses on increasing flexibility and authenticity in the learning environment and promoting greater integration between students, faculty and industry to allow for a more holistic student-centred experience. This extends to a blended model for teaching that includes integrating online and face-to-face instruction with work placements. Two institutions make specific reference to the use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles in their teaching practices with one institution offering a certified digital badge to all staff.

All institutions have demonstrated good practice in teaching. The implementation of UDL practices in one institution demonstrates the accessibility and inclusiveness of programmes and the review team noted here that all modules are embedded with EDI themes, including ethics, building confidence and supporting practice-based elements of the programmes, particularly when it comes to work placements. In another institution, it has a dedicated teaching enhancement unit focused on developing staff resources to support changes to blended and online learning. A third institution operates a rigorous process for monitoring of teaching, including a mock lecture as part of the selection process in the recruitment of teaching staff.

All institutions engage in comprehensive monitoring through student feedback and oversight by programme leaders and committees. In one institution the review team has recommended that ongoing support in pedagogy should be provided to teaching staff to optimise effective teaching practice, especially in large class situations.

THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Review teams noted that institutions have established learning environments that support student engagement and success. Institutions have invested in physical and digital infrastructure to enhance the learning experience. Review teams noted evidence of significant investment in capital building projects, in campus enhancements, and in facilities and supports for students. One institution has considered the needs of the learning environment by implementing annual cross-department and faculty collaboration programmes which address institution-wide development and upgrade requirements across the campus to support the success of its students. A second institution has transformed its former library into a comprehensive student support hub following the acquisition of an additional building nearby.

Review teams noted that modes of delivery are determined by the needs of students but there is insufficient clarity in some institutions on how these modes of delivery and pedagogical methods

are evaluated to meet the needs of these students. It has been recommended that as demand grows for more flexibility in the modes of delivery offered, it should be balanced with the best possible pedagogical approaches to ensure parity of experience for all students (fulltime, part-time and international) and kept under review.

It was noted that all the institutions are focused on the development and extension of blended and online learning and have sought, or are planning to seek, formal extension to their scope of provision from QQI in 2025, with some HEIs seeking to offer programmes fully online. Review teams noted initiatives such as teaching enhancement units, and innovations in professional development practices and academic integrity as well as extended digital transformation across campuses to support this extended scope of provision.

The theme of EDI emerges here again as one institution is commended for current good practice but is also encouraged to regularly monitor and update QA processes to ensure the continued equitable treatment of students and staff and the safeguarding of inclusive learning and working environments.

ASSESSMENT OF LEARNERS

The integrity and approval of learner results are critical for maintaining academic standards. Institutions have both updated current policies and developed new policies to address emerging challenges in academic integrity, to incorporate best practices and ensure the authenticity of learner outcomes. Some examples of good practice in academic integrity have been outlined in section 3. One institution was specifically commended for the objectivity and fairness of their assessment processes, but review teams have also identified areas for improvement in the consistency, accessibility and communication of information and evidence of practice to all stakeholders.

SUPPORTS FOR LEARNERS

A common feature across the institutions and noted by review teams is the wide range of support services and resources provided to students. These services typically include physical and digital student support-hubs, library support centres, learning and disability support services, career development and employability service, and specific support services for international students.

Review teams commended the comprehensive and effective support arrangements in place, including those for international students. Some areas for improvement identified by review teams have focused on the early stages of the student journey and what constitutes the starting point vis-à-vis the acceptance of a place or the start date, particularly for international students. In one institution, the review team deliberated on the extent of institutional responsibility regarding pastoral care and the level of supports offered to students e.g. providing formal assistance to secure accommodation.

Other themes are concentrated on the usage, clarity and accessibility of information on student services to reflect and support diverse student populations. Some institutions have been advised to monitor the usage of these supports by producing clear data on the services, staffing levels and student population in order to provide a more transparent evidence base for decision making.

IDENTIFIED AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The following common topics have been flagged by review teams as being some areas for improvement and enhancement across teaching, learning and assessment practices in these four institutions.

- Providing clarity and accessibility of information on assessment processes for students, ensuring consistency in the provision of assessment information within institutions.
- Maintaining an effective framework for monitoring, benchmarking and analysis of student results.
- Adapting and development policies to address emerging challenges in academic integrity, such as the use of AI-generated materials.
- Expanding the range of programmes that include accredited placements and work-integrated learning to enhance employability and practical experience for students.
- Developing and enhancing a 'students as partners' approach in self-evaluation, monitoring and review activities that embeds student participation in all governance fora, including academic council committees and programme committees.

These recommendations aim to enhance the effectiveness of assessment practices and contribute to the continuous improvement of QA processes within these institutions.



SECTION 5: SELF-EVALUATION, MONITORING, AND REVIEW

All institutions have established self-evaluation processes with mechanisms to involve a range of stakeholders. These processes include periodic reviews of programmes, student services, and administrative functions.

MONITORING AND REVIEW MECHANISMS

Institutions employ various monitoring and review mechanisms to ensure the quality and effectiveness of their programmes and services. These mechanisms include internal audits, external reviews, and regular feedback from stakeholders. Review teams have found that all four institutions have conducted annual programme reviews and periodic external evaluations to ensure compliance with quality standards.

One institution was commended for their ‘multi-layered approach’ in identifying areas for improvement in programmes that include the monitoring of work integrated learning activities. In this case, newly recruited work placement coordinators in key disciplines were seen as a positive step in risk management to ensure the enhancement of learning and alignment with programme objectives and learning outcomes.

In a second institution it was noted that while the monitoring and review of support functions and services was deemed as ‘excellent’, there was a tendency for the focus on quality processes to be more localised thus making it more difficult to identify and share learning in areas of good practice and highlight quality enhancement at an institutional level.

A third institution, with multiple campuses, was commended for the ‘strong integration and robustness’ of its monitoring and review mechanisms – in particular programmatic reviews through devolved responsibility - that provided for internal comparison and benchmarking.

DATA-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING

Data-driven decision making is a key practice in enhancing institutional processes. By collecting and analysing data from various sources, such as student surveys, performance metrics, and feedback from stakeholders, institutions can inform their self-evaluation and review practices. Using data analytics helps identify areas for improvement and track progress towards goals, thereby supporting effective decision-making.

Many of the institutions have developed or are in the process of developing dashboard systems. One institution was commended for their IT management systems, data compliance and cyber risk management, all of which provide access and structured insights drawn from multiple internal systems, helping the institution to provide a unique and holistic view of the student experience. In a second institution, the IT team was singled out by the review team for its work in building

security and resilience across its IT systems, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is evident in the reports that all institutions are engaged in data collection and analysis, but some have been encouraged to further develop these areas and the IT management supports required to ensure decision making is more informed and aligned with institutional values, goals and strategies.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Engaging stakeholders in the self-evaluation, monitoring and review processes is a key practice among the institutions. Mechanisms have been put in place to involve faculty, staff, students, and external partners in these processes to ensure a comprehensive and inclusive approach. For instance, some institutions have established stakeholder advisory groups to provide input on various aspects of their operations, prioritising stakeholder engagement in their QA processes.

IDENTIFIED AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The following topics were identified by review teams as areas for improvement or further enhancement:

- The continued enhancement of stakeholder engagement through self-evaluation, monitoring, and review processes by involving a diverse range of stakeholders, such as external examiners, employers and placement providers.
- The strengthening and prioritising of data-driven decision-making processes more systematically into internal QA processes, ensuring the availability and accessibility of data to relevant stakeholders for monitoring and review purposes.
- The development of clear and measurable quality indicators based on data to inform decision-making and provide quick and easy insights for the governing body, senior management, and all staff.

These recommendations aim to enhance the effectiveness of self-evaluation, monitoring, and review practices and contribute to the continuous improvement of QA processes.



SECTION 6: CONCLUSIONS

This thematic analysis of the CINNTE review reports of the four independent and private HEIs has some common topics arising, both in the commendations and recommendations from the review teams. These conclusions highlight the strengths and areas for improvement within these institutions, providing insights into the effectiveness of their QA processes.

Institutions have established robust governance structures to oversee their QA processes. These structures typically include a board of directors, an academic board, senior leadership teams, and various subcommittees of the academic board. However, some governance structures seem to be overly complex and duplicative, and institutions have been encouraged to streamline their governance processes to avoid unnecessary complexity.

Institutions have formalised their procedures and processes to enable systematic QA. Typically, quality manuals or handbooks contain a full list of academic policies and procedures that are structured into sections on governance, the student journey, and programme quality. Despite a clear effort to organise quality processes, it was found that in some cases institutions would benefit from a clearer definition of quality in their own context. Developing clear, measurable quality indicators based on data is recommended to inform decision-making and provide insights for the governing body, senior management, and faculty.

Institutions have established robust learning environments that support student engagement and success. Investments in physical and digital infrastructure enhance the learning experience. Blended and online learning are being prioritised, and extensions to scopes of provision are being sought to offer fully online, transnational programmes. This has implications for both internal and external QA.

The integrity and approval of student results are critical for maintaining academic standards. A two-step process involving internal exam boards and formal exam boards ensures that assessments are fair, transparent and aligned with learning outcomes.

A wide range of support services ensures students have access to the resources they need to succeed. Comprehensive and effective support arrangements are in place for international students.

Comprehensive self-evaluation processes involve a wide range of stakeholders to ensure continuous improvement and alignment with institutional goals. Various monitoring and review mechanisms ensure the quality and effectiveness of programmes and services.

Data-driven decision making is a common theme across all institutions. Data collected from various sources, such as student surveys, performance metrics, and feedback from stakeholders, informs self-evaluation and review processes. Stakeholder engagement in these processes is a key practice.

Institutions are encouraged to continue to implement regular external reviews to ensure compliance with quality standards and identify areas for improvement. Periodic evaluations by external experts and regulatory and accreditation bodies are also recommended.

The themes identified in these reports underline the importance of continuous reflection and strategic enhancement of QA practices. They also reinforce the significance of a coherent, data-informed and continuously evolving QA system as the foundation for institutional excellence that will ultimately ensure positive outcomes for students.



SECTION 7: INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

All four institutions have provided responses to the findings and recommendations in their respective reports. The key topics addressed in those responses highlight a commitment to QA, its continuous improvement and enhancement, and fostering supportive and collaborative environments that improve the experience for students, staff and other stakeholders.

A prominent theme across all reports and addressed in the responses is institutional commitment to QA and continuous improvement. Each institution's strategic priorities are seen as a reflection of its maturity and dedication to quality. They have all accepted the recommendations included in their reports and are committed to upholding a robust quality culture underpinned by strong governance and a dedication to maintaining high standards in education.

A second key topic reflected is the importance of stakeholder engagement and collaboration within each of the institutions. Preparation for each review process involved active participation from students, staff, and external stakeholders, emphasising the value of shared reflection and collective input. Forming meaningful external partnerships, nurturing proactive engagement and emphasising active community participation with the involvement of students, staff, and stakeholders has been a key feature at each stage of the review process.

A student-centred ethos and support are prevalent themes across the reports, with a recurring focus on missions and values centred on student success and wellbeing. Review teams observed a strong sense of community and collegiality between staff and students at each institution. There is a clear commitment to placing students at the heart of institutional missions and ensuring their needs and educational goals towards success are met. Institutions are dedicated to nurturing a quality culture and fostering a sense of community through the enhanced transparency and accessibility of supports and services for a diverse student body.

Lastly, the theme of strategic development and future focus is evident in the institutions' plans and priorities. Strategic workforce plans and a commitment to integrating technological advancements into their pedagogical ethos demonstrate a forward-thinking approach to support growth in an institution. This includes new programme development and the enhancement of the student experience, providing a robust framework for future growth. Strategic development in some cases is focused on a dedicated pathway to DA, with emphasis on professional development and collaboration.

