

# Implementing Contingency Arrangements For Alternative Assessment and Authentication Processes: Guidance for Further Education & Training Providers

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**QQI**

Quality and Qualifications Ireland  
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

Adding Value to Qualifications

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# 1 Introduction

- 1.1 To support education and training providers in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, and to maintain confidence in the quality of its awards, QQI has published a range of information and resources on the [COVID-19 Updates](#) page on the QQI website aimed at maintaining educational integrity, quality and standards. Much of this information is applicable to all providers across the tertiary education landscape offering programmes leading to awards in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). This document seeks to provide additional guidance for Further Education and Training (FET) providers offering programmes leading to QQI Common Awards System (CAS) awards. It should be read in conjunction with the information published on the [COVID-19 Updates](#) page.

# 2 Alternative Assessments

- 2.1 The closure of education and training settings has required providers to consider alternative options for the delivery of assessments. QQI has produced a set of [Guiding Principles for Alternative Assessments](#) (the Guiding Principles) to assist providers in ensuring that qualifications are only awarded on the basis of validly and reliably assessed learning outcomes that are consistent with applicable awards standards. This document provides supplementary guidance, addressing some of the particular challenges experienced by FET providers.

## I) LEARNING OUTCOMES

- 2.2 The Guiding Principles require providers to take a learning outcomes-based approach and state that “Intended learning outcomes can sometimes be quite granular and include elements that are incidental rather than essential to expectations for the qualification. If the current situation makes the achievement of such incidental outcomes impossible, it is reasonable (subject to the approval of the appropriate governance structures) to replace or remove them, provided it does not substantially affect the overall expected learning outcomes”.
- 2.3 To further assist providers in identifying essential learning outcomes, staff involved in the development and approval of alternative assessments must make judgements about which learning outcomes:
- would generally be regarded **core** and must be assessed;
  - are **subject to regulatory requirements** and must be assessed; and
  - are **essential to expectations for the qualifications** and must be assessed.
- 2.4 Major awards in the common awards system are typically assessed through their components. When making judgements about which learning outcomes can be considered incidental:
- i. consider any standalone use that the component may have; and
  - ii. consider the contribution the component makes to the overall expected learning outcomes for the relevant major award.
- 2.5 Providers will need to put in place arrangements to support their staff in making these judgements, document the alternative arrangements, have them peer reviewed, have them approved by the appropriate governance structure, and ensure the review and approval of the oversight and governance arrangements are recorded.

- 2.6 All of this potentially involves a lot of work and therefore providers are strongly advised to collaborate in putting these arrangements in place (securely). No individual tutor, trainer, teacher or instructor should be unsupported in making alternative arrangements.
- 2.7 CAS awards are national awards and it is important that approaches taken by individual providers are consistent with what is done by others. This will only happen if there is collaboration between providers.

## II) ONLINE ASSESSMENTS

- 2.8 In order to maintain continuity in the provision of education and training, many providers have turned to online tools and methodologies as alternative approaches to assessment, teaching and learning. Under normal circumstances, providers are required to adhere to the modes of provision explicitly approved by QQI on validation of the programme. If the provider wishes to extend its scope of provision to incorporate online delivery/assessment, that would ordinarily require an additional element to the validation process (sometimes called differential validation if the non-online version has already been validated) focusing on the provider's capacity/resources and quality assurance for those methodologies. QQI recognises, however, that the COVID-19 pandemic is a *force majeure* event and has instituted a number of temporary [Measures to Mitigate the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Programmes Leading to QQI Awards](#). These include temporary sanction (for the calendar year 2020) for providers to operate outside their previously approved scope of provision, and to adjust programmes including assessment arrangements from that which was validated, in the knowledge that the measures taken are temporary alternative arrangements for those approved at validation and taken only in response to the current exceptional circumstances.
- 2.9 Whilst specific approval is not therefore required from QQI (in the current circumstances) to adopt online forms of assessment, providers should, nonetheless, give particular consideration to any additional quality assurance mechanisms that may be required to safeguard the validity, reliability and integrity of these approaches. In addition to the measures on 'Integrity of Assessment' outlined in the Guiding Principles, providers should give specific consideration to topics such as:
- Robust, documented approval processes for alternative assessment arrangements (see section 2.5).
  - Clear, concise, timely, and targeted communications to all concerned.
  - Timely and effective support for staff and students recognising that both groups are diverse and disrupted to varying degrees by Covid-19, and that a single approach may not be feasible for all.
  - Contingency arrangements in the event of platform, hardware or software failure.
  - Robust arrangements to ensure that any examinations that are assumed to be unseen remain unseen prior to the examination. A valid and reliable unseen examination that is leaked, results in an examination that is neither valid nor reliable for its original purpose.
  - Robust arrangements to verify the identity of remote learners and to detect and combat fraudulent practices, attempts to gain unfair advantage, and academic malpractice.
  - Implementation of plagiarism detection software as a standard step for all relevant electronic submissions.
  - Systems and processes to manage the secure submission, receipt, marking, storage and return of assessments, and the recording and communication of assessment results.

### III) WORK EXPERIENCE

2.10 Work experience or work-based learning is an integral part of many programmes leading to CAS awards. Gaps in either of these areas may result in teaching and learning deficits as well as challenges for assessment as considered here.

Given the widescale closure of businesses and workplaces, providers are faced with managing a range of scenarios, including:

- Learners who haven't yet commenced work experience and are unable to do so;
- Learners who have partially completed work experience and are unable to finish it;
- Learners who have fully completed work experience but are unable to obtain a supervisor's report as the employer has now closed.

2.11 In considering responses to these scenarios, it is important for providers to distinguish between:

**a) The generic QQI Work Experience component award (e.g. 5N1356):**

The skills required in this component relate to general workplace experience, e.g. timekeeping, communication, working independently etc. In this case, potential solutions include:

- I. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), using any (reasonably recent) previous work experience the learner may have undertaken, supported by an equivalent reference/supervisor report.
- II. Utilising the [temporary mechanism](#) recently established by QQI whereby providers (preferably collectively) can propose alternative components within the CAS structure to enable a learner to achieve the award.

Permitting a teacher/tutor or a Results Approval Panel to make a grade determination in the absence of a supervisor's report is not a viable solution.

**b) Vocationally-specific work placement:**

In this case, learners are required to acquire experience in vocationally-specific contexts, e.g. childcare, healthcare, agriculture. There are two cases within this scenario:

**I. The placement while not strictly complete is substantially complete:**

Members of the relevant profession (and this may include teachers and tutors as well as practitioners) are best placed to make judgements as to whether a partial completion can be regarded as being substantially complete, but it is important to have good provider-level oversight of, and (for the national consistency of CAS qualifications) sectoral consensus about, any such alternative arrangements.

In regulated qualifications, it is essential to consult the regulator.

**II. The placement is substantially incomplete:**

Where the placement is substantially incomplete and insufficient workplace experience has been attained, it is difficult to conceive of credible alternative measures other than to defer. There are some awards where there may be no equivalent to exposure to the relevant working environment. Where the learner's goal is to progress to employment, it may be possible to defer the assessment until a later date.

The most acute issue is where these cases intersect with processes to apply for undergraduate higher education programmes, e.g. learners who are applying to study nursing at third level. Providers should continue to monitor national developments on arrangements for transition to higher education.

#### IV) PRACTICAL ASSESSMENTS/SKILLS DEMONSTRATIONS

- 2.12 There are a number of CAS programmes (e.g. lifeguarding, sports massage, animation, dog grooming, cookery, hairdressing etc.) where developing alternatives to practical assessments/skills demonstration is particularly challenging. It is important for public confidence to ensure the integrity of the award and that learners progress to industry fully competent in the required skills. Whilst, for example, video recording of skills demonstrations may be possible in some circumstances, in many cases learners will not have access to key equipment/resources outside programmes' normal operating environments and this will not be a realistic option.
- 2.13 If the current restrictions are relaxed before June, there may be an opportunity to conclude some of the assessments before the summer. Otherwise, deferral of the assessment may be the only feasible option. This approach may have implications for the progression of some learners to higher education in 2020. Providers should therefore quantify the volume of any learners that may be impacted and continue to monitor national developments on arrangements for transitions to higher education.

### 3 Authentication Process

- 3.1 One of the most crucial components of a provider's assessment framework is its authentication process. For QQI awards, the operation of internal verification and external authentication processes is a core quality assurance mechanism which seeks to ensure fairness, consistency and validity of assessment and of assessment outcomes. Given the degree of disruption to programme delivery and assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is greater potential for error in the application and recording of assessment instruments and outcomes and for disruption to normal authentication processes. At an early stage, providers should therefore reflect on each stage of the internal verification and external authentication processes to identify how they might be affected by the current restrictions and to plan contingency arrangements.
- 3.2 The role of the internal verifier is to systematically check that the provider's assessment procedures have been applied consistently across assessment activities and to verify the arithmetic / administrative accuracy of assessment results. The provider should plan for scenarios where internal verifiers (and/or external authenticators) are not able to access centres/evidence in person. Potential contingency arrangements might include:
- where assessments have been completed in a digital format (e.g. online exam), accessing these online;
  - scanning written material;
  - creating video, photographic or audio recordings of assessments<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Care should be taken to ensure that the visual/audio quality of such recordings is sufficient to enable accurate review by an external authenticator.

- 3.3 If a provider plans to use digital records of assessments, care should be taken to ensure that these are:
- correctly labelled and attributed to the correct learner;
  - stored securely and backed-up.
- 3.4 Provisional results reports should also be extracted from QBS and cross-checked with centre-level results.
- 3.5 The process for verification of assessment results includes ensuring that assessment evidence reflects the assessment techniques outlined in the validated programme. Where alternative assessment techniques or instruments have been adopted, the internal verifier should note on the internal verification report:
- the nature of any alternative assessment adopted (e.g. assignment rather than examination); and
  - whether or not the alternative assessment arrangement has been documented and formally approved by the provider (and any other authority with standing in the variation of assessment arrangements, e.g. a regulator) consistent with QQI guidance.
- 3.6 External authentication establishes the credibility of the provider's assessment processes. Essentially it aims to ensure that assessments are valid, reliable and consistent with the requirements for the relevant awards. Given the scale of disruption to teaching, learning and assessment during the pandemic, an external perspective on assessment is even more imperative at this time and this is especially true for alternative assessment arrangements.
- 3.7 Whilst QQI would encourage co-operation between public and private providers in sourcing external authenticators (EAs), providers may not be able to access all of the EAs they might need. They will therefore need to prioritise the components and programmes that need to be externally authenticated in the event of reduced capacity.
- 3.8 Where feasible, providers should seek to appoint external authenticators on a programme basis rather than on a component-basis, i.e. individuals who have a comprehensive knowledge of the discipline and are in a position to judge the consistency of standards across a range of components rather than having very specific expertise in one sub-specialism.
- 3.9 Providers should plan for scenarios where external authenticators are not able to access centres/evidence in person (see 3.2).
- 3.10 Sampling strategies will be critical. The sample must be sufficient to enable the authenticator to make an informed judgement. The following considerations may assist in guiding decisions on sampling:
- placing a greater emphasis on reviewing evidence that has been assessed using alternative assessments;
  - analysing the number and distribution of results: a small number of learners or a very uneven distribution of results will necessitate a higher rate of sampling;
  - focus on borderline grades (e.g. Fail/Pass, Pass/Merit, Merit/Distinction);
  - a reduced focus on long-established programmes that have been subject to extensive external authentication previously and in which very few issues have been identified. (This would not apply where there has been a substantive change to the programme, e.g. a new teacher is

involved in the programme delivery or a different type of learner cohort is undertaking the programme).

- 3.11 The use of programme data and external authentication reports from previous years may also help in prioritising the use of available resources.
- 3.12 The provider's strategy for sampling should be considered by the appropriate governance structures and documented.
- 3.13 The EA is required to complete an external authentication report which comments on the effectiveness of the assessment process and procedures and on the extent to which the assessment arrangements are consistent with the awards standards. Where an EA identifies serious flaws or concerns, these must be highlighted in the external authentication report and referred to the Results Approval Panel for consideration and follow-up.

## 4 Results Approval Panel

- 4.1 As part of the results approval process, providers are required to establish a results approval panel (RAP) to ensure that assessment decisions and results are reviewed, judged and processed in a fair, consistent and transparent manner. The functions of the RAP include:
  - reviewing and approving assessment results;
  - reviewing reports of the internal verification and external authentication processes;
  - agreeing to the submission of final results to QQI to request certification; and
  - identifying any issues arising in relation to the results and making determinations for corrective action.
- 4.2 The RAP has a crucial quality assurance function in ensuring the integrity of assessment results. The degree of disruption to normal teaching, learning and assessment processes since the introduction of the COVID-19 public health measures will necessitate particularly robust scrutiny of assessment processes and results to ensure confidence in assessment outcomes. Providers should give consideration to:
  - contingency arrangements for the conduct of RAP meetings in the event that face-to-face meetings are not possible or key personnel are not in a position to participate;
  - analysis of provisional results and attainment data from previous years in advance of RAP meetings to identify significant anomalies;
  - securing input or participation from subject matter experts at RAP meetings to support decision-making.
- 4.3 In the case of Education and Training Boards, consideration should also be given to arrangements to ensure consistency of decision-making across similar programmes in different centres (e.g. the operation of joint RAPs or the attendance of common senior decision-makers at separate RAP meetings).
- 4.4 The exceptional circumstances that have transpired as a result of the pandemic will necessitate some degree of flexibility from RAPS in considering assessment outcomes. Nonetheless, where significant flaws or concerns are identified in relation to the validity of assessment results, the RAP has a responsibility to take appropriate corrective action. All decisions should be clearly documented.



## 5 Certification

- 5.1 As with other processes, providers should review logistical arrangements for submitting results to QQI for certification and consider contingency arrangements for accessing and submitting learner records and scenarios whereby key personnel are not in a position to complete the process. As part of planning, providers should identify any cohorts (e.g. those applying to higher education) whose results should be prioritised for submission.
- 5.2 QQI will remain responsive to the needs of all providers in the best interests of their learners. This may include adding additional certification periods: however, for certain cohorts of learners the potential for additional certification windows may be influenced by timelines associated with appeals and by higher education applications processes. The best way to contact QQI about all certification issues is through QHelp.