

## 4 POLICY

### 4.1 Quality Assurance in Education and Training

In an education and training context, quality assurance has to do with matters such as:

- whether the education, training, research and related services provided by a provider are fit for their professed purpose
- the trustworthiness of the qualifications awarded or recognised
- the net contribution of the education and training provision to the common good
- accountability, openness and transparency
- the standards of awards

The term “quality assurance” is used to describe the processes that seek to ensure that the learning environment (including teaching and research) reaches an acceptable threshold of quality. QA is also used to describe the enhancement of education provision and the standards attained by learners. UNESCO defines quality assurance (QA) as “...an ongoing, continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining and improving) the quality of ... [an] education system, institution or program.”

In all cases, quality assurance is the responsibility of the provider.

QQI has an external quality assurance role in ensuring and communicating to the public that providers have appropriate quality assurance procedures in place and that these are implemented and effective. This is achieved by:

1. Issuing guidelines for the establishment of providers’ QA procedures (following consultation with stakeholders in the education and training and qualifications system)
2. Subsequently reviewing the effectiveness of those procedures

QQI also has a responsibility as an international agency to ensure that European policies and international effective practice are implemented nationally, as appropriate to the Irish context.

### 4.2 Principles for Quality Assurance Guidelines

The 2012 Act requires providers to “have regard to” QQI’s QA guidelines (Section 28 [2]) when developing their QA procedures. QA guidelines cannot be adopted by providers as QA procedures, but must be used by providers to inform their internal QA procedures.

QQI will have regard to the guidelines when determining:

- protocols (prescribed mechanisms for meeting criteria<sup>1</sup>);
- criteria (things which must be demonstrated by providers in order to access services<sup>2</sup>);
- standards (thresholds for educational quality which must be met); and
- supplementary and supporting documentation for the guidance of providers and to provide further explanation.

*1. For example: Protection of Enrolled Learners: Protocols for the Implementation of Part 6 of the 2012 Act PEL*

*2. For example: Policy and Criteria for Provider Access to Initial Validation of Programmes Leading to QQI*

QA guidelines are intended to guide providers through their responsibilities for the quality of education and training, research and related services. They are developed in collaboration with the education and training sectors.

QA guidelines will be issued and published on QQI's website [www.QQI.ie](http://www.QQI.ie)

QQI QA guidelines:

- a.** Are a crucial component of a variety of QQI functions, services and policies including:
  - Validation of programmes (and re-validation)
  - Review of providers
  - Certification of learners
  - Authorising use of the International Education Mark
  - Recognition of awards within the National Framework of Qualifications
  - Recognition of prior learning (RPL)
  - Access, transfer and progression (ATP)
  - Delegation of authority to make awards (DA)
- b.** Communicate expectations about the quality of provision, assessment and the teaching and learning experience in the Irish education and training community;
- c.** Bring greater coherence into, and between, different parts of the education and training system
- d.** Are the starting point for providers' establishment of their own QA procedures. They are a 'springboard' for improvement and enhancement for all providers, not a compliance checklist
- e.** Will be adapted and continuously evolve to remain fit-for-purpose for the needs of the education and training community and the qualifications system
- f.** Can be expected to have different purposes and different impacts in each sector and topic that they address. The impact of the guidelines upon a provider will depend upon the scope of their provision and the sector in which they operate.

### 4.3 Approaches to Development

QQI QA guidelines will be developed by building on the existing QA guidelines.<sup>3</sup> QQI may also determine (and disseminate or promote) effective practice by adopting guidelines issued by other bodies.

Key to the development of QA guidelines is collaboration and consultation with the education and training community and stakeholders in the qualifications system.

*3. The guidelines saved under Section 84 of the 2012 Act are considered "existing" for this purpose.*

As part of this collaborative process QQI will:

- Develop QA guidelines that are in line with European and Irish policy on education and training, research and related activities
- Address any gaps that may arise out of the implementation of the national strategies for further and higher education and training.<sup>4</sup> For example:
  - Clusters and strategic alliances in higher education
  - Innovations in provision that require different kinds of QA guidelines
  - Reviews of the existing guidelines and their implementation by QQI
- Adopt guidelines for its own purposes and for the education and training community as and when required.

In summary, the QQI approach to the development of QA guidelines is collaborative and evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

#### 4.3a Modular Approach

QA guidelines may be issued separately to address specific sectors and they may also address specific topics, for example:

- Guidelines for different types of flexible provision, for example online provision
- Guidelines for voluntary higher, further and English language education and training providers seeking access to initial validation

QQI will issue common guidelines relevant to all sectors in education and training where appropriate.

#### 4.4 Principles to Assist Providers in Developing Internal QA Procedures

Quality assurance in an education and training context is informed by overarching principles and internationally recognised effective practice.<sup>5</sup> The following principles will permeate QQI QA guidelines and are intended to inform providers when establishing, further developing, renewing and/or reviewing their quality assurance procedures. They should underpin providers' approaches to quality assurance in education and training, research and related services.

##### **1. The Provider-Owned QA Principle**

The primary responsibility for quality and its assurance lies with education and training providers.

The quality of educational and related services offered is the responsibility of the provider. Assuring the quality of the education and training offered is also the responsibility of the provider. Quality assurance requires planning, resources and commitment.

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<sup>4</sup> The "National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030" and the "Further Education Strategy 2014 – 2019"

<sup>5</sup> The "Common Principles for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training in the context of the European Qualifications Framework" may be a useful reference point.

It is crucial that management and staff of a provider understand and 'own' the quality assurance system to support a genuine culture of quality.

The quality assurance system should be organised based on the subsidiarity principle. Ultimate responsibility typically rests with the governing body (or equivalent), but all of a provider's staff should be involved in quality assurance. Specific responsibilities should be assigned based on the subsidiarity principle.

## 2. The QA Context Principle

Quality systems are context dependent i.e. the scale and scope of a provider's provision will impact on how it operates quality assurance. Providers should be able to demonstrate their quality publicly.

## 3. The QA Culture Principle

A quality culture is the outcome of individual staff and collective organisational commitment to continuous improvement. In such a culture, QA procedures are not viewed as a bureaucratic burden, but as tools to drive improvement and enhancement.

A quality culture is underpinned by a coherent, integrated and embedded quality system, which is:

- Closely linked to institutional strategies
- Grounded in effective internal decision-making processes and structures
- Context-sensitive and takes into account different organizational and disciplinary cultures
- Not punitive, but developmental. It reflects provider:
  - autonomy and self-confidence
  - commitment to staff and learners

## 4. The Learning Outcome Principle

Education and training exists principally for the purpose of enabling people to learn and, accordingly, programmes of education and training should be designed, implemented and evaluated with learning outcomes in mind.

Learning is understood here in the broadest sense and in the context of the National Framework of Qualifications.

## 5. Implementation Principle

Approved quality assurance procedures and those procedures which must have regard to QQI guidelines are fully implemented by providers and are monitored by providers for effectiveness.

## 6. The Externality Principle

A provider-owned quality assurance system makes appropriate use of external persons who are independent of the provider and who are expertly qualified to make relevant national and international comparisons.

Providers must exercise great care when selecting external persons or partners in provision to ensure that they gain the full benefit of objective, expert advice.

External examining and external authentication are examples of the application of this principle. Another is the use of independent external panels in a programme validation and programme re-validation (taught and research) training and other processes.

## 7. The Continuous Improvement Principle

Continuous improvement must be the goal of a quality assurance process. The quality of academic education and training and other programmes needs to be developed and improved for students and other beneficiaries of higher and further education and training.

## 8. The Transparency Principle

Quality assurance systems should enhance transparency. Processes should be developed through which education and training providers can demonstrate their accountability, including accountability for the investment of public and private money.

## 9. The Public Confidence Principle

The quality assurance system supports public confidence (only when this is deserved) in the provider and its capacity to provide programmes to agreed standards. Assuring the quality of provision and related services requires significant effort and resources on the part of the provider. Providers should actively promote their internal quality system and proactively develop it as a tangible resource and explicit part of the education and training infrastructure. **Public confidence is a key objective for provider owned QA. All outputs of the internal quality assurance system should be published.**

### 4.5 Content

In addition to the prescriptions of the 2012 Act and EU directives, the full suite of QA guidelines will address the following areas (this list is not exhaustive):

- a. Programmes of education and training, research and related services offered by providers. This includes:
  - Programme design
  - The learning environment (including teaching and research)
- b. Other party engagements. This includes:
  - Transnational and collaborative provision
  - Linked providers.

#### 4.5.a International and European Influences

QQI's QA guidelines will reflect Ireland's commitment and contribution to international effective practice, EU directives and policy. Notably, these include:

- The “Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (2015)”
- The “European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training”

#### 4.5.b Prescription and Aspiration

Where the activity or sector being addressed through the QA guidelines warrants more detailed and / or more specific guidelines, this may be provided for. Where the area being addressed by the guideline is, for example less mature or poses a greater risk to learners or the education and training system in general, the guidelines may be more prescriptive. This does not imply compliance-oriented guidelines, but that more specific guidance is seen as necessary in certain areas.

### 4.6 Continuous Development

QQI will not simply issue guidelines and then consider them completed (notwithstanding the fact that guidelines, as issued are in full effect until replacement guidelines are issued). Guidelines will be continuously redeveloped and updated in order to keep up with changes in the education and training landscape. The guidelines will change as public policy changes, as providers innovate and as QQI's priorities change.

Part of QQI's role as an external QA agency in this sense is to assess the effectiveness of the guidelines and to organise their on-going development in collaboration and consultation with the sectors.