

The Quality Assurance (QA) of Higher Education (HE) in Ireland

This document provides a description of how the quality of HE provision is currently assured in Ireland – although recent amendments to the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act 2012 mean that some changes to these arrangements are imminent.

The document sets out the role of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) in relation to the QA of HE; the classes of provider involved in the provision of HE and how their internal QA systems and the external oversight of same differs; and other bodies and documents relevant to the QA of Irish HE.

Context

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)

QQI is the independent state agency with responsibility for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services in Ireland. It is a member of **ENQA**; its membership was renewed in 2019 following review by an independent expert panel.

QQI has a wide remit; among its many functions, QQI:

- maintains a set of statutory QA guidelines (QAG), policies and criteria;
- approves and periodically reviews the effectiveness of providers' QA procedures;
- validates providers' programmes of education and training leading to QQI awards;
- delegates awarding powers to certain institutions;
- monitors quality;
- conducts focussed reviews;
- conducts thematic reviews.

HE and the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)

In the 10-level Irish NFQ, which QQI promotes and maintains, HE provision encompasses programmes of education and training spanning from level 6 (equivalent to level 5 on the EQF) to level 10 (level 8 on the EQF), although level 6 programmes may also be offered by providers of further education and training. Minor, special purpose and major awards are included in the NFQ.

Classes of provider

QQI engages with higher education institutions (HEIs) involved in the provision of programmes leading to awards in the NFQ; however, QQI's relationship with each provider depends on the class to which that provider belongs (see below).

It is important to note that the primary responsibility for quality assurance of provision of education and training lies with the providers themselves.

Public HEIs

Universities and designated awarding bodies (DABs)

There are eight universities recognised under the Universities Act 1997, including National University of Ireland¹ (NUI), and three further universities were recently added: Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin), Munster Technological University (MTU), and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), _____

¹ NUI is not a provider, but a federal umbrella structure comprising four of the eight universities, two recognised colleges, and five colleges linked with constituent universities.

which – following the commencement of the relevant provision of the 2012 Act – is now recognised as a university. These institutions are DABs, which are autonomous institutions entitled to validate their own programmes and grant awards to learners (typically from levels 7-10 on the NFQ).

DABs establish their own QA procedures (with regard to the relevant QQI statutory QAG) and approve these procedures in consultation with QQI; DABs also set their own awards standards.

Institutes of technology (IoTs)

There are nine IoTs in Ireland. IoTs have been delegated authority by QQI to grant awards to learners from levels 6-9 on the NFQ. The IoTs may also apply to QQI for validation of programmes (in specific discipline areas) at level 10; in such cases, QQI is the awarding body.

IoTs establish their QA procedures (with regard to the relevant QQI statutory QAG). QQI approves the IoTs' QA procedures and sets their awards standards.

Institutional review of the DABs, IoTs and NUI

The DABs and IoTs are guided by the QQI's *Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines* (QAG), as well as any other relevant sector- and topic-specific QAG, in the establishment of their quality assurance procedures. The effectiveness of these procedures is reviewed on a seven-year cycle (the current cycle of reviews is the **CINTE cycle**). QQI's institutional reviews are conducted by teams of international experts and there are separate terms of reference for the DABs and the IoTs.

Each review culminates in a publishable report that contains commendations, highlighting examples of good practice in the institution, and recommendations for improvement. The institution is expected to publish an implementation plan based on the recommendations one month after the main review visit and submit to QQI for publication a follow-up report one year after the main review visit.

The annual institutional quality report (AIQR)

The DABs and IoTs also submit to QQI an **AIQR**. This report sets out *inter alia* an overview of the institution's policies and procedures, as well as details of planned reviews of schools, programmes, units, linked providers, etc., and details of reviews that have taken place during the reporting period. In the AIQR, the institution describes enhancements implemented during the reporting period, as well as any enhancements planned for the next reporting period.

Every year, QQI compiles and publishes a summary report of the AIQRs, which outlines the overarching themes for the reporting period in question and sets out case studies and examples of good practice from the AIQRs. The AIQRs also form the basis for biannual dialogue meetings between QQI and the public HEIs.

Linked providers

Some providers are 'linked providers' of a DAB. In such cases, the DAB is the awarding body and is responsible for the external quality assurance of the linked provider, although the external quality assurance of linked providers by DABs is taken into consideration during the QQI institutional review process. Linked providers are required to have regard to the relevant QQI QAG.

Linked providers may be colleges of education (responsible for initial teacher education for primary school teachers in Ireland); national institutions (such as the Military College, the Garda Síochána College [police training college]); and recognised, associated, or constituent colleges of Irish universities (such as the Institute of Public Administration, the National College of Art and Design).

Private HEIs

If private providers of higher education wish to provide programmes of education and training in the NFQ, they must first establish QA procedures that have regard to QQI's Core QAG, the Sector-specific QAG for Private and Independent Providers (and any other relevant sets of QAG) and have them approved by QQI.

Once its QA procedures have been approved, a private provider may apply to QQI for validation of a programme of education and training. If, after evaluation by an independent panel of experts, a programme is successfully validated, the provider may then offer the programme to learners, who – upon completion – will be entitled to the associated QQI award. In such cases, QQI is the awarding body and, if it wishes to continue offering the programme, the provider must apply periodically (usually every five years) to QQI for re-validation of the programme.

Since 2021, private providers of education are required to submit an AIQR to QQI but are not yet subject to cyclical institutional review by QQI.

National, European and international context

Other parties relevant to the quality assurance of higher education in Ireland

Professional and regulatory statutory bodies (PRSBs) accredit programmes provided by both public and private providers to ensure that graduates of those programmes are equipped with the knowledge, skill and competence necessary to practise the associated profession. QQI is working to increase its engagement with the PRSBs in an effort – ultimately – to reduce the regulatory burden on HEIs involved in validating and accrediting programmes.

The **Higher Education Authority** (HEA) is the statutory planning and development body for higher education and research in Ireland. It also has responsibility for funding public HEIs. QQI has memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the HEA, which sets out a framework for cooperation and communication between the two bodies in the interests of the higher education sector. The HEA has a consultative role in QQI reviews of HEIs.

Other relevant policies and bodies

There are a number of other policy documents and bodies relevant to the quality assurance of higher education provision in Ireland. These include the National Academic Information Recognition Centre (NARIC); the *National Framework for Doctoral Education; Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG); and the QQI National Consultative Forum.

Responsibilities and Structure of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)

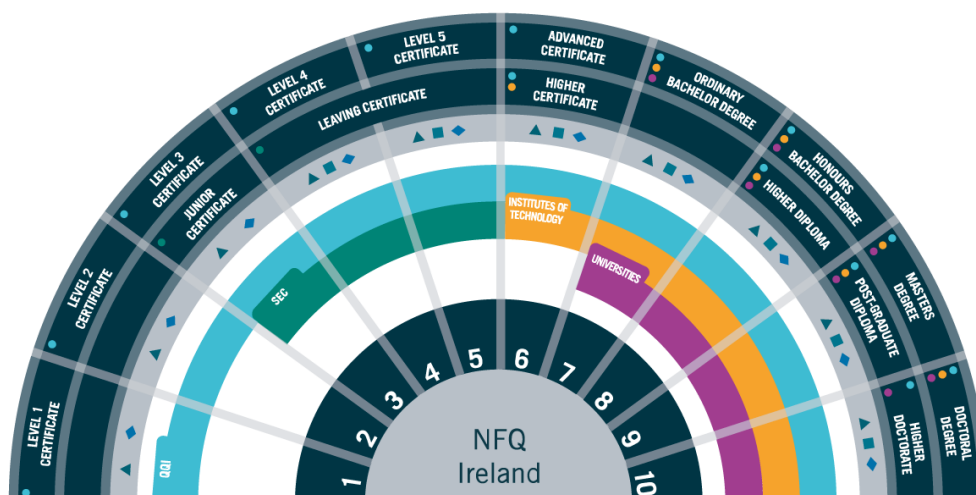
QQI has a broad remit, spanning all post-secondary education and training in Ireland (sometimes described as the 'tertiary' education sector). As indicated in the title of the agency, its two main areas of responsibility relate to qualifications and quality assurance.

Qualifications

QQI's qualifications functions include:

- **National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ):** QQI is responsible for promoting, maintaining and developing the Irish NFQ, a 10-level framework for the development, recognition and awarding of qualifications in Ireland which is mapped to the EQF. Under recent legislation, this will include permitting other awarding bodies to make awards on the NFQ. QQI is also required to maintain a register of awards on the NFQ (the Irish Register of Qualifications: <https://irq.ie/>) to inform the public about quality assured programmes of education and training;

Fig. 1 NFQ Ireland



- **Awarding Body:** QQI is an awarding body, making awards at all levels of the NFQ¹. QQI undertakes a number of activities arising from this function:
 - **Standards:** determining the standards for the achievement of QQI awards;
 - **Access to QQI Awards:** assessing the institutional capacity and quality assurance arrangements of providers that wish to offer QQI awards;
 - **Programme validation:** approving or accrediting programmes of education or training developed by providers leading to QQI awards;
 - **Certification:** issuing QQI awards where learners have met the stated requirements;
 - **Delegation of Authority:** delegating awarding authority to designated institutions.
- **Recognition:** Advising on the recognition of foreign qualifications in Ireland and on the recognition of Irish qualifications abroad.

¹ Within the HE sector, the majority of awards are made by the publicly regulated HEIs, which are either awarding bodies in their own right or to which QQI has delegated authority to make awards.

Quality Assurance

QQI's quality assurance functions include:

- **QA Guidelines:** maintaining a suite of core, sector-specific and topic-specific statutory guidelines, policies and criteria on the quality assurance of education and training;
- **Approval of QA Procedures:** with the exception of universities, approving institutional quality assurance procedures, ensuring adherence to QQI guidelines;
- **Institutional Review:** co-ordinating cyclical review of the implementation and effectiveness of institutional QA procedures;
- **Thematic Review:** co-ordinating quality assurance reviews with a particular thematic focus;
- **Quality Monitoring:** requesting and analysing information and data provided by institutions on the quality assurance activities, developments, enhancements and impacts;
- **International Students:** Operating a non-statutory inspection/recognition scheme for English language teaching organisations; and, in future, authorising the use of an International Education Mark for institutions compliant with QQI's Code of Practice for the provision of programmes to international learners.

QQI Structure

In order to deliver its statutory functions and achieve its strategic objectives, QQI is organised into four main operational divisions as follows:

