

ENQA TARGETED REVIEW

QUALITY AND QUALIFICATIONS IRELAND (QQI)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is an independent arm's length state agency established by the Quality Assurance and Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 2012. QQI is 'committed to a vision of Ireland that offers diverse high-quality further and higher education opportunities, enabling learners to reach their full potential through achieving qualifications that are widely valued nationally and internationally.' Its mission is to 'sustain public confidence in the quality, integrity and reputation of Ireland's further and higher education providers and provide authoritative information on the diverse range of qualifications included in the National Framework of Qualifications.' QQI's activities are overseen by an independent Board appointed by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; it includes a member with international experience and two learner representatives.

New functions were assigned to QQI under an Amendment to the 2012 Act passed in 2019. QQI has a broad range of functions relating to the external quality assurance of further and higher education and training in Ireland together with stewardship of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and the awarding of the International Education Mark (IEM). QQI is responsible for establishing quality assurance (QA) guidelines and for reviewing the effectiveness of QA at the level of the institution across further and higher education in Ireland. This includes the universities, institutes of technology, Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and providers in the private further and higher education and training sectors.

QQI validates programmes (ex-ante programme accreditation) for providers in further education (public and private providers) and higher education, mainly private/independent providers, and sets standards and makes awards on the NFQ in respect of those validated programmes. The NFQ has been extended to include the awards of IEM Awarding Bodies. In the area of qualifications, QQI maintains the ten-level NFQ and any associated recognition. It is the National Academic Recognition Information Centre for Ireland (NARIC Ireland) and provides recognition advice on foreign qualifications.

At the request of the agency, ENQA conducted a targeted review of QQI for renewal of its ENQA membership and for consideration of its continued registration on EQAR. Tripartite Terms of Reference (ToR) were agreed in August 2023 to meet the needs of all the parties. These were updated in February 2024 to reflect EQAR's decisions, in November 2023, on a substantive change report; EQAR requested that the forthcoming review of QQI addressed the separation of QQI's work with regard to Education and Training Boards from its activity within scope of the ESG. QQI was reviewed against the ESG following the methodology set out in the Guidelines for ENQA targeted reviews (this is discussed under Additional Observations).

QQI prepared and submitted a self-assessment report (SAR) in autumn 2023. It identified ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis as the focus for enhancement. In the SAR, the agency described how it not only produces thematic reports in line with the purpose set out in ESG 3.4 but also takes a broader view of, and approach to, its thematic work. Thus, QQI uses the information and intelligence available to it to analyse the findings of external quality assurance activities not only to produce thematic analysis but also to identify and explore other matters of interest to the higher education sector and public interest in it. This approach enables QQI to reflect the emergence of concerns in some areas (such as 'grade inflation' in degree outcomes) and wider challenges, some of which can be sudden, for higher education. Recent obvious examples include the need to adapt forms of delivery and assessment in

light of the Covid-19 pandemic; the rise of ‘contract cheating’ and linked focus on matters of academic integrity; and the rapid impact of generative AI tools (such as ChatGPT) to produce content.

QQI confirmed in the SAR that there were no substantial changes to other aspects of the ESG in its work since the 2019 report, while also noting that there were a number of process changes in prospect due for introduction in 2024. It also noted that the agency had increased its staffing and re-organised its management structure.

The SAR was received by the appointed panel of experts in December 2023, who used it to agree the visit schedule and establish lines of enquiry. While also checking to confirm QQI’s continuing compliance across the ESG, overall the panel of experts was able to focus primarily on the enhancement area. The site visit took place in February 2024. The panel met a range of individuals from the agency together with those who had been involved in its work, from the higher education sector and wider stakeholders; the visit was marked throughout by the positive engagement and constructive dialogue.

The panel’s overall conclusion is compliance with the ESG, and the panel judged QQI’s compliance with the individual ESG standards as presented in the table below:

Table 1: Summary of QQI’s compliance with the ESG (Parts 2 and 3)

ESG	Compliance according to the targeted review¹	Compliance transferred from the last full review²
2.1	Compliant	
2.2		Fully compliant → Compliant
2.3		Partially compliant ³ → Compliant
2.4		Fully compliant → Compliant
2.5		Fully compliant → Compliant
2.6		Fully compliant → Compliant
2.7		Fully compliant → Compliant
3.1		Fully compliant → Compliant
3.2		Fully compliant → Compliant
3.3		Fully compliant → Compliant
3.4		Fully compliant → Compliant
3.5		Substantially compliant → Compliant
3.6		Fully compliant → Compliant
3.7		Fully compliant → Compliant

¹ Compliance refers to the focus areas that were evaluated in depth and are part of the Terms of Reference, i.e., standards that were only partially compliant with the ESG during the last full review, ESG Part 2 for newly introduced or changed QA activities of the agency, ESG 2.1 for all QA activities and any standard affected by substantive changes since the last full review. If any of the standards of Part 2 of the ESG are covered due to the newly introduced or changed QA activities, a remark ‘for new or changed QA activities only’ is added in brackets to the compliance assessment.

² Compliance refers to the last EQAR Register Committee decision for renewal of inclusion on the Register, or in case when an agency is not renewing its registration in EQAR, compliance refers to the last ENQA Agency Review report and should its judgement differ from that of the panel, the judgement of the ENQA Board, as stipulated in the membership decision letter by the ENQA Board. Compliance refers to the QA activities of the agency that were reviewed during the previous full review.

³ The activity that led to the judgement of partial compliance was completed in 2020.

INTRODUCTION

This report analyses the compliance of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (Dearbhú Cailíochta agus Cailíochtaí Éireann) QQI with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG). It is based on an external review conducted from August 2023 until May 2024 and should be read together with the external review report of the [agency's last full review](#) against the ESG.

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW AND OUTLINE OF THE REVIEW PROCESS

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW

ENQA's regulations require all member agencies to undergo an external cyclical review, at least once every five years, in order to verify that they act in compliance with the ESG, as adopted at the Yerevan ministerial conference of the Bologna Process in 2015.

Registration on EQAR is the official instrument established by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) for demonstrating an agency's ESG compliance. An external review is a prerequisite for registration.

QQI has been a member of ENQA since 2012 and has been registered on EQAR since 2015.

As QQI has undergone two successful reviews against the ESG Parts 2 and 3, in 2014 and 2019, it is eligible and has opted for a targeted review. The purpose of a targeted review is to ensure the agency's compliance with the ESG by covering standards that were found partially compliant during the agency's last renewal of registration on EQAR and membership of ENQA and on standards that could have been affected by substantive changes⁴ during the past five years, while at the same time further strengthening the enhancement part of the review.

SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

QQI has a broad remit, and within that remit, the following activities were agreed to fall within the scope of the review:

- Institutional Quality Monitoring and Review
- Approval of Providers' Quality Assurance Procedures
- Programme Validation and Revalidation
- Delegated Authority to Make Awards⁵
- Focused Reviews

Due to QQI's wide remit, a substantial proportion of its work does not fall within the scope of the ESG. This embraces: its work as an awarding body for providers without awarding powers, the external quality assurance of Education and Training Boards (FET provision at levels 1-6 of the NFQ), quality assurance approval of Further Education and Training (FET) Providers and the validation,

⁴ e.g. organisational changes, the launch of new external QA activities.

⁵ This function had not come into effect for private/independent higher education providers at the time of the site visit. There is an extant QQI policy on Delegated Authority (DA) for public providers, but Ministerial regulations are required for DA for private/independent providers to be progressed by QQI. Further information is provided under Additional Observations, and under ESG 2.1 and ESG 2.3.

monitoring and review programmes of FET Providers; the maintenance of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), and acting as NARIC Ireland. It also undertakes work in support of the higher education sector that stems from wider work to protect the student interest, safeguard standards and promote quality enhancement, such as its work on academic integrity, much of its work with Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs), the joint support of work in student engagement and doctoral education.

The areas of focus for this targeted review are ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance, and ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis as the self-selected enhancement area.

There are no standards currently with a partial compliance conclusion by EQAR's Register Committee. It should be noted that although the Register Committee deemed QQI only partially compliant against ESG 2.3, the work connected with the area of reservation has since been completed effectively moving ESG 2.3 to compliance. No standards are affected by substantive changes reported to date.

Given that there are, nevertheless, developments in the wider higher education environment and, like any effective organisation, QQI has continued to change and adapt, the panel has provided a short update on each standard. This updates the operational context and is intended to provide a stepping stone for the panel reviewing QQI in 2029.

MAIN FINDINGS OF THE 2019 REVIEW

The 2019 review by ENQA found that QQI was compliant with the ESG.

There were two commendations. Against ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance, the effectiveness of the agency's approach to enabling higher education providers to take on more responsibility for quality assurance as they mature, including through delegating authority to make higher education awards, was commended. Also commended was the way in which policy and external quality assurance methodologies are developed through comprehensive and engaging consultation with stakeholders (under ESG 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose).

In Part Three, the following standards were found to be fully compliant with no recommendations: ESG 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance; ESG 3.2 Official status; ESG 3.3 Independence; ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis; ESG 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct; and ESG 3.7 Cyclical external review of agencies.

One standard, ESG 3.5 Resources, was found to be substantially compliant, with a recommendation to continue to work with the Department of Education and Skills to improve the funding model so that the agency can take a longer-term approach to planning and not be so vulnerable to the fluctuations in on-demand income.

For Part Two, the following standards were found to be fully compliant with no recommendations: ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance; ESG 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose; ESG 2.4 Peer-review experts; ESG 2.5 Criteria for outcomes; ESG 2.6 Reporting; and ESG 2.7 Complaints and appeals.

ESG 2.3, Implementing processes, was considered substantially compliant with one recommendation, to accelerate and complete the process of reengagement and institutional review with independent providers. The Register Committee of EQAR considered that QQI only achieved partial compliance

with standard ESG 2.3. However, as the decision letter stated, ‘in its holistic judgement, the Register Committee concluded that this was a specific and limited issue’ and did not change the overall judgement of compliance.

REVIEW PROCESS

The 2024 external targeted review of QQI was conducted in line with the process described in the *Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews*, the EQAR Procedures for Applications, and in accordance with the timeline set out in the Terms of Reference. The panel for the targeted review of QQI was appointed by ENQA and composed of the following members:

- Ulf Hedbjörk, Senior Analyst, Swedish Higher Education Authority, Sweden, Chair, QA professional (ENQA nominee);
- Rowena Pelik, International Higher Education Consultant, HEQES, UK, Secretary, QA professional (ENQA nominee);
- Maria João Rosa, Professor and researcher in QA, University of Aveiro, Portugal, CIPES, Centre for Research in HE Policies, Portugal, academic (EUA nominee);
- Alexandra-Simona Zamfir, PhD student in medicine, ‘Grigore T. Popa’ University of Medicine and Pharmacy Iasi, Romania, panel member, student (European Students’ Union nominee, member of the European Students’ Union Quality Assurance Student Experts Pool).

Goran Dakovic, Head of ENQA Agency Reviews, acted as the review coordinator.

Self-assessment report

QQI outlines in its self-assessment report (SAR) that a project plan for the development of the SAR was approved through its Projects Steering Group in May 2023. Following this, a team was established, drawn from across the agency, and a methodology and stakeholder engagement plans agreed. Stakeholder engagement covered internal staff, QQI Board, and external voices. QQI made use of its Partnerships Survey 2023 to provide information from external stakeholders on its SWOT, using both focus groups and additional questions to individuals, to provide a range of perspectives on thematic analysis as the standard for enhancement.

In the SAR, QQI states that ‘the development of the SAR has been a very positive and valuable process’ indicating that the process ‘provided space for robust discussions and reflections on progress since the last review and on the focus area for enhancement.’ The SAR also notes that QQI found both staff focus groups on the SWOT and engagement with the Board and its committees as part of this to be positive and constructive.

The SAR was clear and provided a sound basis for the review. It was critically self-reflective in assessing how QQI had responded to changes and challenges since 2019, about progress and achievements and how it is planning to respond to the ongoing extensions to its remit.

Regarding ESG 3.4, the chosen enhancement area for the targeted review, the SAR and supplementary information for the panel reflected on a significant number of ways that the agency could further progress with its thematic analyses. The supplementary information enabled the panel more fully to understand the reasons behind the choice as well as key challenges surrounding work on thematic

analysis and QQI's overall aspirations. This information, together with a leading discussion question framing the development of this area within the agency, allowed discussions during the site visit to focus more productively on plans to address this area.

Site visit

The site visit was conducted at QQI's offices 21-23 February 2024. This was preceded by online and face-to-face meetings as detailed in the visit schedule (see Annex I). The schedule was agreed with the agency to reflect the nature of the choice of enhancement standard, while also enabling the panel to consider ESG 2.1 and familiarise itself with progress and change across ESG standards.

The panel was able to meet with a range of internal staff from different functional areas, external individuals involved with both external quality assurance activities (including reviewers) and thematic analyses as well as external stakeholders. The panel met a number of members of QQI's Board alongside its Chair; the Chief Executive Officer; members of QQI's executive and key staff from across functional areas. The schedule enabled the panel to meet internal staff, external commissioned authors and stakeholders with an interest in QQI's thematic analysis (the chosen enhancement area). Senior staff representatives and those with responsibility for quality from higher education institutions (HEIs) provided insight both to the enhancement area and external quality assurance (EQA) activity by the agency more broadly.

External, strategic and contextual input was provided by representatives from the Ministry, as well as those from the sector itself, from sector organisations and from PSRBs.

All meetings were conducted with openness and engaged interest and it was evident that the commitment to quality, standards and enhancement in higher education in Ireland is widely owned, not only directly, within the sector, but also more broadly. A number of external interviewees had clearly reflected carefully in preparation for meeting the panel; discussions were constructive, revealing both commonalities in views and differing perspectives. The genuine interest in what would be gained from engaging with the ENQA review was evident from QQI (staff and Board), from sector and Ministry representatives. The panel appreciated the quality of the dialogue and the commitment to learning and to enhancement that it demonstrated.

CHANGES WITHIN THE AGENCY

HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

The SAR details changes in the wider landscape of higher education and in quality assurance that have affected the agency and ways it has responded. In common with nations and systems around the world, QQI was faced with responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. As well as moving activity online, QQI acted quickly to support the sector with a thematic analysis, published in August 2020, of the impact of Covid-19 on teaching, learning and assessment. QQI has since retained some online elements in EQA to enable teams to engage collectively earlier in planning for reviews.

A number of pieces of legislation have resulted in change in the higher education landscape and thus for QQI, or have concerned QQI directly. While the Technological Universities Act was passed in 2018, before the last ENQA review of the agency, most of the mergers that have created new

Technological Universities (TUs) occurred in 2021 and 2022 and there are now five new TUs. QQI amended the terms of reference to its institutional reviews and added the new TUs to its review cycle.

QQI itself has had new legislative functions assigned to it under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act, 2019. The SAR explains that a programme of projects and stakeholder engagement were put in place linked to these new statutory functions. These are:

- the establishment of the International Education Mark;
- the inclusion of awards of Listed Awarding Bodies in the NFQ;
- due diligence regulations for the assessment of private/independent providers to deliver education/training and adequate learner support;
- the establishment and management of a new learner protection fund; and measures to counter contract cheating/promote academic integrity.

Importantly for this review, the SAR states that most of these functions have yet to come into law and that no new EQA activities have started and thus are not reflected in the ToR.

Under the 2019 Act, QQI is the body responsible for bringing prosecutions of those facilitating or promoting learner cheating, with the Act providing the legal basis. QQI has been active in promoting academic integrity, establishing a National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN). It has developed a range of national resources and tools, worked with the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency in Australia to establish a global academic integrity network and chairs ENQA's academic integrity working group. The SAR also emphasises increased stakeholder engagement, especially with PSRBs, with students and in connection with doctoral education, as well as the development of additional quality assurance guidelines for providers of blended and online programmes in 2023.

Additionally, the Higher Education Authority Act 2022 had been approved. While it primarily concerns the regulatory functions of the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the SAR notes that the legislation provides a legal basis for the MoU that defines the relationship between the HEA and QQI. This is important, given that there are shared and overlapping functions in some areas; for instance, the National Student Engagement Programme is a joint initiative of QQI, the HEA and the Union of Students of Ireland.

QQI'S ORGANISATION/STRUCTURE

QQI's organisational structure had been changed since the 2019 review. Organisational restructuring in November 2021 led to the creation of re-configured Directorates (Corporate Services, Development, Integration and Awards) together with a Partnership division. This followed a successful submission to the government in 2021 that enabled QQI to expand its staffing. The period since the last review has also seen a substantial degree of staff turnover and this, together with additional resources and a reduced number of staff grades, has also enabled change in the distribution and nature of the professional skill set of staff.

The considerations behind this new structure were explained to the panel as being driven by the principle of 'form follows function' to enable the agency best to deliver its 2022-24 Statement of Strategy. The panel was told that QQI's previous organisational structure had reflected the nature of the staffing of the four organisations that had been brought together to create QQI. The changes in 2021 shifted to a functionally based structure, to reflect the changing nature of QQI's work, the impact

of digitalisation and the need for more staff able to work flexibly as high-level professionals more than as specialists. The panel was told that, overall, the changes had created a more balanced, more professionalised and highly qualified staff, had built in ways to enable cross-organisational learning, systematised development opportunities and produced greater organisational resilience.

Importantly, given the choice of enhancement area, and in line with the strategic focus put on the strengthening of the work on thematic analysis, a Research and Innovation Division was established within the Development Directorate as a new unit responsible for the strategic planning, management, and delivery of thematic analysis activity.

QQI'S FUNDING

QQI's income remains an approximately equal combination of grant funding from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) and variable funding from fees. Grant funding received by QQI was increased following the 2019 review, enabling it to increase its staff complement by eight posts. The panel heard that, overall, this funding had increased by 35%. As discussed more fully under 3.5, QQI is working with DFHERIS to agree a revised funding model. The two main intentions behind this are to increase the predictability of income, thus to enable QQI to plan its activities more effectively and operate them more efficiently, and to update the schedule of fees charged to reflect actual costs both of existing activity and new activities under its more extended remit.

QQI'S FUNCTIONS, ACTIVITIES, PROCEDURES

The extension of QQI's remit and responsibilities under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act, 2019 is covered above. The impact of these additional responsibilities has not yet had a significant impact on QQI's quality assurance activities.

In the context of validation activity for the four large private/independent providers accounting for around 60% of this work for the agency, QQI developed conditions to enable it to delegate authority to providers without awarding powers and these are with DFHERIS for approval through the appropriate Ministerial regulations⁶. These four providers have had their quality assurance procedures approved (and some already have devolved responsibility for parts of the validation process and have been integrated into institutional monitoring with Annual Quality Reports (AQRs) and quality dialogue meetings). In the interim QQI has commenced CINNTE⁷ reviews and will complete them this year (2024).

Following the completion of reengagement, QQI plans to develop a fit for purpose and proportionate model for the institutional review of the remaining private/independent HEIs who are mainly small and specialist, and expects to publish a consultation this year (2024). This activity will fall under the ESG.

⁶ QQI processes are determined independently, and it is only where legally specified regulations are required that DFHERIS approval is involved.

⁷ CINNTE is the name of QQI's Institutional Review cycle.

QQI is advanced in its preparation for the IEM and it is anticipated the scheme will be put into operation in 2024. Where this activity applies to higher education, the panel assumes it will fall under the ESG.

FINDINGS: COMPLIANCE OF QQI WITH THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA (ESG) WITHIN THE SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

ESG PART 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

ESG 3.1 ACTIVITIES, POLICY, AND PROCESSES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard:

Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a regular basis. They should have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are part of their publicly available mission statement. These should translate into the daily work of the agency. Agencies should ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work

2019 review: fully compliant with no recommendations or suggestions

2024 update and confirmation

QQI continues to set clear and explicit goals as part of three-year Statements of Strategy. The Statement of Strategy at the time of the site visit, that for 2022-24, was able to reflect on some of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and to incorporate plans in response to QQI's widened remit. The 2022-24 strategy set four strategic priorities: to provide or ensure better information and opportunities for learners; to implement strengthened regulation to protect learners; to drive and stimulate provider development; and to publish authoritative analysis and insight. This last priority relates directly to the choice of enhancement area. The strategy identified partnership and excellence as the key enablers.

Annual Corporate Plans detail the activities intended to implement and operationalise the statement of strategy each year. Thus, strategy is directly translated into the planned activities of the agency and its daily work. This was evident not only in the documentation reviewed by the panel but was frequently evidenced in meetings throughout the site visit. All larger strands of work are managed as projects, overseen by a projects steering group, with project brief clearly set out, progress monitored and projects formally closed on completion.

As noted in the 2019 review report, QQI has a remit that is broader than most European quality assurance agencies, and was widened further with amended legislation that year. The SAR details the new legislation, noting that not all of it had been formally commenced by the time of the 2024 review.

The 2019 report also noted that QQI sought to ensure that activities operate coherently as an overall system of external quality assurance. The panel noted that QQI was able to further this coherence with organisational restructuring in 2021 and through its emphasis on learning from the activities it undertakes. The panel confirms that QQI continues to create an effective balance between the independence necessary to its role assessing and directing quality assurance in higher education in Ireland and meaningful engagement with stakeholders in both its governance and development of its

work. The ways in which QQI consults with stakeholders allows it to reflect their views and interests without its core integrity as an independent agency being compromised.

ESG 3.2 OFFICIAL STATUS

Standard:

Agencies should have an established legal basis and should be formally recognised as quality assurance agencies by competent public authorities

2019 review: fully compliant with no recommendations or suggestions

2024 update and confirmation

QQI was established by the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 which gave it a range of statutory functions with its responsibilities and powers defined in legislation. Its responsibilities were extended with the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019 and are detailed in the SAR. Higher Education in Ireland is regulated by the HEA and the SAR provides information on the Higher Education Authority Act 2022. The SAR indicates that there are areas of shared or overlapping responsibility between QQI and HEA. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the two organisations has been given legal standing under the updated legislation and a fourth MoU is expected to be agreed in 2024 reflecting both this statutory basis and the changed remits of both organisations. Although that new MoU had not been developed at the time of the site visit, the panel had the opportunity to discuss the intentions behind it.

The official status of QQI is clear, the panel confirmed that its authority on matters within its remit is respected and recognised. QQI is well established as an effective, well-regarded agency within Ireland, by government, by the higher education sector and by its stakeholders more generally. The panel also noted that QQI has established itself as a leading agency internationally, within the EHEA and further afield.

ESG 3.3 INDEPENDENCE

Standard:

Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence

2019 review: fully compliant with no recommendations

2024 update and confirmation

QQI is a state agency under the aegis, since June 2020, of the DFHERIS, (Department of Education and Skills at the time of the 2019 report). The Act that created QQI states that it 'shall be independent in the performance of its functions.' The 2019 panel noted the careful work and scrutiny of contextual evidence from 2019 to 'investigate and consider how the risk to the agency's organisational and operational independence were [sic] being managed and mitigated.' This panel (2024) re-confirms that QQI has autonomy in the management of its quality assurance activities and its decisions are independent and are not compromised by undue stakeholder influence.

While the Minister has responsibility for appointing members of the agency's Board, the 2019 panel confirmed that how this is operationalised ensures the Board is duly independent. It also found that the way in which QQI reports and is accountable to the Ministry for delivery and use of public funds is suitably structured; this was confirmed by the 2024 panel.

ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Standard:

Agencies should regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities

2019 review: fully compliant with no recommendations; a suggestion for further consideration was made. This was to define a clear multi-year programme of research and analysis, which could help to align the agency's ambitions in this area with the resources available, and also to engage stakeholders in confirming the usefulness of analysis work before it is commenced.

2024 update and confirmation

In line with the recognition of the strategic importance of thematic analysis (one of QQI's strategic priorities is INSIGHT - Publishing authoritative analysis and insight), QQI has developed a sound approach and capacity to develop such activity, namely by establishing a Research and Innovation Division. This team allows QQI to progress thematic analysis activity and is a locus for its strategic planning, management, and delivery. Since the last ENQA review, QQI has published a substantial number of thematic analyses not only describing and analysing the general findings of its external quality assurance activities, but also focusing on other themes highly relevant for higher education stakeholders in Ireland and abroad. All the agency's thematic reports are published on its website with those published 2019-2023 listed in Annex 4. They include a series termed 'QQI insights' (QQI Insight on Assessment: Learner Perspectives, QQI insight on Quality in Irish Private and Independent Higher Education Institutions, etc.); analyses of the outcomes of EQA activities; analysis to support higher education in responding to the impact of Covid-19 and developments such as micro-credentials.

From reading the SAR and during the site visit, the panel was able to confirm QQI's continuing compliance with this standard, as well as to verify the effort made by the agency in conducting relevant and sound thematic analysis and reflecting on how to further develop this activity. The section on the Enhancement Area (p. 28) provides a thorough account of QQI's thematic work.

Panel commendations

1. The panel commends the agency on its careful self-reflection on thematic analysis, identifying the main challenges and how to further improve this area of activity, and how QQI has valorised thematic analysis as a tool to improve its external quality assurance activities in innovative, comprehensive and interrelated ways.
2. The panel commends QQI on how it has established thematic analysis as a strategic priority, backed that with concrete actions, such as setting up the Research and Innovation Division, and supported the production of thematic analysis with comprehensive project management.
3. The panel commends QQI on the quality and relevance of the thematic analysis produced between 2019 and 2023.

ESG 3.5 RESOURCES

Standard:

Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work

2019 review: substantially compliant with a recommendation to continue to work with the Department of Education and Skills to improve the funding model so that the agency can take a longer-term approach to planning and not be so vulnerable to the fluctuations in on-demand income.

The 2019 panel identified suggestions for improvement, noting that, although there were several areas for improvement needed for QQI to become fully compliant, these had been identified by the agency and were being progressed effectively. The panel advised that the agency saw their current plans through to implementation and continued to maintain an ongoing strategy for organisational development.

Evidence

In the 2019 report, the review panel concluded that while QQI possessed sufficient staffing and financial resources in theory, its organisational framework fell short in facilitating the optimal effectiveness and efficiency of its external quality assurance endeavours. The panel's suggestions for improvement supported QQI's ongoing efforts aimed at remedying this situation, albeit acknowledging that they were yet to be realised. To ensure alignment with established standards and guidelines, QQI was urged diligently to pursue the implementation of these initiatives, ultimately reaching a stage where it could fully leverage all earned or allocated resources.

Human resources

As indicated in the SAR, a workforce planning process was underway at the time of the 2019 review. This culminated in a submission to the government department in 2021 for eight additional posts duly approved (bringing QQI's total staff complement to 84). Coupled with retirements and staff turnover, QQI had been able to recruit 36 new staff members (over 40% of the existing full staffing complement). In parallel, in November 2021, organisational restructuring resulted in the creation of four directorates

and the establishment of the Partnerships Division. The SAR states that this division has proved pivotal in fortifying collaborations with key stakeholders, including learners, providers, professional bodies, regulatory/statutory entities, and European and international partners.

The new directorates aimed to facilitate QQI's transformation from a state of establishment to that of a more developed and impact-oriented agency. The panel learnt that, by doing so, QQI sought to enhance its operational capabilities and effectiveness, aligning itself more closely with its objectives and responsibilities. From both the SAR and meetings during the site visit, the panel understood that QQI was realising the benefits of professional and committed staff aligned with strategic goals. Results from QQI's Partnership Survey, 2023, affirm strong stakeholder engagement and highlight staff professionalism and proactiveness as notable attributes.

Financial resources

As stated in the SAR, in response to the 2019 recommendations, QQI has collaborated extensively with DFHERIS on the development of its funding model. However, the funding structure has not yet changed and continues to be a combination of direct funding and fees.

A revised funding model was proposed to the Department in 2021. DFHERIS mandates that QQI's new services must not incur additional costs to the Irish Exchequer. Proposed funding initiatives include increased programme validation fees, higher public HEI relationship fees, the introduction of an Education and Training Board relationship fee, and the planned commencement of the International Education Mark (IEM) in 2024, with full costs recovered through administration of the IEM. These measures aim to ensure financial sustainability and align fees with service costs and, if accepted, would increase the proportion of predictable income. QQI requires Departmental approval to revise fee levels and to set fees for new responsibilities.

Thus, the proposed funding changes aim to address several shortcomings identified in the 2019 report. The changes seek to increase income predictability, reduce dependence on certification income, align fee structures with actual costs and adapt to changes in legislative frameworks. These changes reflect an ongoing effort to enhance financial stability and sustainability while meeting evolving operational needs. The new financial model could see a decrease in QQI's variable annual income from 46% to 32% while fixed predictable income increases.

In mid-2022, QQI submitted a revised, more concise proposal to DFHERIS, outlining preferred options and rates. Concurrently, QQI has been developing the Amended Legislation Programme for its new statutory and regulatory functions (under the 2019 Amendment). In 2023, DFHERIS advised that funding model proposals must accompany the amended legislation proposal for comprehensive consideration. Some providers met by the panel commented that the relationship between the schedule of fees and the nature of activity was not fully transparent. In working with the Department, however, QQI is continuing to aim to ensure financial sustainability and align fees with service costs.

Analysis

The panel agrees with the agency's assessment that the organisational review of 2019, along with the subsequent implementation of revised management portfolios, has been pivotal in shaping QQI's evolution and progress to a forward-thinking and impactful organisation. The revised organisational structure has facilitated greater collaboration and synergy across the agency, fostering a cohesive approach to achieving strategic objectives.

The panel noted that, following the last review, there was a strategic aim to enhance organisational capacity. There is recognition of the ongoing need to remain flexible and adaptable. Emphasis is placed on maintaining a forward-looking perspective, ensuring that staff are equipped to adapt and innovate beyond immediate requirements, thus fostering organisational resilience and longevity.

Moreover, insights gained through meetings during the site visit highlighted the opportunities resulting from significant staff retirements. This turnover provided QQI with the opportunity strategically to recruit individuals with skill sets tailored to meet the agency's evolving needs at a time of rapid change and shifting strategic priorities. By leveraging this turnover, QQI has been able to bring in new staff equipped with the requisite expertise to address emerging challenges and support the agency's strategic direction effectively.

In the same context, in aligning staff portfolios and skill sets with organisational goals, looking to emphasise a shared professional skillset and a policy of rotating responsibilities, QQI has facilitated skills development and built organisational resilience. As a result, it reports improved staff satisfaction. The Programme Management Office further enables diverse staff groups to collaborate effectively in delivering key initiatives aligned with QQI's strategy. The panel found that this collaborative approach, coupled with a focus on skill diversification and alignment with strategic objectives, underscores QQI's commitment to achieving impactful outcomes and remaining responsive to evolving demands in the education landscape.

During the site visit, when examining progress towards, and intended impact of, the altered funding model on QQI's operations and capabilities, it was confirmed to the panel that no significant changes have been made thus far. Currently, the funding structure maintains a roughly equal division between fixed funding and demand-based or relationship fees. However, discussions underscored the challenges associated with planning with this combination of fixed and variable income. Furthermore, the discussions shed light on the intricate nature of discussions for an 'arm's length organisation' with government and the bounded nature of autonomy, along with the political complexities and lengthy procedures involved in fee setting. Despite continuous efforts to establish a more predictable funding arrangement, it was noted that a resolution might be postponed until issues regarding the IEM are resolved.

Moreover, there was an acknowledgment of the intricate nature of fees and charges associated with QQI's operations, indicating a need for additional clarity and simplification in the funding framework. It was clear to the panel from meetings during the site visit that a revised, transparent fee structure is desirable for providers as well as to support QQI to plan its operations effectively.

ESG 3.6 INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

Standard:

Agencies should have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of their activities

2019 review: fully compliant with no recommendations

2024 update and confirmation

In 2019, the report observed that the agency's approach was still maturing and there was potential to develop it further as further processes were operationalised and scaled up, noting the opportunity for QQI to think proactively about how to further evolve its approach to internal quality assurance. The panel in 2024 heard a range of evidence, supported by documentation, as to how QQI has evolved its approach both to Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) and to building the experience and professionalism of staff.

The panel learnt in meetings how building the professional skills and range of experience of staff had been embedded into operational practice and culture and that this both supported staff as individuals and built organisational capacity and resilience. Ways in which staff are enabled to gain experience outside their own area within QQI and externally, in Europe, are now routine. QQI uses mechanisms such as projects to enable staff to gain cross-organisational experience, it regularly sends staff on the ENQA Leadership Development Programme and enables them to present at conferences such as the European Quality Assurance Forum.

At the time of the site visit, QQI was part-way through a substantial programme of activity to overhaul its business systems and processes with the aims of ensuring that they effectively support its work and evolving remit (including the changing nature of customer expectations) and removing the legacy of variations from past practices. IQA is supported by a managed approach to all larger pieces of work via the Projects Steering Group as well as by a range of internal controls. The panel heard evidence of a clear culture of continuous improvement, itself supported by consultation and stakeholder engagement as well as by critical self-reflection. Moreover, the Information and Quality Governance Programme, encompasses a number of projects meant to assure and enhance the quality and integrity of QQI's activities.

ESG 3.7 CYCLICAL EXTERNAL REVIEW OF AGENCIES

Standard:

Agencies should undergo an external review at least once every five years in order to demonstrate their compliance with the ESG

2019 review: fully compliant with no recommendations

2024 update and confirmation

The panel confirmed QQIs' continued active engagement with the cyclical review process, with the ESG and EHEA.

The agency engaged fully in the follow-up process with ENQA. In its follow-up report to ENQA in 2021, QQI described the progress made in addressing the 2019 panel recommendations. First, with regard to the recommendation for ESG 3.5, the agency reported progress in relation to the establishment of a long-term sustainable funding model, and the recruitment for new staff posts as a result of a workforce planning process (as discussed under ESG 3.5 above). Second, the recommendation for ESG 2.3 to 'accelerate and complete reengagement and institutional review with independent providers' was addressed by the agency in several ways: the reengagement process was completed, private/independent HEIs were included within the annual quality reporting and monitoring process, and resources were committed to implementing institutional review processes for private/independent HEIs in the next strategic planning period.

ESG PART 2: EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard:

External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part I of the ESG

2019 review: fully compliant with no recommendations

QQI was **commended** for the effectiveness of the approach to enabling higher education providers to take on more responsibility for quality assurance as they mature, including through delegating authority to make higher education awards.

Evidence

The panel identified no changes in regard to external quality assurance activities within the scope of the ESG since the previous review, with the exception of the activity Reengagement process for non-public providers, completed in 2021. As stated in the ToR, QQI conducts the following external quality assurance activities within the scope of the ESG: Institutional Quality Monitoring and Review, Approval of Providers' Quality Assurance Procedures, Programme Validation and Revalidation, Delegated Authority to Make Awards, and Focused Reviews.

The SAR states that, following the aforementioned reengagement process of approving private/independent providers' quality assurance procedures, the vast majority of Irish HEIs are now subject to institutional reviews within QQI's external quality assurance framework. This implies that the quality assurance framework must be flexible and fit to assess and support the enhancement of quality in a wide range of HEIs of various types and sizes.

The 2019 review found that QQI's quality assurance policy framework aligned comprehensively to and met the standards and guidelines in Part I of the ESG, and this was confirmed by the present panel. The SAR states, as a core principle of QQI's approach to quality assurance, HEIs' primary responsibility

for the quality of their provision and its assurance. The framework is based on common principles of a 'shared quality assurance infrastructure' with core quality assurance guidelines applicable to all providers, aligned to the ESG and supplemented by sector specific and topic specific quality assurance guidelines.

The SAR describes how standards of the ESG Part I are covered within QQI's external quality assurance activities through a detailed mapping grid demonstrating compliance with ESG 2.1 and reproduced as Annex 3. The table below is a simplification of the mapping grid used in the SAR. The full mapping grid includes links to policies, procedures and guidelines, and further detailed mapping references, such as for validation and revalidation, and monitoring. The panel was able to confirm that these documents support the judgement of compliance for ESG 2.1.

The mapping grid in the SAR does not include the activity Delegated Authority to Make Awards (DA), listed in the ToR for the targeted review. This is a process that was used in the past and considered by the 2019 panel⁸. QQI has developed a revised process; however, elements require Ministerial approval which is awaited. Delegated Authority is discussed further under Additional Observations (See also ESG 2.1 and 2.3).

Table 2: simplified mapping of EQA procedures against ESG Part I

ESG Part I	Shared QA infrastructure for all EQA activities	Approval of Providers' QA Procedures	Programme Validation and Revalidation	Monitoring	CINNTE Cyclical Institutional Review	Focused Review
I.1	X ⁹	X	X	X	X	X
I.2	X	X	X	X	X	X
I.3	X	X	X	X		
I.4	X	X	X		X	
I.5	X	X	X	X		
I.6	X	X	X	X		
I.7	X	X	X	X		
I.8	X	X	X	X		
I.9	X	X	X	X		
I.10	All HEIs are required to undergo periodic (at least every seven years) external quality review. Planned reviews are published in CINNTE Schedule 2023 - 2024 .					

⁸ The 2019 panel reviewed how QQI considered applications for delegated authority. It noted that the scope of the activity was reducing but that amendments to legislation would, in future, enable independent providers to seek delegated authority; this group of providers had not hitherto been eligible. The 2019 panel was confident that the policy framework was in place for considering applications, but noted that there was limited evidence available for it to review how the policy had been applied in practice in recent years.

⁹ X = compliant

	The Policy for Cyclical Reviews sets out the purpose and approach to review. Review reports are published on the Quality and Monitoring Review Reports library.
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Analysis

The panel explored QQI's external quality assurance activities included in the ToR, and was able to confirm the analysis of the previous review that QQI's quality assurance policy framework meets the standards and guidelines in Part I of the ESG in a comprehensive way.

The panel found that, through its external quality assurance activities, operating at institutional as well as programme level, QQI ensures that institutions have appropriate internal quality assurance procedures in place, and that these are implemented effectively and to the benefit of teaching and learning. The interrelatedness and comprehensiveness of the quality assurance framework is further underpinned by the common principles of the shared quality assurance infrastructure, which apply to all external quality assurance activities. The panel concluded from sector specific and topic specific guidelines that the core activities are well-established and effective, in terms of the assessment of internal quality assurance arrangements in HEIs. This was also confirmed to the panel by various stakeholders during the site visit.

The panel found all QQI's activities and processes within the scope of the ESG to be clearly defined, implemented consistently, and published. Procedures were clearly described in the supporting documents associated with each procedure, and easily accessible on the agency's website. During the site visit, representatives of HEIs and other stakeholders confirmed that QQI's EQA policies and procedures are well known and accepted. On the basis of the documentation provided and discussions held during the site visit, the panel concludes that the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes within HEIs is assessed by QQI in a both rigorous and enhancement-led manner, and that assessment criteria of all procedures effectively translate the standards of ESG Part I (as summarised in the mapping grid above, Table 2). The panel considers this a clear indication that QQI's external quality assurance has a positive impact on the development of HEIs' internal quality assurance.

An important characteristic of QQI's external quality assurance is the agency's intention and endeavour to delegate increasingly greater operational responsibility to HEIs as regards awarding powers and the quality assurance of their programmes and other provisions. An example of how QQI conceives its external quality assurance activities in an innovative, comprehensive and interrelated manner is the development of a combined process for delegated authority and institutional review. Delegated authority is a strategic priority included in the agency's current Statement of Strategy, and aims to 'facilitate increased autonomy and flexibility for mature providers by enabling them to pursue delegated authority to make their own awards' (see also Additional Observations and ESG 2.3) The aim of the combined process was to assess applications for delegated awarding authority to a number of private/independent HEIs as part of institutional review. Due to a delay in the required legislative process pertaining to delegated authority, the agency decided instead to implement a two-phased approach, consisting of an institutional review taking a holistic and enhancement-led approach, followed by an assessment for delegated authority through a compliance-based process. This adjusted approach is meant to provide scope for each HEI to address recommendations that may emerge from an institutional review process before proceeding to an assessment for delegated authority. It also

illustrates that QQI is able to operate in a flexible and responsive manner to deliver effective and timely EQA.

Several examples mentioned in the SAR show how QQI draws on the results from external quality assurance activities to inspire their continuous improvement of processes. For instance, a thematic analysis of the reengagement process was conducted by QQI in 2020, which showed that this process had led to improvements in HEIs' internal quality assurance, but also to a number of improvements in the agency's validation processes, such as, online surveys for providers and experts, support for report writing, interactive Q&A sessions for providers, and improved publications of the outcomes of the validation process. Further, recommendations from an externally commissioned mid-cycle analysis of the outcomes of institutional review reports (2020) made QQI recognise that the quality assurance of research activity was an area that they needed to develop further; this has resulted in, for example, institutional and review team briefings with a stronger focus on the quality assurance of research and its relation to teaching and learning. Finally, an independent external analysis of QQI's Annual Quality Report process (2023) has inspired a reflection on the effectiveness of the agency's monitoring function and framework, a theme also discussed during the ENQA progress visit in 2022.

Based on the SAR, supplementary documentation, and interviews during the site visit, the panel was able to confirm that the direction taken by QQI in its continuing development, already commended by the 2019 review, has indeed resulted in increased responsibility and ownership by HEIs as regards their own quality assurance and awarding processes, indicating an increased maturity of HEIs' internal quality assurance processes.

Panel commendation

- I. The panel commends the agency's effective approach to continue to delegate increasingly greater operational responsibility and ownership to HEIs as regards their internal quality assurance and awarding processes.

Panel conclusion: Compliant

ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE

Standard:

External quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.

2019 review: fully compliant with no recommendations.

Commended for the way in which policy and external quality assurance methodologies are developed through comprehensive and engaging consultation with stakeholders.

2024 update and confirmation

The panel reiterates the conclusions of the 2019 report that, within a framework based on a set of high-level shared principles and requirements, each activity is supported by clear methodologies, policies, guidelines and templates; approaches are developed in consultation with stakeholders; and has resulted in a range of methodologies being produced that are fit for purpose.

The panel confirms QQI's continuing commitment to consultation with a revised consultation framework having been published in 2022. Consultation is often iterative, with policy documents and guidance being re-tested with stakeholders. The panel noted that this produced effective, helpful documentation and is valued by stakeholders, but also heard that development processes could be lengthy.

QQI was in the process of designing new methods following the extension of its responsibilities at the time of the panel visit. These were not advanced enough to have formed part of the ToR of the targeted review, but it was evident that QQI was actively engaging the sector in the development, for example, of the approach to the IEM.

ESG 2.3 IMPLEMENTING PROCESSES

Standard:

External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include:

- a self-assessment or equivalent
- an external assessment normally including a site visit
- a report resulting from the external assessment
- a consistent follow-up

2019 review: substantially compliant with one recommendation. QQI was asked to accelerate and complete reengagement and institutional review with independent providers. The EQAR Register Committee considered QQI only partially compliant against this standard given the incomplete implementation of reviews for independent private providers¹⁰.

In its holistic judgement, the Register Committee concluded that this was a specific and limited issue, which does not weigh heavily given QQI's engagement with independent private providers through their programme validation relationship. The Committee therefore concluded that QQI continues to comply substantially with the ESG as a whole.

2024 update and confirmation

The panel confirmed the observations and conclusions in the 2019 report, namely that the implementation of QQI's different quality assurance activities are useful, pre-defined and are implemented consistently and in line with the published methodologies. Further, that they have proved to be successful and valuable in both the assurance and the enhancement of quality. In 2019, it was

¹⁰ In the present report, as in the SAR, the term used is 'private/independent provider', with the exception of direct reference, such as here, to ENQA's or EQAR' judgements from the previous review.

noted that monitoring processes varied appropriately by provider type with some being slow to be operationalised but were gradually being delivered.

The panel noted that, with regard to Delegated Authority to Make Awards, updated procedures, criteria and ministerial regulations that would enable private/independent providers to seek delegated authority were awaiting approval and were not available at the time of the targeted review. (See also ESG 2.1 and Additional Observations.)

The 2019 report recorded that the reengagement process with private/independent providers was yet to be completed and noted the risks connected to the absence of cyclical institutional reviews (with a potential period of up to 12 years between institutional reviews for some providers). While the report explained the reasons for this, it had to conclude that the standard was not met for this category of provider.

The 2024 panel was able to confirm that, as recorded in the SAR, the reengagement process had been completed in 2021 and that QQI was now compliant with this standard.

Further to this, the four large private/independent providers now have Terms of Reference and a Handbook for their external institutional review and all will have taken place by the end of 2024. However, with reference to the remaining private/independent providers, QQI states in the SAR that it has 'not yet developed an institutional review model and process for this cohort of institutions' noting that 'the timelines for this development and implementation are not within our current strategic timeframe, but it is proposed to publish an issues paper for consultation in 2024.' This is a group of mainly small and specialist institutions, all of which had completed an external evaluation of their internal quality assurance as part of the reengagement process. The panel understood, from meetings and the SAR, that QQI has a close engagement with these providers through their programme validation and revalidation relationship, but encourages QQI to progress the development of the fit for purpose and proportionate review model it identifies in the SAR as needed for this group of providers, following the consultation proposed by the agency for 2024.

The extraordinary circumstances that unfolded in spring 2020, precipitated by the emergence of the global Covid-19 pandemic, exerted a profound influence on the operational protocols governing QQI's working arrangements and external quality assurance procedures, thereby invariably affecting the operations of the higher education sector. This period underscored the resilience and adaptability demonstrated by QQI, leading, as outlined in the SAR, to the sustained integration of various innovative digital and online processes into their operational procedures.

The panel noted that each EQA process is implemented consistently for each category of provider. However, the nature of the processes varies between provider categories. It is important to stress that this reflects the nature of the different higher education sectors, and the relationship QQI has with them, together with its commitment to ensure that processes are aligned with the needs of each provider category and are fit for purpose.

Panel commendation

- I. The panel commends QQI on its resilience and adaptability during the Covid-19 pandemic as demonstrated by the integration of innovative digital and online processes into their operational procedures.

Suggestion for further improvement

- I. The panel encourages QQI to continue to develop a review model suitable to the group of private/independent providers not yet included in cyclical institutional review activity.

ESG 2.4 PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS

Standard:

External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s)

2019 review: fully compliant with no recommendations

2024 update and confirmation

The panel confirmed the conclusions of the 2019 report that QQI makes full use of peer-review by national and international experts in its key validation and review activities. The panel confirmed that, with the exception of monitoring, expert panels always included a student. It also confirmed that there was an appropriate system in place to check against conflicts of interest (given the increased likelihood of conflicts of interest with national experts in a small Higher Education system).

The 2019 report had suggested that the support and training for industry experts could be improved and that greater use could be made of online and blended methods; it was clear to the 2024 panel that changes had been made. Reviewers met by the panel were positive about the training they had received seeing it as both effective and sufficient. Training is adapted to the particular needs of the different experts (industry/student/international) and the nature of the method. Reviewers reported that the training is well aligned to their needs and role on a panel. International panel members especially valued the overview provided of higher education in Ireland. The National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) training was considered a valuable support by student reviewers who had experienced it (although it was not a requirement for student reviewers and, without it, a student would be less well prepared). The training draws on the expertise of experienced reviewers. Training also involves input from other bodies, such as the HEA and the Irish Universities Association, but the panel learnt that the representative bodies for other sectors were not routinely involved. Both reviewers and QQI staff commented on how the retention of some online elements supported the review process.

ESG 2.5 CRITERIA FOR OUTCOMES

Standard:

Any outcomes or judgements made as the result of external quality assurance should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision

2019 review: fully compliant with no recommendations

2024 update and confirmation

The panel confirmed the conclusions of the 2019 report that QQI's approach to reaching sound judgements, based on published criteria for each of its external quality assurance activities, is robust and effective. The approach supports consistency in judgements between different panels through the management of processes by QQI staff, the use of handbooks, guidelines and templates as well as the final consideration of report findings by committees of QQI's Board.

ESG 2.6 REPORTING

Standard:

Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision should be published together with the report

2019 review: fully compliant with no recommendations

2024 update and confirmation

The panel confirmed the conclusions of the 2019 report that QQI has a consistent approach to reporting. Review, monitoring, and follow-up reports are routinely published, are clear and publicly available.

Reviewers met by the panel reported that the training that they had received on writing for reports equipped them effectively to produce the evidence-based, clear reporting required.

Through meetings with representatives from HEIs, the panel also confirmed that QQI's reports and processes continue to support providers in managing and enhancing quality.

ESG 2.7 COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

Standard:

Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions

2019 review: fully compliant with no recommendations

2024 update and confirmation

The panel confirmed the conclusions and observations made in the 2019 report noting the legislative basis for appeals and a fully independent appeals panel appointed by the responsible Minister. In 2019, QQI had not received any appeals and had had one complaint of service. It has since had one appeal (related to further education), which was not upheld. However, QQI was able to learn from the process of operating an appeal and has made amendments in light of the experience. With limited complaints and appeals there is little evidence to draw on in determining the effectiveness of QQI's

complaints and appeals processes; however, the panel concludes that the design of these processes is appropriate and provides potential complainants and appellants with an opportunity to pursue their case. The panel confirmed with providers in meetings during the site visit that they were aware of complaints and appeals processes. However, it was clear that QQI's operational practices (including consultation in the design and development of processes, clear guidance and handbooks, the professionalism of its staff, and the quality of the training for reviewers) alongside the overall trust in QQI meant that the small number of complaints and appeals represented a robust system working effectively and shared commitments to the quality and standards of higher education in Ireland.

ENHANCEMENT AREA

ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

QQI chose ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis as the enhancement area for its 2024 ENQA targeted review. A number of reasons were put forward by the agency for this selection, both in the SAR, in the supplementary information provided to the panel on the standard for enhancement and during the interviews held with QQI senior management staff. Overall, it was stressed that the main purpose for the selection was the fact that thematic analysis is a key strategic focus for QQI and that the agency believes that work in this area has significant potential benefit for its stakeholders. Moreover, and despite much having been done in this area since the 2019 ENQA review, the agency indicated that there is still a number of challenges to overcome and potential for development, including:

- thematic analysis planning and prioritisation (e.g. stakeholder involvement in identifying areas of analysis, prioritisation, governance and ensuring scope for responsiveness);
- needs in terms of data (there are limitations due to the absence of a national data strategy for the tertiary sector);
- production (internally or through commissioned external authorship);
- value and impact;
- dissemination.

As such, QQI saw that its 2024 ENQA review could provide a timely opportunity for self-reflection, as well as to obtain external perspectives on how it might further develop and enhance its strategic approach and work on thematic analysis.

In order to contribute to the agency's reflections on thematic analysis, and having reviewed thematic analyses produced in the period between 2019 and 2023 alongside the information in the SAR, the panel explored a series of questions with those met during the site visit. In meetings conducted with QQI staff and with its external stakeholders the panel posed questions about thematic analyses, including: i) their relevance, value and impact; ii) the way the topics are selected by QQI and how far stakeholders are involved in that selection; iii) their value for learning and capacity building internally and externally, namely by the QQI staff, reviewers and/or the higher education providers; iv) its use for policy making at institutional and/or government level; and v) issues of format, publication and dissemination.

Additionally, three of the meetings held during the site visit were primarily devoted to thematic analysis, one with the agency staff representatives involved with thematic analysis, one with externally commissioned authors and one with external stakeholders with an interest in thematic analysis (meetings 8-10, see Annex I). The goal was to obtain in-depth information from those directly involved with thematic analysis on issues such as views on their purpose, relevance and impact; the drivers behind QQI's approach; the main audiences; the topics chosen and who is involved in that choice; format; dissemination; the balance between having a predefined programme for thematic analysis vs. the maintenance of flexibility, agility and the capacity to respond to a fast changing higher education landscape; QQI support to staff in developing the necessary skills and expertise to undertake thematic analysis effectively; how to identify and select external authors for commissioned external thematic analysis; the main uses of thematic analysis; and the way this area should be further developed in the future.

With the aim of involving all QQI staff in a self-reflection process around thematic analysis, the review panel set up a Mentimeter¹¹ 'pool' which was left open during the whole site visit with six broad open questions:

- 1) What topics for thematic analysis would you propose, and what needs would these topics address?
- 2) How should QQI prioritise between areas and topics for thematic analysis?
- 3) What could a multi-dimensional approach to the format and dissemination of thematic analyses look like?
- 4) How can QQI identify the value and impact of thematic analysis?
- 5) Three years from now, how do you see QQI's thematic analysis, and what is needed to get there?
- 6) Any other remark or note on thematic analysis?

The panel acknowledges and thanks the QQI staff who took the time to answer these questions and who, as such, contributed a wide range of relevant insights for the panel and for the continuing development and enhancement of QQI thematic analysis. The collected responses are included as Annex 5.

All the information collected was then analysed by the panel in a brainstorming session held at the end of the site visit, with the aim of uncovering key messages and the main reflections on thematic analysis.

It is important to emphasise that, for QQI, thematic analysis has a broader definition and purpose than the one presented in the ESG, encompassing not only the regularly production and publishing of reports that describe and analyse the general findings of its external quality assurance activities, but also other system-level analysis pertaining to the quality of tertiary education and qualifications. The review panel supports this understanding of what thematic analysis can be, as well as QQI's views of their use to support decision making at system and institutional levels in relation to quality assurance and improvement.

Overall, and as referred in the section on the compliance with ESG 3.4, QQI has developed since 2019 a well-thought, active and, in the view of the panel, sound approach to thematic analysis. One of QQI's strategic priorities, as defined in its Statement of Strategy 2022-24, is INSIGHT - Publishing authoritative analysis and insight, for which six objectives and five key performance indicators have been defined.

QQI's Research and Innovation Division, established in 2021, is designed to help realise this priority, and deliver the intended system-level analysis and insights both to support and influence national policy on further and higher education. This team allows QQI to progress the production of thematic analysis, while also providing a locus for its strategic planning, management, and delivery. The work of this team is complemented by the Projects Steering Group, since many of the thematic analyses are operated as projects, whose approval, scheduling, resourcing and monitoring during execution and conclusion are supervised by this group. As a result of these developments, QQI has, since 2019, published 25 thematic analyses not only describing and analysing the general findings of its external quality assurance activities, but also focusing other themes highly relevant for higher education stakeholders in Ireland and abroad.

¹¹ <https://www.mentimeter.com/>

The review panel considers that QQI not only clearly defined its strategic goals for thematic analysis, but was also able to deploy them in a number of concrete actions, identified, for instance in QQI's Corporate Plan 2022, which, consequently, allowed it to obtain significant results from this activity. Annex 4 of this report lists thematic analysis reports published 2019-2023.

Moreover, QQI's strategic approach to thematic analysis is well-evidenced by its current reflection on how to further develop this activity, as outlined in the SAR and evidenced in the interviews with the agency key management staff. QQI has been able to reflect on its current situation regarding thematic analysis, uncovering its main key challenges and aspirations and being able to identify its main stakeholders in this respect.

In the future, QQI intends to continue its work around two essential types of thematic analyses. The first, retrospective analyses, which, in line with ESG 3.4, provide an analysis of external quality assurance activities, to identify opportunities for improvement (e.g. 'Mid-Cycle Analysis: CINNTE Review Reports'). The second are forward looking topic-based analyses, aimed at shaping policy and direction of practice (e.g. 'QQI early exploration into Micro-credentials in Higher Education, 2014–2020').

It was evident to the panel that the majority of topics identified by the different stakeholders in meetings as relevant to them had either been covered by QQI or were already part of its plans. Topics identified included digitalisation, artificial intelligence, micro-credentials, lifelong learning, United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, quality assurance of research activities, academic integrity and the European higher education context, as well as others related to different analysis of QQI activities. The panel supports QQI's intention of continuing to produce both types of analyses. Moreover, the panel supports QQI's view that maintaining both types of analyses involves finding the right balance between having a predefined plan of analyses to be conducted in the medium term (aligned with the strategic priorities and the corporate plan and mainly related to the retrospective type), with the flexibility to act responsively with new topics as they emerge in the higher education landscape, either at national or international level. The existence of the Projects Steering Group may facilitate the realisation of these forward-looking analyses. QQI has access to a significant and rich resource of information through its work in external quality assurance and seeks to make optimum use of this to support development and enhancement in higher education. It also has the means to support the sector through thematic analysis in responding to current issues, such as the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic or use of micro-credentials.

Different thematic analyses will, typically, have different audiences, and be differently valued by the various further and higher education stakeholders. Moreover, it was interesting to note that the different sectors to whom the review panel had the opportunity to talk, expressed different views on the intended audience and drivers for thematic analysis (e.g. as for government and driven by it or for a particular higher education sector). QQI could usefully consider how it communicates the rationale and motivation behind the choice of topics as well as how it identifies different audience/s for each. From the interviews it was clear to the panel that topics for thematic analysis were primarily decided independently by QQI itself based on its close understanding of sector needs and policy needs. However, greater involvement from external stakeholders in the choice of topic, or their prioritisation, might helpfully increase the sector's ownership of QQI's thematic output and would most probably contribute to increase their value and impact.

The dominant view from representatives of providers met by the panel was that the most relevant and useful thematic analyses are those developed by QQI in conjunction with HEIs or their

representative organisations, under a logic of co-creation. Despite this being the preferred mode of work, and the view expressed that it is open to collaborate with QQI with such requests, it was also clear that these could be overwhelming, poorly timed or use multiple routes of communication with consequent duplication. The panel heard that the sector would like QQI to work with them to make requests for information easier to handle.

Data accessibility for thematic analysis is a challenge identified by QQI, since there is no national data strategy for the higher education sector. In some areas QQI has to rely on data provided by the HEA or the Central Statistics Office and in others it holds the principal source of data. Access to data can sometimes limit QQI's capacity in running system-level wide analysis.

The panel discussed this issue in interviews with QQI senior management and with different stakeholders, including the representative of the HEA, representatives from government and from providers. While the issues are different for the different groups it is evident that there are issues with data across the tertiary landscape in Ireland which can only be fully addressed at a policy and system level. Providers, for instance, expressed frustration with duplicate requests and the absence of system-wide data definitions. The panel confirms that there is awareness of the need to establish: i) greater coherence and alignment of data collection, including a shared agreement on the definition of the variables of interest ii) communication platforms and agreements enabling appropriate data sharing between the different organisations for the benefit of the tertiary sector as a whole and iii) systems that can adapt to the direction of travel towards more flexible forms of learning and the growth of micro-credentials.

To date thematic analyses have been mostly produced as comprehensive reports, with a significant number of pages. Although this translates the depth and rigour put on their development, it also makes them hard to read and limits their usefulness to a certain extent. As such, QQI stakeholders have referred to the need of developing more audience friendly formats, complemented with more effective dissemination channels (at the moment, the reports are mainly published on the QQI website).

Regarding the format, one option put forward during the interviews to enhance stakeholders' engagement with thematic analysis and increase their value and impact was the extraction from the reports of the main issues of interest for each specific QQI audience/stakeholder.

In terms of dissemination, reference was made to the different possibilities opened up by information technologies, such as brief videos and social media posts. In-person events were mentioned as providing a good way to disseminate the results of thematic analysis where they enabled the active participation and engagement of the audience. Stakeholders expressed the view that it would be helpful if QQI found ways for the valuable information contained in thematic analysis to be re-accessed, regretting that so much is lost in earlier outputs. The panel heard that stakeholders would also appreciate the sharing of emerging findings during work on a thematic analysis. They saw this both as supporting timely action and enabling providers to shape the development of thematic projects formatively.

Summary conclusions on the enhancement area

To sum up, the panel commends QQI for its considered and strategic work in developing thematic analysis to the present level and also for continuing to reflect on how to further improve the impact of this activity which is so relevant for quality assurance nationally and, more widely, across Europe.

QQI is aware of the different challenges it has to overcome to succeed in this endeavour. Most of those challenges lie in managing balance in the development of consultation processes with external

stakeholders on the selection of topics, in the progress of studies, and development of more targeted, user-friendly dissemination formats. QQI is similarly aware of challenges, and the need for resolutions, around data, data definitions and data sharing across the tertiary sector and its agencies, and recognises that this impacts not only on current work but also on data needs in the future.

The panel fully agrees with the view of one QQI staff member in the Mentimeter 'pool' that, three years from now, QQI thematic analysis should be seen as 'Evolving | Dynamic | Delivering on Recommendations', for which 'continued energy, direction and focus' are needed.

ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

QQI'S WORK IN QUALITY ASSURANCE AND THE EDUCATION AND TRAINING BOARDS

The panel was asked to check how the agency ensures that its activities under its *Policy for the Inaugural Review of Quality Assurance in Education and Training Boards* is clearly separated from the agency's activities within the scope of the ESG, given that further education and training courses are provided at levels one to six on the NFQ in Ireland.

QQI provided the panel with information on this and it was discussed with senior staff in meetings. The panel is fully satisfied that this element of QQI's remit is not in the scope of the ESG. The focus of QQI's work to date in approving, monitoring and reviewing the quality assurance procedures of Education and Training Boards has been in respect of further education and training. Further education awards at level six on the NFQ are at level five on the European Qualifications Framework and are clearly distinguished as further education on the NFQ. QQI commissioned a report, published in 2021, evaluating the comparability of NFQ level six awards in higher and further education, and this outlines the distinctions and basis for them.

DELEGATED AUTHORITY TO MAKE AWARDS

Delegated Authority (DA) to Make Awards is included in the Terms of Reference for the targeted review; however, it has not yet come into operation for the four large mature private/independent HEIs to which it could now apply. Some of these HEIs already have devolved responsibility for parts of the programme validation process and are already integrated into the institutional monitoring cycle, that is, they submit Annual Quality Reports and participate in quality dialogue meetings.

QQI states in the SAR that DA¹² is a strategic priority with the objective of facilitating increased autonomy and flexibility for mature providers. It goes on to explain that QQI has been working on the development of a framework for the implementation of delegated authority for private/independent providers from mid-2022 'including updating the criteria, procedures and establishing ministerial regulations.' QQI further explains in the SAR that 'the process for DA requires a statutory instrument detailing the ministerial regulations of the conditions to be met by institutions seeking DA. These conditions have been completed and were submitted to DFHERIS for consideration in May 2023 for ministerial approval.'

QQI had, therefore, intended to progress with the roll out of DA in 2024, with a combined DA and institutional review process for relevant institutions. However, given that ministerial approval has taken time, QQI has instead begun a two-phase approach. The SAR explains that CINNTE, the first element, will take a holistic and enhancement-led approach and that the second, following a request

¹² As noted earlier (p. 20, 2.1, footnote), the 2019 panel reviewed how QQI considered applications for delegated authority. It noted that the scope of the activity was reducing but that amendments to legislation would, in future, enable independent providers to seek delegated authority; this group of providers had not hitherto been eligible. The 2019 panel was confident that the policy framework was in place for considering applications, but noted that there was limited evidence available for it to review how the policy had been applied in practice in recent years.

for DA, will be a compliance-based assessment for DA. In the SAR, QQI emphasises that ‘this phased approach provides scope for each HEI to address recommendations that may emerge from an institutional review process before proceeding to an assessment for DA.’

QQI in the SAR confirms that ‘the terms of reference, handbook and review schedule have been established for the external review of these four institutions, and the four reviews will be concluded by Q4 2024.’

CONCLUSION

SUMMARY OF COMMENDATIONS

ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis

1. The panel commends the agency on its careful self-reflection on thematic analysis, identifying the main challenges and how to further improve this area of activity, and how QQI has valorised thematic analysis as a tool to improve its external quality assurance activities in innovative, comprehensive and interrelated ways.
2. The panel commends QQI on how it has established thematic analysis as a strategic priority, backed that with concrete actions, such as setting up the Research and Innovation Division, and supported the production of thematic analysis with comprehensive project management.
3. The panel commends QQI on the quality and relevance of the thematic analysis produced between 2019 and 2023.

ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance

1. The panel commends the agency's effective approach to continue to delegate increasingly greater operational responsibility and ownership to HEIs as regards their internal quality assurance and awarding processes.

ESG 2.3 Implementing processes

2. The panel commends QQI on its resilience and adaptability during the Covid-19 pandemic as demonstrated by the integration of innovative digital and online processes into their operational procedures.

OVERVIEW OF JUDGEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the review panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, QQI is in compliance with the ESG.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER IMPROVEMENT

ESG 2.3 Implementing processes

1. The panel encourages QQI to continue to develop a review model suitable to the group of private/independent providers not yet included in cyclical institutional review activity.

ANNEXES

ANNEX I: PROGRAMME OF THE SITE VISIT

MTG NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
		7 February 2024	
1	13.00-15.00	Review panel's online meeting and preparations for site visit	
2	15.00-16.30	An online clarifications meeting with the agency's resource person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agency resources person • Chief Executive Officer • Director of Integration Directorate • Senior Manager Research and Innovation
		20 February 2024	
3	17.00-18.00	Review panel's pre-visit meeting and preparations for day one	
4	18.15-19.00	A pre-visit meeting with the agency's resource person and Chief Executive Officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agency resources person • Chief Executive Officer
	08.45-09.30	Review panel's private meeting	
5	09.30-10.15	Meeting the Chair and members of the Board of QQI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chairperson • Five Board Members
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion	
6	10.30-11.15	Meeting with representatives from the Senior Management Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior Adviser Strategy and Risk • Director of Corporate Services • Director of Development • Director of Awards • Director of Integration • Head of Partnerships • Senior Manager Finance and Procurement • Senior Manager Human and Physical Resources
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion	
7	11.30-12.30	Meeting with key staff of the agency/staff in charge of external QA activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Head Quality Assurance • Validation Manager • Head Qualifications Standards and Certification • Head Tertiary Education Monitoring and Review • Senior Manager Tertiary Education Monitoring and Review

MTG NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager Tertiary Education Monitoring and Review
	12.30-13.20	Lunch	
8	13.20-14.00	Meeting with the agency staff with lead responsibility for thematic analyses and staff who have led thematic analyses, the enhancement area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director of Development • Head of Research and Innovation • Senior Manager, Research and Innovation • Head, Qualifications Information and Learning Opportunities • Senior Manager Tertiary Education Monitoring and Review • Senior Manager Programme Management Office
9	14.00-14.30	Meeting with externally commissioned authors of the enhancement area (thematic analysis)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher Education Consultant (Co-author 'Quality in Higher Education' - Thematic analysis of AQRs) • Higher Education Consultant (Co-author 'Quality in Higher Education' - Thematic analysis of AQRs) • Higher Education Consultant, (Author of 'Thematic analysis programme validation') • Higher Education Consultant (online), (Author of 'CINNTE Review Thematic Analysis', and member of QQI Projects Steering Group) • Emeritus Professor, UCC. (Author of 'Report on e-proctoring' and 'The future of Quality Assurance') (online),
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion	
10	14.45-15.45	Meeting with representatives from HE organisations with an interest in QQI's thematic reporting / thematic analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director of Learning, Teaching and Academic Affairs, Irish Universities Association • Academic Affairs and Data, Technological Higher Education Authority • The Higher Education Colleges Association, Chief Executive Officer, Hibernia College • Vice President Student Experience South East Technological University • Registrar, National College of Ireland • President, CCT College • Union of Students of Ireland
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion	
11	16.00-16.45	Meeting with department/key body of the agency / Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Head of Partnerships Division, • Senior Manager Communications • Manager, Partnerships Division

MTG NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
		involved with communications and with stakeholders/end-users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Head of International Education (recently engaged in consultation on IEM) • Manager International Education • External expert (reviewed consultation framework) • Representative of Opinions, External consultancy
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion	
12	17.00-18.00	Wrap-up meeting among panel members and preparations for day 2	
		22 February 2024	
	09.30-10.00	Review panel's private discussion	
13	10.00-10.30	Meeting with representative from HEA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior Manager, National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning
	09.30-10.00	Review panel's private discussion	
14	11.00-11.45	Meeting with heads of some reviewed HEIs/ HEI representatives	<p>Public Universities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic Secretary, Trinity College Dublin • Deputy President and Registrar, University College Cork (CINNTE Institutional Review 2023) (online) <p>Technological Universities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Registrar and Deputy President TU Dublin • Vice President Academic Affairs and Registrar, Munster Technological University (CINNTE Institutional Review March 2024) (online) <p>Institute of Technology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • President, Institute of Art, Design and Technology (CINNTE Institutional Review 2023) <p>Private/independent HEIs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • President, Dublin Business School (Focussed Review 2023, Institutional Review 2024)
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion	

MTG NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
15	12.00-12.45	Meeting with quality assurance officers of HEIs	<p>Universities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director of Quality, University of Limerick (Chair of Quality Assurance Officers Network) • Director of Quality Enhancement, University College Cork (online) <p>Institute of Technology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistant Registrar, Institute of Art, Design and Technology <p>Private University</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Head of Quality Enhancement, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, University of Medicine and Health Sciences <p>Private Institution</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality, Enhancement, and Registrations Manager, Hibernia College (online) • Vice President and Quality Assurance Officer, Carlow College <p>Technological University</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Head of Quality Assurance, Technological University of the Shannon • Vice President for Academic Affairs and Registrar, Atlantic Technological University
	12.45-13.45	Lunch (panel only) and review panel's private discussion	
16	13.45-14.30	Meeting with representatives from the reviewers' pool	<p>External Quality Review activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinating Reviewer, CINNTE Review of University College Cork • Student reviewer, CINNTE Review Institute of Art, Design and Technology • International Chair, CINNTE Review of Trinity College Dublin (online) • Industry Representative, CINNTE Review University College Cork) <p>QA Approval and Programme Validation Evaluators</p>

MTG NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consultant (panel chair for programme validation and Quality Assurance approval panels) • Consultant (panel chair for programme validation) • Student evaluator programme validation • Director Global Operations, West Pharmaceutical Services (Evaluator programme validation)
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion	
17	14.45-15.30	Meeting with stakeholders with an interest in thematic analyses	<p>PSRBs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director General, Engineers Ireland • Executive Head of Education Policy, Chartered Accountants Ireland • Education Director, Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland • Education Director, Policy and Standards, Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland (online) <p>Other</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chair of National Academic Integrity Network, Member of QQI Approvals and Reviews Committee. (Former Deputy Registrar and Dean of Teaching and Learning, Dublin City University)
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion	
18	16.00-16.45	Meeting with ministry representatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistant Secretary General • Principal Officer, Higher Education Governance and Quality • National Co-ordinator, Bologna Process
19	17.15-18.15	Wrap-up meeting: preparation for day 3 and provisional conclusions	
		23 February 2024	
20	09.00-10.00	Meeting among panel members to agree on final issues to clarify	
21	10.00-11.00	Meeting with Chief Executive Officer to clarify any pending issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chief Executive Officer • Director of Integration
22	11.00-12.30	Private meeting between panel members to agree on the main findings	

MTG NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
23	12.30-13.00	Final de-briefing meeting with staff and Board members of the agency to inform about preliminary findings	Board Chair, Chief Executive Officer and Staff (in person and online)
	13.00-14.00	Lunch	

ANNEX 2: TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE REVIEW

Targeted review of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) against the ESG

Annex I: TERMS OF REFERENCE

The present Terms of Reference were agreed between QQI (applicant), ENQA (coordinator) and EQAR.

1. Background

Quality and Qualifications Ireland -QQI has been registered on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) since 2015 and is applying for renewal of EQAR registration based on a targeted external review against *the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)* coordinated by The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

Quality and Qualifications Ireland -QQI has been a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) since 2014 and is applying for renewal of ENQA membership.

QQI is carrying out the following activities within the scope of the ESG¹³:

- Institutional Quality Monitoring and Review
- Approval of Providers' QA Procedures
- Programme Validation and Revalidation
- Delegated Authority to Make Awards
- Focused Reviews

All these activities will be included on the agency's profile on the EQAR website and linked to DEQAR database. NB: The agency may not upload reports from other activities to DEQAR.

The following activities of the applicant are outside the scope of the ESG:

¹³ The procedure "Re – engagement process for non – public providers" has been completed in 2020. The activity is not of relevance for the current registration of the agency on EQAR. However, if the agency wants to have it taken up in the review process for their internal enhance purposes, this could be further agreed with the coordinator.

- External Quality Assurance of Education and Training Boards
- QA Approval of FET Providers
- Validate, monitor and review programmes of FET Providers
- Maintain the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)
- NARIC Ireland

While these activities are not relevant to the application for renewal on EQAR, it is QQI's choice – in agreement with the review coordinator – whether those activities should be commented upon by the review panel.

2. Purpose and scope of the targeted review

This review will evaluate the extent to which QQI continues to fulfil the requirements of the ESG. The targeted review aims to place more focus on those parts that require attention and provide sufficient information to support QQI's application to EQAR.

The review will be further used as part of the agency's renewal of membership in ENQA.

2.1 Focus areas

- A) Standards with a partial compliance conclusion in the Register Committee's last renewal decision:
 - a. n/a;
- B) Standards 2.1 to 2.7 for the following activities:
 - a. n/a;
- C) Standards affected by other types of substantive changes:
 - a. n/a
- D) ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance;
- E) Selected enhancement area: ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis
- F) The newly introduced activity "Policy for the Inaugural Review of Quality Assurance in Education and Training Boards", which is a review of public further education and training provider, was published in October 2019 and conducted between March 2021 and May 2022. Since the further education and training courses are provided at levels one to six on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in Ireland, the panel is asked to check how the agency ensures that these activities are clearly separated from the agency's activities within the scope of the ESG.

Other matters regarding ESG compliance that come up during the targeted review and that may affect the agency's compliance with the ESG (if any).

These issues should be investigated by the review panel as far as possible, providing an analysis and conclusion on the ESG standard(s) concerned.

3. The review process

The review will be conducted in line with the requirements of *the EQAR Procedures for Applications* and *the Policy on Targeted Reviews*, and following the methodology described in the *Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews*.

The evaluation procedure consists of the following steps:

- Agreement on the Terms of Reference between EQAR, QQI and The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA);
- Nomination and appointment of the review panel by The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA);
- Self-assessment by QQI including the preparation and publication of a self-assessment report;
- A site visit by the review panel to QQI;
- Preparation and completion of the final review report by the review panel;
- Scrutiny of the final review report by ENQA's Agency Review Committee;
- Analysis of the final review report and decision-making by the EQAR Register Committee;
- Decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board;
- Attendance to the online follow-up seminar.

3.1 Independence of the review coordinator

The coordinator has not provided remunerated (e.g. consultancy) or unremunerated services to QQI during the past 5 years, and conversely QQI has not provided any remunerated or unremunerated services to the coordinator.

3.2 Nomination and appointment of the review team members

The review panel consists of at four members including an academic employed by a higher education institution, a student member and one other expert. At least two members are from another country.

At least one panel member should be a quality assurance professional that is currently employed by a QA agency and has been engaged in quality assurance within the past five years. When requested by the agency under review or when considered particularly pertinent, other stakeholders (for example, a representative

of the labour market) may be included. In this case, an additional fee is charged to cover the reviewer's fee and travel expenses.

One of the members serves as the chair of the review panel, and one as the review secretary. At least one of the reviewers is an ENQA nominee (most often the QA professional[s]). At least one of the reviewers is appointed from the nominees of either the European University Association (EUA) or the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and the student member is always selected from among the ESU-nominated reviewers. If requested, the labour market representative may come from the Business Europe nominees or from ENQA. At least two panel members come from outside the national system of the agency under review (if relevant).

The panel will be supported by the ENQA Review Coordinator (an ENQA staff member) who will monitor the integrity of the process and ensure that ENQA's requirements are met throughout the process. The Review Coordinator will not be the secretary of the review and will not participate in the discussions during the site visit interviews.

ENQA will provide the agency with the proposed panel composition and the curricula vitae of the panel members to establish that there are no known conflicts of interest. The reviewers will have to agree to a non-conflict of interest statement that is incorporated in their contract for the review of this agency.

Once appointed, the coordinator will inform EQAR about the appointed panel members.

3.3 Self-assessment by QQI, including the preparation of a self-assessment report

QQI is responsible for the execution and organisation of its own self-assessment process and shall take into account the following guidance:

- Self-assessment includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders;

The self-assessment report is expected to contain:

- a description of the self-assessment process and the production of the SAR;
- a description of changes occurred within the agency since the last full review, including any eventual changes in the higher education system and quality assurance system in which the agency predominantly operates, the agency's structure, funding, its list of external quality assurance activities within the scope of the ESG, as well as the changes in the agency's quality assurance activities abroad (where relevant);
- a section that addresses the focus areas of the review, including standards that were considered to be partially compliant with the ESG in the last full review as well as ESG 2.1 and one self-selected ESG standard for enhancement (see 2.1 Focus areas);

- a SWOT analysis of the agency as a whole;
- for each of the individual standards enlisted above (see section 2) a consideration of how the agency has addressed the recommendations as noted in the previous EQAR Register Committee decision of inclusion/renewal (if applicable).

The report is well-structured, concise and comprehensively prepared. It clearly demonstrates the extent to which QQI fulfils its tasks of external quality assurance and continues to meet the ESG and thus the requirements for EQAR registration.

The self-assessment report is submitted to the review coordinator, which has two weeks to carry out a screening. The purpose of a screening is to ensure that the self-assessment report is satisfactory for the consideration of the panel. The coordinator will not judge the content of information itself but rather whether or not the necessary information, as outlined in the *Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews*, is present. If the self-assessment report does not contain the necessary information and fails to respect the requested form and content, the ENQA Secretariat reserves the right to ask for a revised version within two weeks.

The final version of the agency's self-assessment report is then submitted to the review panel a minimum of eight weeks prior to the site visit. The agency publishes the completed SAR on its website and sends the link to ENQA. ENQA will publish this link on its website as well.

3.4 A site visit by the review panel

The review panel will draft a proposal of the site visit schedule considering the aspects included under the focus area (as defined under point 2.1 of the Terms of Reference).

The schedule will include an indicative timetable of the meetings and other exercises to be undertaken by the review panel during the site visit. The approved schedule shall be given to QQI at least one month before the site visit, in order to properly organise the requested interviews.

The site visit should enable the review panel to explore how the agency has addressed the standards where it has been found to be partially compliant (if the case), aspects of substantive change, consideration of internal quality assurance (ESG 2.1) and the self-selected ESG standard(s) for enhancement. The panel will include extra time during the site-visit to address any other arising issues (if the case) that might have an impact on the agency's compliance with the ESG.

The site visit will close with a final de-briefing meeting outlining the panel's overall impressions but not its judgement on the ESG compliance of the agency.

Prior to the physical site visit, the panel attends a joint briefing call between the panel, ENQA and EQAR to clarify the review expectations and address any possible arising matters.

In advance of the site visit (at least two weeks before the site visit), the panel will organise an obligatory online meeting with the agency. This meeting is held to ensure that the panel reaches a sufficient understanding of:

- The specific national/legal context in which the agency operates;
- The specific quality assurance system to which the agency belongs;
- The key characteristics of the agency's external QA activities.

3.5 Preparation and completion of the final review report

The review report will be drafted in consultation with all review panel members and correspond to the purpose and scope of the review as defined under articles 2 and 2.1. In particular, it will provide a clear rationale for its findings concerning each ESG. When preparing the report, the review panel should bear in mind the *EQAR Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG* to ensure that the report will contain sufficient information for the Register Committee for application to EQAR¹⁴.

The external report will present the facts and analysis reflecting the reality at the time of review. This will form the main basis for the Register Committee's decision making.

A draft will first be submitted to the ENQA Review Coordinator who will check the report for consistency, clarity, and language. After panel has considered coordinator's feedback, the report will go to the agency for comment on factual accuracy. If QQI chooses to provide a position statement in reference to the draft report, it will be submitted to the chair of the review panel within two weeks after the receipt of the draft report.

Thereafter, the review panel will take into account the statement by QQI and submit the document for scrutiny to ENQA's Agency Review Committee and then to EQAR along with the remaining application documents (self-evaluation report, Declaration of Honour, statement to review report-if applicable). The report is to be finalised normally within 2-4 months of the site visit and will normally not exceed 30 pages in length. All panel will sign off on the final version of the external review report. The coordinator will provide to QQI the [Declaration of Honour](#) together with the final report.

4. Publication and use of the report

QQI will receive the expert panel's report and publish it on its website once the ENQA Agency Review Committee has validated the report. Prior to the final validation of the report, the ENQA Agency Review Committee may request additional

¹⁴ See here: <https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2018/04/UseAndInterpretationOfTheESGv2.0-2015.pdf>

(documentary) evidence or clarification from the review panel, review coordinator or the agency if needed. The review report will be published on ENQA website regardless of the review outcome. The report will also be published on the EQAR website together with the decision on registration, regardless of the outcome.

ENQA will retain ownership of the report. The intellectual property of all works created by the review panel in connection with the review contract, including specifically any written reports, will be vested in ENQA. In the case of an unsuccessful application to EQAR, the report may also be used by the ENQA Board to reach a conclusion on whether the agency can be admitted/reconfirmed as a member of ENQA.

5. Decision-making on EQAR registration and ENQA membership

The agency will submit the review report via email to EQAR before expiry of the agency's registration on EQAR. The agency will also include its self-assessment report (in a PDF format), the Declaration of Honour and any other relevant documents to the application to EQAR (i.e. annexes, statement to the review report).

EQAR is expected to consider the review report and the agency's application at its Register Committee meeting in October 2024. The Register Committee's final judgement on the agency's compliance with the ESG as a whole can either be substantially compliant (approval of the application) or not substantially compliant (rejection of the application). In case of a positive decision (substantially compliant with the ESG), the registration is renewed for a further five years (from the date of the review report).

The decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board will take place after EQAR Register Committee decision.

To apply for ENQA membership, the agency is requested to provide a letter addressed to the ENQA Board outlining its motivation for applying for membership and the ways in which the agency expects to contribute to the work and objectives of ENQA during its membership. This letter will be considered by the Board together with the confirmation of EQAR listing when deciding on the agency's membership. Should the agency not be granted the registration in EQAR or the registration is not renewed, the decision on ENQA membership will be taken based on the final review report, the application letter, and the statement from the Agency Review Committee. The decision on membership will be published on ENQA's website.

6. Indicative schedule of the review

Agreement on Terms of Reference	August 2023
Appointment of review panel members	September 2023
Self-assessment report (SAR) completed by QQI	15 November 2023

Screening of SAR by ENQA Review Coordinator	November 2023
Preparation of site visit schedule and indicative timetable	December 2023
Briefing of review panel members	December 2023
Review panel site visit	Early February 2024
Submission of the draft review report to ENQA Review Coordinator	End March 2024
Factual check of the review report by the QQI	April 2024
Statement of QQI to review panel (if applicable)	April 2024
Submission of review report to ENQA	Early May 2024
Validation of the review report by the Agency Review Committee	June 2024
EQAR Register Committee meeting and decision on the application by QQI	October 2024
Decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board	October 2024

*Note: a minor amendment was made to the ToR in February 2024

ANNEX 3: QQI'S MAPPING GRID AGAINST ESG PART I

The SAR describes how standards of the ESG Part I are covered within QQI's external quality assurance activities through a detailed mapping grid demonstrating compliance with ESG 2.1. The grid is in the same format used in the agency's 2019 SAR, with the inclusion of updated policies, procedures and guidelines, and further detailed mapping references, such as for validation and revalidation, and monitoring.

The mapping grid does not include Delegated Authority to Make Awards, which was in the Terms of Reference for the targeted review but had not come into operational effect (see Additional Observations)

ESG Part I	Shared QA Infrastructure for all QA Activities	QA Approval Process	Programme Validation and Revalidation	Monitoring	Cyclical Institutional Review	Focused Review
<p>I.1 Policy for quality assurance</p> <p>Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders.</p>	<p>The Core Statutory QA Guidelines (QAG) underpins all QQI quality assurance activities.</p> <p>Core QAG 2.1 Governance and Management of Quality</p> <p>1.1 Governance 1.2 Management of quality assurance 1.3 Embedding a quality culture</p> <p>Core QAG 2.2 Documented Approach to Quality Assurance</p> <p>2.1 Documented policies and procedures 2.2. A comprehensive system</p> <p>Policy and supplemental QA guidelines: Policy on QA Guidelines QA Guidelines Private/independent Providers QA Guidelines DABs</p>	<p>QA Approval Process confirms a new provider's internal QA is consistent with QQI guidelines.</p> <p>Policy and criteria for provider access to initial validation of programmes</p> <p>Current providers can extend their scope of provision by having their QA procedures approved against topic specific QA Guidelines</p>	<p>As stated in Policy and criteria for validation of programmes a provider must have their QA procedures approved to access programme validation</p> <p>Section 3: Prerequisites for programme validation</p> <p>Section 4: Validation in the context of a particular provider (4.1-4.4)</p> <p>Core validation criterion 17.1 The provider is eligible to apply for validation of the programme</p> <p>Core policy is supplemented by: Policy for collaborative programmes, transnational programmes and joint awards</p>	<p>Monitoring is conducted through an Annual Quality Report (AQR) process.</p> <p>HEI submit an AQR with information on their internal QA activities.</p> <p>The AQR template is mapped explicitly to ESG part 1.</p> <p>In addition, we hold biennial quality dialogue meeting with institutions.</p> <p>Monitoring Policy</p> <p>The AQRs are published in Quality and Monitoring Review Reports</p> <p>An annual thematic analysis of themes arising in the AQRs is published. Thematic analyses of annual quality reporting</p>	<p>The Policy for Cyclical Reviews sets out QQI's model for cyclical reviews, which is aligned to the ESG.</p> <p>QQI's institutional review process, CINNTE, confirms compliance with the ESG and QQI statutory QA guidelines. It evaluates the effectiveness of an institution's internal QA system.</p> <p>The objectives and review criteria (referenced to the ESG) are contained within the terms of reference.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Review terms of reference ▪ CINNTE Handbook for Technological Universities ▪ CINNTE Handbook for Designated Awarding Bodies ▪ Addendum for review of TU 	<p>QQI may conduct a focused review of a provider's QA procedures from time to time, as it considers appropriate, or in response to concerns that have come to its attention in relation to the implementation and effectiveness of a provider's QA procedures.</p> <p>The Procedures for Focused Reviews by QQI of the Implementation and Effectiveness of Provider QA Procedures sets out the procedures that will be implemented by QQI when carrying out a focused review.</p>

	QA Guidelines Institute of Technology QA Guidelines Apprenticeship QA Guidelines Research Degree Programmes		Research degree programme policy and criteria QA Guidelines for Providers of Blended and Online Learning Programmes		Institutional review reports are published in Quality and Monitoring Review Reports	
<p>1.2 Design and approval of programmes</p> <p>Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes. The programmes should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes. The qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the</p>	<p>Section 2.3 of Core Statutory QA Guidelines (QAG) addresses programmes of education and training.</p> <p>Core QAG 2.3 Programmes of Education and Training</p> <p>3.1 Programme development and approval</p> <p>3.2 Learner admission, progression and recognition</p> <p>3.3 Programme monitoring and review.</p> <p>Section 9 addresses information and communication</p> <p>The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) provides the awards and</p>	<p>The core QAG and validation policy are the primary reference documents for external panels in evaluating a provider’s internal QA for approval.</p> <p>The approval process focuses heavily on how a provider implements, manages and governs programme design, approval and review.</p>	<p>The Policy and criteria for validation of programmes describes the process for approval and reapproval (following review) of programmes.</p> <p>Core validation criteria 17.2 The programme objectives and outcomes are clear and consistent with the QQI awards sought.</p> <p>This criterion requires that for each programme the minimum intended programme learning outcomes (MIPLOs) are specified consistent with the relevant QQI awards standards and therefore the NFQ.</p> <p>Our Policy for Determining award Standards outlines how</p>	<p>AQR Part A section 2.0 Programme Development and Delivery</p>		<p>Ref – DBS report A focused review of Dublin Business School (2023)</p>

<p>European Higher Education Area.</p>	<p>standards infrastructure for higher education</p> <p>The Irish Register of Qualifications</p> <p>which is managed by QQI, includes all quality-assured, recognised qualifications offered by public and private HEIs.</p>		<p>QQI award standards are developed and aligned to the NFQ.</p> <p>Our suite of higher education and training awards standards is published in QQI Awards standards</p>			
<p>1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment</p> <p>Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.</p>	<p>Sections 2.5 Teaching and Learning and 2.6 Assessment of Learners of Core QAG are relevant.</p> <p>QAG 2.5 Teaching and Learning</p> <p>Specifically, 5.1 guides that the learning environment ‘encourages a sense of autonomy in the learner, while encouraging adequate guidance and support for the learner’.</p> <p>Also, Core QAG 2.3 requires that programmes are designed with the involvement of learners.</p>	<p>The QA approval process evaluates a provider’s policy and procedures for</p> <p>(i) Teaching and Learning</p> <p>(ii) Assessment of Learners</p> <p>for completeness and effectiveness.</p>	<p>This is addressed in a number of core validation criteria.</p> <p>Core validation criterion 17.5(b) ‘In so far as it is feasible the programme provides choice to enrolled learners so that they may align their learning opportunities towards their individual educational and training needs.’</p> <p>Core validation criterion 17.8 (b) ‘Learners can interact with and are supported by others in the programme’s learning environments including peer learners, teachers and where applicable</p>	<p>AQR Part A Section 2.3 Teaching, learning and assessment</p>		

			<p>supervisors, practitioners and mentors.’</p> <p>Core validation criteria 17.9 There are sound Teaching and Learning Strategies</p> <p>Core validation criteria 17.10 There are sound Assessment Strategies</p> <p>Assessment and Standards sets out our expectations on assessment and takes a learner-centred approach.</p> <p>Section 2.1.1(3)(f) states ‘Teachers and learners share in the responsibilities for effective learning. Learners’ involvement in the construction of assessment tasks and criteria can enhance learning.’</p> <p>Our Effective Practice Guidelines for External Examining addresses external moderation of assessment.</p>			
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<p>I.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification</p> <p>Institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student 'life cycle', e.g., student admission, progression, recognition and certification.</p>	<p>Section 2.3.2 Core QAG Learner admission, progression and recognition, requires that 'there are pre-defined and published regulations, which are consistently applied, covering all areas related to learner admission, progression recognition and certification of awards.'</p> <p>QA Guidelines for DABs</p> <p>Section 6.1 Procedures for certification.</p> <p>Policy and Criteria for Access, Transfer and Progression,</p> <p>Section 4 deals with Entry Arrangements and</p> <p>Section 5 with Information provision for learners</p>	<p>The QA approval process evaluates a provider's policy and procedures with regard to the core QAG and for compliance with QQI's policy on Access, Transfer and Progression.</p>	<p>Core validation criterion 1.7.4 The Programme's Access, Transfer and Progression Arrangements are Satisfactory, addresses all elements of ATP for programmes leading to QQI awards.</p> <p>For those programmes leading to QQI awards, assessment is the responsibility of the provider. A provider uses QQI's secure online system to submit learner results. QQI certification is issued once verified checks are undertaken.</p>		<p>CINNTE review evaluates the extent to which an institution's procedures are in keeping with QQI policy for Access, Transfer and Progression.</p>	
<p>I.5 Teaching staff</p> <p>Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of teachers. They should apply fair and transparent processes for</p>	<p>Section 2.4 Core QAG Staff Recruitment, Management and Development addresses this, and requires that a provider takes 'responsibility for</p>	<p>The QA approval process evaluates a provider's policy and procedures for staff recruitment, management and development with regard to the core QAG</p>	<p>Core validation criterion 17.6 (a) – (f) 'There are sufficient qualified and capable programme staff available to implement the programme as planned', address this for</p>	<p>AQR Part A Section 5 Staff Recruitment, Development and Support</p>		

<p>recruitment and development of the staff.</p>	<p>the quality of its staff and for providing them with a supportive environment that allows them to carry out their work effectively.’</p> <p>Also relevant, Section 6 Topic Specific QA Guidelines for Research Degree Programmes</p>	<p>for completeness and effectiveness.</p>	<p>QOI validated programmes.</p>			
<p>1.6 Learning resources and student support</p> <p>Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided.</p>	<p>Section 2.7 Core QAG Supports for Learners deals with student support and learning resources, including pastoral care supports.</p> <p>Section 2.5.4 Learning Environments and 2.6.1 Assessment of learning achievement are also relevant.</p>	<p>The QA approval process evaluates a provider’s policy, procedures and resources for learner supports.</p> <p>The procedures are evaluated with regard to the core QAG for completeness and effectiveness.</p>	<p>This is addressed in a number of the core validation criteria, namely,</p> <p>17.6, 17.7, 17.8, 17.9, 17.10 and 17.11.</p>	<p>AQR Part A Section 3 Learner Resources and Supports</p>		
<p>1.7 Information management</p> <p>Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of</p>	<p>Section 2.8 (8.1-8.7) Core QAG Information and Data Management addresses this directly.</p>	<p>The QA approval process evaluates a provider’s policy, procedures and resources for information management.</p>	<p>Core validation criterion 17.12 The Programme is well-managed ‘the programme includes intrinsic governance, quality assurance, learner assessment and</p>	<p>AQR Part A Section 6 Information and Data Management</p>		

<p>their programmes and other activities.</p>		<p>The procedures are evaluated with regard to the core QAG for completeness and effectiveness.</p>	<p>access, transfer and progression procedures that functionally interface with the provider's general or institutional procedures'.</p>			
<p>I.8 Public information</p> <p>Institutions should publish information about their activities including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to-date and readily accessible.</p>	<p>Section 2.9 (9.1-9.3) Core QAG Public Information and Communication addresses this directly.</p> <p>Section 5 Policy and Criteria for Access, Transfer and Progression, which deals with information provision for learners is also relevant here.</p>	<p>The QA approval process evaluates a provider's policy, procedures and resources for providing and managing information for the public.</p> <p>The procedures are evaluated with regard to the core QAG for completeness and effectiveness.</p>	<p>Core validation criterion 17.4 addresses programme information requirements as specified in our Policy and Criteria for Access, Transfer and Progression</p>	<p>AQR Part A Section 7 Public Information and Communication</p>		
<p>I.9 Ongoing monitoring and periodic review</p> <p>Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure they achieve objectives set for them and respond to the needs to students and society. These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action</p>	<p>Section 2.11 Core QAG Self-Evaluation, Monitoring and Review addresses this. 'Review and self-evaluation of quality, including review of programmes of education and training, research and related services is a fundamental part of the provider</p>	<p>The QA approval process evaluates a provider's internal monitoring process and procedures, including process for systematic feedback from stakeholders.</p> <p>The procedures are evaluated with regard to the core QAG for completeness and effectiveness.</p>	<p>As outlined in the Policy and criteria for validation of programmes section 13 programmes are validated for a specified period of time, this is normally for five years. A provider who wishes to continue to offer the programme beyond this time must have the programme revalidated. Validation may be reviewed by QQ and</p>	<p>AQR Part A Section 8 Monitoring and Periodic Review and Section 2 Programme Development and Delivery</p>		

<p>planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned.</p>	<p>quality assurance system.</p> <p>Section 2.9.3 Core QAG Publication of quality assurance evaluation reports is also relevant to this standard.</p>		<p>may be withdrawn if the conditions of validation are not being complied with by the provider.</p> <p>Core validation criterion 17.12 (f) is relevant to this standard.</p>			
<p>1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance</p> <p>Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis.</p>	<p>All HEIs are required to undergo periodic (at least every seven years) external quality review. Planned reviews are published in CINNTE Schedule 2023 - 2024</p> <p>Our Policy for Cyclical Reviews sets out the purpose and approach to review. Our current review process, called CINNTE, is in keeping with Parts 2 and 3 of the ESG and contains the following elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The publication of a terms of reference. - Submission of an institutional self-evaluation report (ISER). - An external assessment and site visit by a team of reviewers. - The publication of a review report with findings and recommendations. - Follow-up procedures which include publication of an implementation plan and follow-up report. <p>Review reports are published on our Quality and Monitoring Review Reports library.</p>					

ANNEX 4: LIST OF THEMATIC ANALYSIS PUBLISHED 2019-2023

Report on Award Classification Distributions for QQI Higher Education and Training Awards 2012-2017	2019
Accreditation/Approval of Higher Education Programmes by Professional Bodies	2019
Making Sense of Qualifications: Views of Recruitment Professionals in Ireland	2019
Quality in Irish Higher Education 2020	2020
The Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education A QQI Evaluation	2020
Certification of QQI Major Awards 2014-18	2020
QQI Reengagement - Thematic Analysis	2020
Evaluation of the Comparability of the Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate Qualifications	2021
Mid-Cycle Analysis: CINNTE Review Reports	2021
QQI Insight on Assessment	2021
QQI Insight on Higher Education Quality & Qualifications	2021
QQI Insight on Quality in Irish Private and Independent HE Institutions	2021
QQI Insight on Quality in Irish Public Higher Education Institutions	2021
A thematic analysis of reports on the approval and review of programmes of higher education in the universities, RCSI and DIT in the period 2015 - 2018	2021
A thematic analysis of reports on the accreditation/approval/review of programmes of higher education by professional and regulatory bodies in the period 2015-2018	2021
A thematic analysis of reports on the accreditation/ approval/review of programmes of higher education in the institute of technology sector in the period 2015-2018	2021
Reporting by Awarding Bodies on the Approval and Re-approval of Programmes of Higher Education in Ireland: A Thematic Approach	2021
E-Proctoring in Theory and Practice: A Review	2021
QQI early exploration into Micro-credentials in Higher Education, 2014–2020	2021
A Review of Consortia-Led Apprenticeships in Ireland	2022
An Independent Evaluation of the QQI Annual Quality Reporting Model	2023
Quality in Irish Private & Independent Higher Education Institutions	2023
Quality in Irish Public Higher Education Institutions	2023
Quality Assurance of Further Education and Training in the ETB Sector: Sectoral Report	2023
QQI Insight on Assessment: Learner Perspectives	2023
Quality in Irish Higher Education Institutions	2023
From Counting to Cultivating Successful Participation: A Review of the Landscape of Practice Supporting Access Transfer and Progression in Irish Education and Training	2023

ANNEX 5: SUMMARY OF RESPONSES TO THE MENTIMETER EXERCISE UNDERTAKEN AS PART OF THE SITE VISIT

1/5 What topics for thematic analysis would you propose, and what needs would these topics address?	
External examining - this is a core QA measure for assessment in HE. A thematic analysis would provide an indicator of the health of assessment & point to areas for improvement on a system level.	Institutional review of private/independent HEIs - contribute to the review of QQI's monitoring framework.
Credit - an analysis of the ECTS credit volumes relative to programme durations across HE to gauge compliance with sectoral norms.	Impact on student cohorts who began their programmes during COVID lockdowns and any learnings for the future of hybrid and remote delivery.
Quality indicators - an analysis of the indicators used by Irish and international HEIs as part of their quality systems could inform the development of national guidance.	Monitoring reports on providers.
Artificial intelligence - an analysis of institutional responses to the advent of AI could provide intelligence as to the preparedness of the sector to respond to these developments.	Focus on providers who do not have self awarding powers.
International education in Ireland, based on the forthcoming IEM process, including higher education pathways through English language schools. This will inform national debates about expansion.	Correlation and alignment between planned programme outcomes validated prospectively and actual outcomes reviewed retrospectively.
How students spend their time: credit, student effort, competing demands on students' time. The various models for programme approval (incl. curriculum, assessment, and qualification standards).	Monitoring review reports of providers.
Implementations and applications of micro-credentials in HET.	Focus on synthesis reports of providers who do have self awarding authority.
Regard for United Nations SIG; Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Action; Promotion of Environmental Causes; QA of research - in practice.	Institutional Review of private/independent HEIs - contribute to the development of the next cyclical review process for HEIs.
Perhaps some impact and analysis pieces around areas of enhancement over e.g. 5 years. This would help QQI to demonstrate its value externally e.g. student engagement.	Future thematic analysis should confirm effectiveness of our approach to QA and internal QA of providers. There is an opportunity to consider narrower themes in terms of quality of online learning.
The quality assurance of research, particularly in the context of the Research and Innovation legislation which references QQI as a source of quality assurance advice on research quality.	Possibly a system wide thematic analysis on where QQI should provide additional resources, to support both HE and FET sectors.
Student engagement.	I would recommend a request with the sector to provide topics for areas that we can provide focus.
Institutional review of private/independent providers. - Suitability of the current institutional review process and the concept of a 'one size fits all' approach.	The future of lifelong learning; who is involved, how, where? What is the identity, role, concept of 'public good' of 'institution', 'provider', 'curriculum'? What does guidance look like?
2/5 How should QQI prioritise between areas and topics for thematic analysis?	
In accordance with QQI's strategic priorities and in response to the needs of key stakeholders.	Link to Corporate Strategy & Corporate Plan planning processes. Input from a wide range of QQI stakeholders & staff. Prioritisation based on above inputs. PESTLE. Flexible yet planned approach.

Should be a balance between routine/cyclical analyses and analyses that respond to issues of current public or policy interest (e.g. recession, COVID) - need to keep some capacity (and €€€) for latter.	This would depend on what is prioritised in QQI's next strategy or a need to address a sectoral issue.
To maximise benefit there is value in following a coherent approach that is aligned with QQI strategy and national strategy. Consultation with stakeholders is key. So also is a multiannual plan.	Identify priority knowledge gaps by consulting widely with users of QQI QA reports as data sources.
Analysis of annual reports and review reports to note recurring themes and topics. Review events held by providers - who are the speakers, what are the popular topics.	Prioritisation should be considered in light of strategic priorities but also emerging trends. Should be formal system for this activity in line with role of PSG.
We should look to our strategic objectives to identify & decide on priorities with provision to respond quickly to unforeseen challenges/issues/events that are of wider sectoral significance.	Based on need assessed by interrogating players within the system.
3/5 What could a multi-dimensional approach to the format and dissemination of thematic analyses look like?	
Analyses being available in a variety of formats, e.g. a detailed written report; summary report; summaries designed for different stakeholder groups; recorded presentations, live presentations etc.	It might be useful to consider short videos as a way of communicating outputs of reports, asking to present at other agencies' learning hubs/ in their blogs/ newsletters.
Multiple methods of analysis (qual/quant) with a more participative research model. Link analysis more closely to policy development/consultation.	Dissemination alone is not sufficient. Need follow up events and engagement activities to promote, track and evaluate use of thematic analysis.
Document; Webinars, workshops and conferences; Key points on social media and the website (short text, audio and video productions).	The approach would be diverse to reflect the interest of all stakeholders and would be accessible and communicated across a range of media channels.
Different resources summarising the results, infographic, executive summary, social media posts as well as reports, in order to make the findings more accessible to a wider audience.	Perhaps adding expected / suspected impacts - dissemination should be pushed over social media channels.
Hosting events based on themes identified through analysis. Use social media well.	Dissemination needs to be multi modal in terms of different styles of communication with focus on audience, accessibility and plain English.
Input from different voices. Cross-cutting strategic objectives. Past, current and future perspectives.	
4/5 How can QQI identify the value and impact of thematic analysis?	
Seek feedback from relevant stakeholders. Track citations.	Downloads and citations of analysis are basic measures. Value and impact will again depend on co-producing the questions asked with users and evaluating user view on value and USE.
Stakeholder surveys (as at present). Citation in external policy papers.	Value can be identified through the input of stakeholders and their willingness to engage in areas of TA that are important and relevant both at an institutional and systemic level.
Citations in various fora; Peer review; Before and after metrics (but this takes a long time and demonstrating causal relationships is difficult).	The impact can be identified through the follow up actions taken by QQI and stakeholders in response to a TA.
Review. Use the institutional review process and Annual Reporting process to identify how themes are being addressed on an ongoing basis - are there improvements?	Surveying the community of providers 4-6 months following publication.

Ensure effective communication of analyses. Revisit analyses with stakeholders at defined intervals via meetings, communications, surveys etc. Ensure analysis used to improve internal processes.	Feedback from sector. Influencing change at sectoral or local level. Internal ability to improve processes, policies and/or build internal knowledge and capacity. Increased trust in QQI.
Through changes in how institutions implement/change policies & procedures - evidenced through AQRs. References to the analyses in national and international media, event invitations to QQI to discuss.	
5/5 Three years from now, how do you see QQI's thematic analysis, and what is needed to get there?	
I would like to see our analyses having greater impact in informing system-level policy and priorities, i.e. strategic decision-making within QQI, DFHERIS and the HEA.	TA will contribute to a credible explanatory model of which QA processes (internal and external) have useful effects, how these processes operate and under which conditions.
A more efficient model of procurement of external research, a more structured approach to quality assuring and making our data (text and numbers) open for analysis, including by AI.	A more coherent system whereby the intended purpose, resulting outcomes and actions relating to TA are evident and mapped to strategic priorities (as appropriate) & effectively communicated.
There is a trade-off between depth and breadth in periodic QA reviews against the ESG. TAs can go deeper and complement them. I would like to see TAs (QQI-type) integrated into the EQA model.	A full catalogue that has addressed many areas where QQI is looked to, to provide direction / guidance to the sectors...careful planning and coordination - additional committed resources would help.
The process will become more digitised. With caution, AI may be used. More providers will be included.	Strategic plan to inform the approach to thematic analyses. Ability to use internal resources to conduct some analysis to build capacity and knowledge. Wider application beyond traditional/narrow QA.
Evolving. Dynamic. Delivering on recommendations. Needed: continued energy, direction and focus.	
Any other remark or note on thematic analysis?	
QQI's research and insights function goes well beyond the strict ESG definition of secondary analysis of products of external QA.	Systematic synthesis of external sources of evidence about QA should be undertaken. QQI should establish quality standards for its research and analytical function.
Thematic analysis as envisaged by ESG 3.4 is more limited than how I envisage TA functioning. It may be useful to revisit ESG 3.4 and broaden its scope.	I think we commit quite a lot of resources to this area for quite a stretched resource - if it is important to education within Ireland - it needs financial backing and resourcing.
It is a useful tool to recognise good practice and identify areas of weaknesses that requires work. Needs to used more by the providers.	Thematic analysis is a positive aspect of QQI business that has huge value internally & is a common aspect of our work commended by external stakeholders. It promotes our relevance and visibility.
The capacity of QQI and other users to make use of TA is limited. Need to explore how knowledge mobilisation might be organised, staffed, what activities should be undertaken, and how it is evaluated.	

ANNEX 6: GLOSSARY

AQR	Annual Quality Report
CINNTE	QQI's Institutional review cycle
DA	Delegated Authority
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
DEQAR	Database of External Quality Assurance Results
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
EQA	External Quality Assurance
ESG	<i>Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2015</i>
ETB	Education and Training Board
FET	Further Education and Training
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI	Higher Education Institution
IEM	International Education Mark
IQA	Internal quality assurance
NAIN	National Academic Integrity Network
NARIC	National Academic Recognition Information Centre
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NStEP	National Student Engagement Programme
PSG	Projects Steering Group
PSRB	Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body
QA	Quality Assurance
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SAR	Self-assessment report
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats
ToR	Terms of Reference
TU	Technological University

ANNEX 7: DOCUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE REVIEW

DOCUMENTS PROVIDED BY QQI

The SAR included links to a wide range of information and documents.

In addition, the panel was provided with:

- Supplementary information on the Standard for enhancement: 3.4 Thematic Analysis
- An Organisational chart
- Details of the committees of QQI's Board with a role in quality assurance activities, their terms of reference and memberships:
 - Policies and Standards Committee and
 - Approvals and Review committee
- The internal committees/groups that support quality assurance activities including reporting routes/relationships:
 - Programmes and Awards Executive Committee
 - Projects Steering Group
- The processes being developed for introduction in 2024 NB: these were not in scope and were for information only, requested by the panel to illustrate the evolution of QA processes and continuous improvement. Draft information was provided concerning:
 - Criteria for the Establishment of Listed Awarding Bodies and guidelines on their voluntary engagement with QQI
 - Criteria for the inclusion of awards within the NFQ
 - Policy on Authorisation to use the International Education Mark and Code of Practice for provision of programmes of HE to international learners
- Supplementary information on QQI Appeals in the CINNTE Institutional Review process
- Procedure for determining appeals under the relevant legal Acts
- A note on Education and Training Boards and the ESG
- Additional information on internal quality assurance
- Additional information on the Projects Steering Group and the management of projects
- Additional information on operational and executive groups and structures
- 2024 Corporate Plan
- Headline results from QQI's 2023 Partnership Survey
- Documents linked to QQI's work developing its next Statement of Strategy (concurrent with the targeted review)
 - Looking back at what we achieved
 - PESTLE analysis looking to 2025-2027
 - A SWOT

OTHER SOURCES USED BY THE REVIEW PANEL

ENQA agency review report 2019 and Board decision letter

EQAR Renewal of Registration decision 2019

QQI Follow-up report 2021 and ENQA Board letter

QQI SAR 2018

QQI substantive change report to EQAR 2023

QQI website

ENQA TARGETED REVIEW 2024

THIS REPORT presents findings of the ENQA Targeted Review of the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), undertaken in 2024.

enqa.

European Association for
Quality Assurance in Higher Education