



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

QUALITY IN IRISH PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS



QQI
Insights

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Mapping of Annual Quality Report Sections to ESG 2015 and QQI Core Statutory QA Guidelines (QAG)

AQR Part A Section	QQI QAG Core Sub-section No.	QAG Core Sub-section Title	ESG Standard No.	ESG Standard Title
1.0 – Internal QA Framework	2.1	Governance and Management of Quality	1.1	Policy for Quality Assurance
	2.2	Documented Approach to Quality Assurance		
2.0 – Programme Development and Delivery	2.3	Programmes of Education and Training	1.2	Design and Approval of Programmes
4.0 – QA of Research Activities and Programmes			1.9	On-going Monitoring and Periodic Review of Programmes
8.0 – Monitoring and Periodic Review	1.5	Teaching Staff		
5.0 – Staff Recruitment, Development and Support	2.4	Staff Recruitment, Management and Development	1.3	Student-centred Teaching, Learning and Assessment
2.3 – Teaching, Learning and Assessment	2.5	Teaching and Learning		
	2.6	Assessment of Learners	1.6	Learning Resources and Student Support
3.0 – Learner Resources and Supports	2.7	Supports for learners	1.7	Information Management
6.0 – Information and Data Management	2.8	Information and Data Management	1.8	Public Information
7.0 – Public Information and Communication	2.9	Public Information and Communication	1.9	On-going Monitoring and Periodic Review of Programmes
2.0 – Programme Development and Delivery	2.10	Other Parties Involved in Education and Training		
8.0 – Monitoring and Periodic Review				
9.0 – Details of Arrangements with Third Parties	2.11	Self-evaluation, Monitoring and Review	1.9	On-going Monitoring and Periodic Review of Programmes
2.0 – Programme Development and Delivery			1.10	Cyclical External Quality Assurance
8.0 – Monitoring and Periodic Review				
4.0 – QA of Research Activities and Programmes	QAG for Providers of Research Degree Programmes			

Quality in Irish Public Higher Education Institutions

This is a thematic analysis of quality assurance and quality enhancement within Irish public¹ higher education institutions. It is based on the Annual Quality Reports submitted by 20 public higher education institutions in February 2022. It was produced on behalf of QQI by a project team comprising Dr. Annie Doona, Dr. Cathy Peck, Dr. Deirdre Stritch and Laura Devlin.

¹ A list of publicly-funded higher education institutions (universities and colleges) provided by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) is available on the gov.ie website.

Foreword

A key strategic priority for QQI is the provision of system-level analyses and insights to promote greater understanding of emerging issues within the tertiary education sector and to ensure both confidence in, and continuous improvement of, the quality of education and training in Ireland.

This report is the sixth analysis of the Annual Quality Reports (AQRs) submitted annually by the Irish public higher education institutions to QQI. The AQRs seek to provide documentary evidence of the establishment, implementation and monitoring of an institution's internal quality assurance system, consistent with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (2015) and with QQI's statutory quality assurance guidelines. In publishing this analysis, QQI seeks to provide transparency of the quality assurance activity within the sector and to promote examples of quality enhancement and innovation.

The report provides a thematic analysis of the content of the AQRs submitted in 2022 in respect of the 2020/21 reporting year. Whilst COVID-19 continued to impact on the operations of the sector during this period, the AQRs evidence that the experience acted as a catalyst for considerable innovation in teaching, learning and assessment, many elements of which are being retained and adopted in the longer-term to enhance the learning experience.

This was also a dynamic period for the technological higher education sector whereby, in January 2020, institutes of technology were designated as awarding bodies with authority to make awards up to Level 9 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Much of the sector was also in various stages of working towards technological university status with awarding authority up to NFQ Level 10. Awarding bodies play a critical role in maintaining the integrity of the NFQ and quality assuring its implementation across the full spectrum of awarding activity is an essential component of an institution's quality framework.

The AQRs also indicate that issues related to academic integrity were a significant feature of quality considerations during this time. The developments reported in policy, procedures, resources and supports in this area are a healthy indicator of a responsive and adaptive quality system.

Dr Pádraig Walsh
Chief Executive Officer

Background and Context: The Annual Quality Report

The Annual Quality Report (AQR) is an important element of QQI's quality assurance monitoring and review framework. It provides assurance to QQI that requisite quality assurance (QA) procedures are being implemented and regulatory requirements are being met by higher education institutions (HEIs). For HEIs, the report forms a single, transparent repository of policies and procedures; acts as a record of completed and ongoing quality enhancement activities; and sets out planned quality enhancement activities for subsequent reporting periods. It also serves to disseminate good practice throughout the sector. Information contained in the AQR informs QQI's biennial quality dialogue meeting with each public HEI.

The AQRs are published on [QQI's website](#) and provide transparency on quality assurance in Irish higher education institutions.

In addition, QQI invites institutions to submit case studies pertinent to specific themes in quality assurance and quality enhancement for the reporting period. The themes identified by QQI for this reporting period were academic integrity and the impact of COVID-19. A collection of the unabridged case studies is published separately on [QQI's website](#).

This thematic analysis report is the sixth to be published by QQI and is based on the 20 AQRs submitted in 2022 in respect of the reporting period from 1 September 2020 to 31 August 2021. It is a qualitative analysis of quality assurance developments and enhancements within Irish public higher education institutions as reported on by the HEIs in their AQRs. Themes were identified, with the aim of highlighting and disseminating good practice and identifying key areas of focus for the public higher education sector.

This report is based on the Annual Quality Reports submitted by the following public HEIs:

No	Institution
1.	Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT)
2.	Dublin City University (DCU)
3.	Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT)
4.	Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT)
5.	Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT)
6.	Institute of Technology, Carlow (ITC)
7.	Institute of Technology, Sligo (ITS)
8.	Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT)
9.	Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT)
10.	Maynooth University (MU)
11.	Munster Technological University (MTU)
12.	National University of Ireland (NUI)
13.	National University of Ireland, Galway (NUI Galway)
14.	Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI)
15.	Trinity College Dublin (TCD)
16.	Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin)
17.	University College Cork (UCC)
18.	University College Dublin (UCD)
19.	University of Limerick (UL)
20.	Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT)

Table 1: List of Public HEIs that submitted AQRs in 2022

Section 1: Strategic Updates - Quality Assurance Implementation and Related Developments

1.1 Contextual factors impacting on Quality Assurance

During the 2020/21 academic year, ongoing and evolving public health restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic continued to frame the operations of Ireland's public higher education institutions. The challenges of managing a safe return to campus for staff and students and responding dynamically to successive waves of the pandemic were prominent in the Annual Quality Reports (AQRs). However, within the reporting period, the demonstrated resilience of institutions, staff and learners was very much brought to the fore.

By September 2020, decision-making across the sector was better informed following the rapid learning curve experienced with the onset of the pandemic in March of that year. Despite the unprecedented circumstances, HEIs reported on the implementation of measures that facilitated continuity in the delivery of their programmes and services for learners and maintained the integrity of their awards.

During the 2020/21 reporting period, many HEIs were able to shift from a reactive footing with a focus on short-term emergency measures to a proactive and future-oriented stance. Academic councils approved and bedded down policies and procedures that take account of the increasingly diverse assessment techniques now being utilised. Quality offices developed sustainable protocols for conducting reviews and new programme validations in virtual environments. Digital teaching and learning teams established baseline standards for modules and programmes in virtual learning environments. During this time, the National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN) became a well-established community of practice in which all public HEIs participated. At institutional level, HEI libraries, learner support and academic success units delivered academic integrity supports, resources and modules for both learners and staff. Such developments have served to not only maintain but to enhance and futureproof quality assurance in the sector. Examples of such activities are highlighted in subsequent sections and through the inclusion of relevant case studies throughout this analysis.

This reporting period also captured abundant evidence that COVID-19 has acted as a catalyst for an acceleration of digital transformation across the sector. This was documented in relation to highly localised activities, such as the digitisation of previously manual processes, and also at institutional level in significant investments made in upgrading information management and ICT systems. This is exemplified in the extract below focused on process improvements in the academic registry at the University of Limerick (UL).

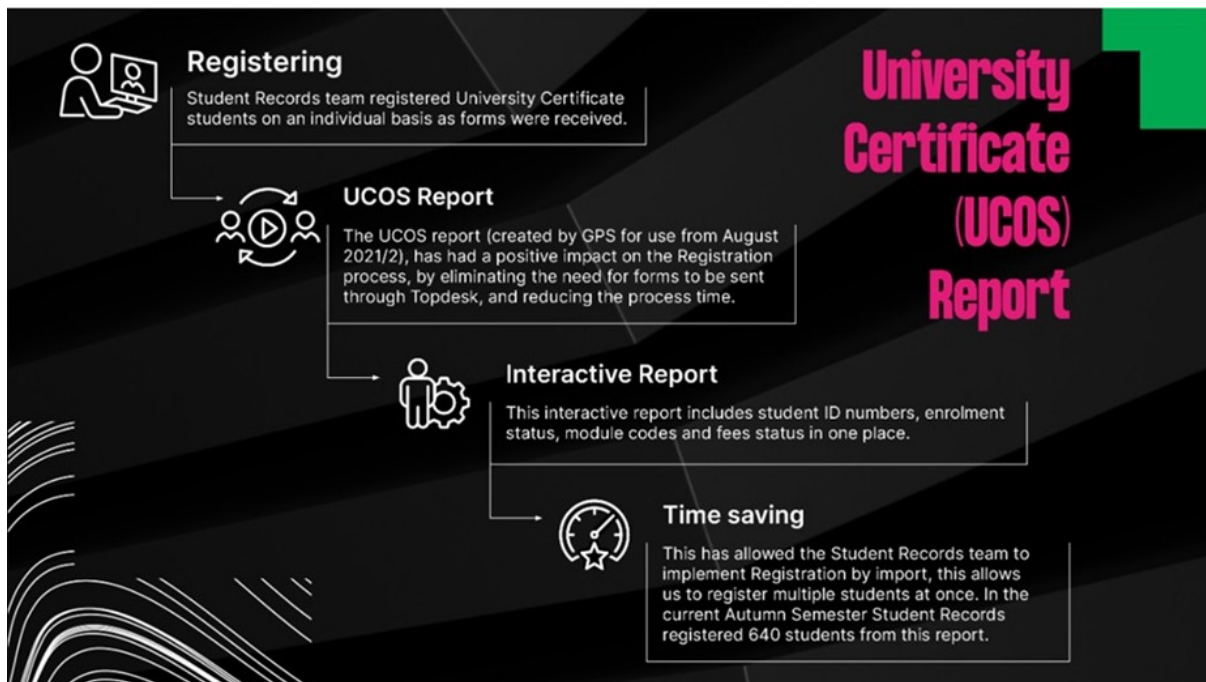


Figure 1: UL Academic Registry Process Improvements

Responses to the restrictions and limitations imposed by the pandemic also drove significant innovation and creativity in teaching, learning and assessment. The AQRs for this period reflect both the hardships experienced and the valuable learnings gained across academic departments. In many instances, this has prompted the adoption of enhancements to practice for the longer term. This came to the fore across numerous case studies submitted with the AQRs, and is illustrated in a case study provided by the Faculty of Film Art and Creative Technologies at Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT), an abbreviated version of which is included here:

Case Study 1: “No Gathering? No problem!”: 2021 Online Exhibition and the Outdoor Projection of Film and Art Works Projected onto Lexicon Library for 2021 IADT Graduate Exhibition.

Introduction

At the height of the second lockdown in the spring of 2021 the Faculty of Film Art and Creative Technologies was forced to take the disappointing decision to move our end of year exhibition online for the second year in a row. The 2020 exhibition had been a rushed project at the height of the 1st emergency lockdown, and we were determined to ensure the class of 2021 had as good an experience as possible. We had learnt so much over the course of the year having moved to online learning. Furthermore, we now had a better sense of what was possible in terms of digital representations of artistic work. With all that in mind, we took on the challenge of creating a bespoke digital exhibition space that would display the students’ work in a way that would have a positive impact on them and their careers.



The Story

Traditionally their final projects, which are the summation of up to four years study and hard graft at the college, are exhibited in a gallery style showcase publicly accessible and enjoyed. It is the biggest graduate show in the country and over the course of 4 months the marketing team, our digital partners Detail and the faculty team led by John Montayne built an online exhibition site. It was a significant undertaking, and it remains online and “up the walls” for all to enjoy. Other elements helped to cement and bring to life the experience for our students and their families. A selection of the works of 400 of the graduation class of 2021 of the Institute of Art, Design + Technology (IADT) were projected onto the walls of the Lexicon Library in Dún Laoghaire on Friday, 25th and Saturday 26th June.

The projection was a 30-minute film featuring the country’s most inspiring, thought-provoking, and diverse creative works from the students of Animation, Design + Visual Arts, Film + Media, Photography, Technology and Psychology.



A [promotional video](#) about the exhibition is available from the IADT YouTube Channel. The full graduate exhibition, 'On Show 2021', is available online at <https://onshow.iadt.ie>.

Impact and Conclusion

Building, managing, and populating the site was a major piece of work. It was worthwhile and ultimately, very successful. Students have a permanent record of their achievement that they can point to in future years. The institute too has a resource it can draw upon and importantly, we have a platform that we can continue to use for future graduating classes who will enjoy both a physical and online exhibition. It also proved to be a positive news story as the work of the students gained national recognition.

Case Study 1: IADT - 2021 Graduate Exhibition

1.2 Developments in the technological higher education sector

This reporting period saw the submission of the first AQR for two of Ireland's new technological universities, Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin), established on 1st January 2019, and Munster Technological University (MTU), established on 1st January 2021.² It also saw final submissions from Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT) and Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) that will in future be reporting as the Technological University of the Shannon (TUS).

Given the recent establishment of these universities, the AQRs reflect the transitional nature of QA structures. Both TU Dublin and MTU outlined the processes by which new QA and governance systems are being developed and confirmed that new academic councils and associated sub-committees have been established:

- In TU Dublin, the QA policies and procedures of the 3 antecedent institutes of technology will continue to apply until the new 'TU Dublin Quality Framework' is finalised. Implementation of QA policies and procedures is managed by each campus registrar. Six academic boards, formed from the legacy academic councils of Blanchardstown, Tallaght and City Campus College Boards, report to the new University Programmes Board. This board also exercises academic oversight of linked, collaborative and transnational provision.
- MTU also confirmed that the legacy academic regulations, as well as the QA policies and procedures of CIT and IT Tralee remained largely in place at the time of writing, with any changes made being described in the report. It was confirmed that a new, integrated 'Academic Quality Assurance Framework' is being developed as a matter of priority. A transitional academic council was established in May 2021. Two 'Academic Legacy Committees', comprising the former academic councils of CIT and IT Tralee, deal with legacy and operational issues at MTU Cork and MTU Kerry respectively, and have delegated authority to manage QA within the inherited systems. There are also six integration and development committees.

1.2.1 Institutes of technology as designated awarding bodies

Across the AQRs, the post-January 2020 status of institutes of technology as Designated Awarding Bodies (DABs), which enables all institutes of technology to make awards up to Level 9 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was acknowledged. For example:

² The AQR for MTU covers the period 1st January 2021 - 31st August 2021.

- DkIT reported that as part of the institution's policy enhancements relating to DAB status an awarding policy was approved in the reporting period.
- IT Sligo reported that the Academic Council of the institute formed a specific purpose committee to oversee the transition to DAB status.
- AIT reported that the legislative context impacted on the culture, awarding powers and standards, academic governance of awards and the quality processes of AIT, each of which had been adapted in the period since January 2020.
- LIT reported that the institution, following its adoption of QQI Awards Standards, has developed robust procedures for ensuring that its awards are consistent with the relevant awards standards, outlining procedures consistent with QQI *Sector-specific Quality Assurance Guidelines for Designated Awarding Bodies*², Section 6.
- LYIT outlined the QA responsibilities that the institution held as a DAB and that the institute's awards standards are determined within the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).
- GMIT, IADT and IT Carlow reported that the respective academic councils of the institutes had adopted the QQI Awards Standards following DAB status.

Notably, in many instances, this status has been / will be rapidly superseded by the establishment of the technological universities across Ireland, which have authority to make awards up to NFQ Level 10.

1.2.2 Designation of technological universities

MTU was established on the 1st of January 2021 and has focused on establishing its new governance structures and building on the strengths of its predecessor institutions, Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) and Institute of Technology, Tralee (ITT). Unsurprisingly, the dominant theme within MTU's first AQR, which covers the first eight months post-establishment, is the transitional phase.

The AQR submitted by MTU documents the establishment of new units of governance and the progression of transitional arrangements toward newly established structures. MTU's AQR describes where new features of the quality system have been developed or implemented. Early actions taken since MTU's establishment include the following:

- The Governing Body ratified the continued application of the regulations, policies and procedures of the former institutions to which they applied immediately before establishment of the MTU, in accordance with the Technological Universities Act 2018 (the TU Act 2018).
- Staff were invited to submit feedback on the gender balance, geographic or other relevant constituencies to be represented, as well as proposals on the election process for staff members to the new Governing Body.
- MTU's Governing Body ratified the establishment of a small, time-limited academic council in order to have this unit of governance in place from the day of establishment. The Governing Body later agreed on the establishment of a transitional MTU academic council following approval of regulations by the Governing Body for a "medium membership model" comprising 89 members. The Governing Body also established a number of other committees, including an audit & risk committee and an equity, diversity and inclusion committee (the latter populated after the reporting period) and agreed proposals for a number of others.
- The first business of the transitional academic council was to establish six integration and

2 <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-11/qg-4-sector-specific-qa-guidelines-for-universities-and-other-designated-awarding-bodies.pdf>

development committees. The remits of these committees variously spanned academic planning and review; admissions and student affairs; learning resources, infrastructure and student supports; regulations and quality assurance; research council; standing orders.

- Immediately post establishment, all members of the executives of CIT and ITT retained their portfolios. A small executive assisted the President in day-to-day operational activity and a planning group was formed. Toward the end of the reporting period, these groups combined to form the current MTU Executive.
- Pending development of a MTU strategic plan, MTU's strategy is guided by the 'MTU Application for Designation as a Technological University' (which set out the vision, mission and values of the MTU) and other documents associated with the application.

MTU's Governing Body approved the MTU Dignity and Respect policy and associated procedure at its inaugural meeting. As this was the first common policy to be adopted by MTU, this action can be perceived to have strong symbolic resonance. It is also noteworthy that MTU has acted early to strengthen the student voice in governance structures, quality assurance and enhancement. Feedback is sought locally through engagement with the Students' Union, the implementation of the National [Student Engagement Programme \(NStEP\)](#) and an initiative of the institution, Students as Partners in Quality (Sparq). Initiatives are underway to make the use of [StudentSurvey.ie](#) data more accessible at academic unit and programme level to provide an evidence-based mechanism for closing the feedback loop.

TU Dublin, established on the 1st of January 2019, submitted its first Annual Quality Report in this reporting period. Despite the ongoing disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, significant development in organisational design and integration has been achieved within the institution. The report reflects that the establishment of TU Dublin has prompted quality enhancement and the development of essential new infrastructure, for example, the student records system. As TU Dublin prepared for its first CINNTE visit, the preparation of the Institutional Self-evaluation Report (ISER) was reported to be a catalyst for self-reflection.

Actions taken during the reporting period include:

- A number of senior posts were filled.
- Recruitment for five faculty Deans was completed, as well as for a Vice President for Research and Innovation, Vice President for People, Change & Culture, Vice President for Partnerships & Vice President for Sustainability.
- Recruitment for eight out of ten Heads of Services was completed by August 2021, enabling the new heads to lead the completion of detailed designs for transitioning each service to the new organisation structure.
- A project team was appointed in 2021 to develop the University Education Model (UEM) (2021 - 2024) based on 10 guiding education principles approved by the institution's Academic Council.
- The TU Dublin student records management system project was initiated to create a single digitally enabled infrastructure for students to engage effectively with the university.
- The development of TU Dublin's Quality Framework was significantly progressed, with all draft documents circulated to all staff for review and feedback.
- Quality enhancement processes pertaining to programme validation and management, changes to programmes and modules and annual quality enhancement were approved by the Academic Council.

During this reporting period, the AQRs of seven institutes of technology that were actively working toward designation as technological universities were submitted. Within these, many examples were provided of proactive work to develop alignment and cooperation across different levels between the institutes in the lead up to their establishment as a technological university.

LIT and AIT reported on aligning action plans and development activities within the context of integration and establishment as a new technological university. Quality assurance improvement plans emphasised the integration of structures, strategies and policies. Notably, a research ethics working group was established with the participation of the ethics committee chairs from each institution.

The Connacht-Ulster Alliance (CUA), comprising Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT), Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT) and Institute of Technology, Sligo (ITS), identified multiple areas of collaboration. These included the development of common strategies for learning, teaching and assessment and for student services (among a range of cross-institutional initiatives). The student unions of the three institutes of technology collaborated on developing a single constitution for the new student union within the TU. The CUA also jointly facilitated a DigitalEd week, 'Building Digital Teaching and Learning Capabilities in the CUA', in May 2021.

The AQRs indicated that Institute of Technology, Carlow (ITC) and Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) engaged in 28 TU-focused projects spanning a range of foci, including equality, diversity and inclusion, regional promotion of access, international mobility, and support for adult learners and socio-economically challenged students. Academic and research staff engaged in network building projects across domains and faculties, as well as professional service areas including human resources, student supports and finance.

1.3 Facilities

Although the AQRs submitted for this reporting period emphasised, without exception, the development, use and enhancement of digital environments and processes within public HEIs, decisions were also taken and work progressed/completed in relation to the built environment. This reflects substantial investment in the expansion and enhancement of teaching and research facilities, as well as in those that house administration and support services. Notably, a number of the capital projects announced during the reporting period will expand capacity on STEM programmes in Ireland by several thousand places. Work planned or announced included the following:

- At Dublin City University (DCU), agreement was reached on the development of the DCU FutureTech Building on the Glasnevin campus as part of the DCU campus masterplan. This 10,000m² facility will have the capacity to accommodate over 3,000 additional STEM students on the Glasnevin campus and will house DCU's entire School of Health and Human Performance.
- At Trinity College Dublin (TCD), sod was turned in 2021 on the E3 Learning Foundry, which will create 1,600 new STEM student places and house an innovation hub with space for entrepreneurs and start-ups.
- Also at TCD, a project budget and proposed tender to refurbish the Rubrics and Chief Steward's House to provide new student and staff accommodation were approved in May 2021. The Old Library Redevelopment Project received €25 million in funding from the government through the Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage.
- At GMIT, statutory consents have been obtained for a new 5,500m² STEM building. An additional 4 hectares of land were also acquired to enable future expansion of the Galway campus.
- At UCD, an expansion of facilities for research and innovation, including a new AgTech Innovation Centre at Lyons Farm and major capital development at Belfield were announced as actions within the Research, Innovation and Impact strategy published in March 2021.

- At NUI Galway, a detailed plan has been developed for the construction of a Learning Commons at the heart of the campus. The space will incorporate a Learning Success Hub and Makerspace/Digital Scholarship Centre. A mix of individual and group study spaces are planned and Bookbot technology will be deployed to enable efficient storage and retrieval of printed collections and facilitate flexible use of the available space.

During the reporting period, work was also completed on the following projects:

- At DCU, an extensive refurbishment of Woodlock Hall on the All Hallows campus was completed.
- At TU Dublin's Grangegorman campus, a 16,000m² East Quad building was completed in December 2020 and a 36,000m² Central Quad building in March 2021. Over the first six months of 2021, over 1,000 staff relocated and 16,000 pieces of equipment were moved. Academic activities commenced from April 2021 in a phased manner under COVID-19 restrictions.
- Also at TU Dublin, construction work on the refurbishment of the Park House building resumed in June 2020 and was completed in January 2021. Cathal Brugha Street, Chatham Row, Sackville Place, Rathmines House, Kevin Street, Mountjoy Square and Church Lane were vacated between January and June 2021. The refurbishment of Rathdown House to include dining, student services and a health & wellness centre was completed in January 2021. The renovation of the Lower House was completed in January 2021.
- At GMIT, work on an Enterprise Ireland-funded iHub extension and medical imaging suite continued. This was formally opened following the reporting period.
- At TCD, work on student accommodation facilities in Printing House Square that had been delayed due to the pandemic continued. The facilities were formally opened following the reporting period.
- At Dundalk IT (DKIT), work was completed on the construction of fully accessible bathrooms on campus.

1.3.1 Inclusivity and sustainability in the built environment

In addition to major capital works, a number of AQRs submitted during this reporting period indicated adaptations to the built environment (both planned and completed) to promote accessibility, inclusivity and sustainability. These developments were often presented concurrently to actions that promote inclusion and sustainability in teaching, research and student support practice. Such initiatives highlight the holistic approaches and cross-institutional commitment being employed to achieve impact in these areas. Examples of such initiatives include:

- At UCC, a space was dedicated in the Old College Bar building as 'The Calm Zone'. The space is designed to offer respite and calm, particularly for students on the autism spectrum. Areas include a reception and open plan area, workshop space, sensory rooms, respite rooms and eating spaces.
- At IADT, the audio-visual capabilities in classrooms and laboratories were significantly enhanced to include multiple web cameras in each space along with improved audio quality. These enhancements facilitated fully online teaching but were also intended to facilitate hybrid attendance for learners self-isolating or with high-risk medical conditions.
- At NUI Galway, the university's sustainability strategy (2021 to 2025) was organised around six themes. Within these, the built environment and health & wellbeing are prominent.
- AT LIT retrofitting of Moylish campus buildings included the installation of photovoltaic panels and electric vehicle chargers.
- At DkIT a low sensory input space was established in the library.

1.4 European universities and other international collaborations

During this reporting period, the AQRs submitted reflected a deep commitment across public Irish HEIs to European integration, cooperation and exchange. A number of public Irish HEIs have joined or progressed in alliances with consortia of European universities. These partnerships share a vision of more seamless cooperation. In some instances, this is envisaged through the establishment of European universities of the future.

- AIT and LIT continued their membership of the RUN-EU network. RUN-EU consists of seven regionally-focused HEIs across Europe and will focus on the delivery of collaborative, future and advanced skills-based teaching, learning, research and engagement activities. Future development will encompass joint student-centred, challenge and work-based flexible learning activities, short advanced programmes and degrees delivered through inter-university and interregional approaches.
- TU Dublin continued working with the European University of Technology Alliance (Eut+) with seven partner institutions to establish a baseline of activities and approaches for the purposes of developing collaborative initiatives and shared programmes.
- University of Limerick (UL) continued to engage as a member of the EMERGE consortium with six partners across the EU. In March 2021, EMERGE member Université Rennes 2 hosted an online staff week to strengthen links between the partners. UL will host the next staff week for the consortium in the subsequent reporting period.
- IT Sligo signed a formal strategic agreement with the RISEN Alliance, committing to working with five HEIs in other EU member states to strengthen collaboration in curriculum, student/staff mobility and research. IT Sligo is leading a project within the alliance to implement a multidisciplinary and practice-based European master's programme.
- NUI Galway continued working with the ENLIGHT network of nine European partners on creating an "ENLIGHT university system" with a governance structure and common quality approach, integrating national quality assurance and recognition procedures. A data processing agreement was under development to facilitate this with the ambition to have a functioning European university system established after a 3-year pilot phase. A small number of pilot modules relating to flagship challenge areas are being developed as joint modules.
- IADT launched FilmEU in 2021, a project which has secured €1.1 million in funding to explore and develop an EU university for the film & media arts. Partner institutions are located in Portugal, Belgium and Hungary with associated partners in Estonia, Finland and Germany. During the reporting period, IADT received notification of an additional €0.5 million in funding under the Horizon 2020 initiative in order to improve research capacity across the consortium.

More localised projects also saw successful collaborations unfold at programme and module level, and the achievement of specific internationalisation goals. For example:

- TCD reported that, following a collaboration with five EU partner universities which commenced in 2019, the CHARM-EU project has progressed to delivery of a pilot Master's Programme in Global Challenges for Sustainability. The programme commenced in September 2021, with 70 students across 5 locations.
- The Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) was successful in its application for membership of the European University Association (EUA) and signed a partnership agreement with Sorbonne Université to support exchange of students and staff.

- IADT reported on a 'virtual mobility' initiative in partnership with the Universitat Internacional de Catalunya (UIC). The Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) project linked New Media Studies students at IADT with Audio Visual students at UIC.

Although European integration was a strong theme, a number of international collaborations reported in this year's AQRs extended beyond the boundaries of the European Union.

- IT Carlow reported on developments at Carlow International College of Technology in Zhengzhou, China, which will operate in partnership with Henan University of Animal Husbandry and Economy. The college was established with the backing of the Chinese Ministry of Education and has been approved to deliver three programmes, a BSc in Brewing and Distilling, a BSc in Sustainable Farm Management and Agribusiness and a BSc in Software Development. The first intake of learners is anticipated in September 2022. IT Carlow acknowledged the valuable cooperation and advice of the Embassy of Ireland in China and from Education in Ireland to the success of this initiative.
- IADT reported on developments in two international credit mobility projects that have been in progress since 2017 with Armenian and Ukrainian partner institutions. Both projects transitioned online during the reporting period, with a 12-week collaboration with Yerevan State Institute of Theatre and Cinematography in Armenia and a one-day conference with Sumy State University in Ukraine. Follow-on funding from the European Commission was agreed for both projects.
- NUI Galway reported on the establishment of the Galway Global Project, which was launched in March 2021. Global Galway is intended to create a sustainable internationalisation structure that will aid the university in progressing its ambitions for global growth. A director was appointed in September 2021 and 4 teams were created within the project: Global Recruitment, Global Mobility, Global Partnerships, Finance & Global Operations.
- DkIT reported on a teaching collaboration with the University of Zhengzhou Shengda (ZSDU), China. This collaboration between the institute's Department of Business and ZSDU resulted in two DkIT lecturers teaching a series of modules online over the course of a semester. In future, it is hoped that staff will travel to deliver lectures.

During this reporting period, HEIs also documented a number of initiatives to improve the experience of incoming international students. Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT) reported on the impact that internationalisation and growing numbers of international students have had on perceptions of the institution in the region. In the extract from a larger case study below, LYIT reports on its alignment to QQI's *Code of Practice for Provision of Programmes of Education and Training to International Learners (2015)*³ as the institution embeds 'internationalisation at home.'

³ <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-11/qp-15-code-of-practice-for-provision-of-programmes-of-education-and-training-for-international-learners.pdf>

Case Study 2:

Creating rich opportunities for international engagement

LYIT has a very positive history of engagement in international education stretching back over 30 years, primarily based on our participation in the Erasmus Programme. LYIT examined the opportunities available through internationalisation as part of the self-evaluation for the QQI Cyclical Review 2018. The initial plan was to target growth where LYIT had established links via the Donegal and North West diaspora, USA and Canada, as well as other prioritised non-EU countries, in particular China and Brazil. Targets for fee paying non-EU students were set in this first HEA compact and are reviewed and revised in our forthcoming Academic Programmes Plan. LYIT's growing international student population has changed how the Institute is perceived in the region. Increasingly the Institute is seen as a higher education option that offers a student experience comparable with the feel of a larger university. The next phase for LYIT is to develop the necessary supports that will embed all aspects of internationalisation within the Institute focusing on optimising the study experience of international learners that choose to complete a study spell at LYIT. LYIT has adopted an approach to its International activity that is closely aligned with the three principles set out in QQI's Code of Practice for the Provision of Programmes to International Learners:

P1 Marketing, Recruitment and Admissions: Recruitment of learners is conducted in a transparent and ethical manner. LYIT ensures that clear, unambiguous and up-to-date information is provided in our marketing and promotional materials.

P2 Fees, Refunds and Subsistence: LYIT provides learners with clear, unambiguous and up-to-date information on all study costs, including subsistence and accommodation. LYIT will inform learners about fees and other costs associated with undertaking a programme of study in Ireland.

P3 Supports and Services: LYIT works to foster an educational environment which supports the well-being and integration of all learners into the student body and ensures a positive learning experience for all learners.

In addition, International Students at LYIT:

1. Can avail of Access, Transfer and Progression opportunities as described in Chapter 4 of the QAH.
2. Are subject to LYIT's Marks and Standards as described in Chapter 5 of the QAH.

A list of programmes for which International students are eligible to apply is maintained as part of QQI's Interim List of Eligible Programmes (to be known in the future as the Irish Register of Qualifications).

Case Study 2: LYIT - Creating rich opportunities for international engagement

At TCD, a collaborative project has been undertaken to develop an Admissions Matrix intended to bring clarity to prospective international students on undergraduate admissions requirements. This is described in a case study, an abbreviated version of which is included here:

Case Study 3:

Objective 4: The Code of Practice for the Provision of Programmes to International Learners – Enhancing the Structure of Undergraduate Admission Requirements

Development and Challenges:

A collaborative project between members of the Global Relations Recruitment Team and the Admissions Officer, Academic Registry, began in 2019. An initial focus was to review international best practice in the presentation of admission requirements – particularly from Australia and the UK, where [university degree structures](#), and so admission requirements, are commensurate with Trinity's. The objective was to identify ways to improve the transparency of admission requirements for an international audience, without compromising Trinity's academic standards. A related objective was to "future proof" any new structure, so that it could incorporate additional international education systems as needed over subsequent years, without becoming unwieldy and unclear. This was especially challenging given that undergraduate admission policies are related to the Central Applications Office (CAO) and the Higher Education sector policies, placing some limitations on Trinity's freedom to unilaterally adjust requirements at short notice.

To resolve this, a structure was devised for describing the various categories of requirements (matriculation, subject specific, competitive, etc.) that was compatible with all existing admission requirements as set out in the [Calendar Part 2](#), but that could also be generalised to fit any international second-level qualification system. The newly devised structure introduced the terminologies of "bands" to contain competitiveness requirements (equivalent to Leaving Cert points totals) and "levels" to contain subject specific requirements. These new terms also resolved the design challenge of graphically representing so many layers of information succinctly in a legible format. A draft presentation of the banding structure was approved by the Undergraduate Studies Committee (USC) in April 2020.

With provisional approval to proceed, the Global Relations Recruitment Team undertook a benchmarking exercise to establish the appropriate values with which to populate the bands and levels. The benchmarking was based on the published standards of peer universities, existing Trinity policies, and the professional experience of Trinity staff and counterparts in other institutions. Informed by this, the admission structure was expanded to include 11 new secondary qualifications, from countries including India, China, Russia, Australia and Malaysia. A final version of the new structure, including Competitive Bands, Subject-Specific Levels, Science Subject Groups, and the combined "Matrix" table, was approved by USC in September 2020 and by Council in October 2020.

Implementation:

Academic Registry Applications and Admissions Team adopted the new structure in assessing applications for 2021 admission, which opened in November 2020. A standalone publication to cover [Undergraduate Admissions for Non-EU students](#), based on the new structure approved in October 2020, was prepared by the Global Relations Marketing Team, and published as a pdf document online in December 2020. For subsequent application cycles, the new structure will be incorporated into the Undergraduate Prospectus and Admissions pages of the University website.

The adoption of this structure comes with a streamlined annual process for adding new qualifications. Proposals to add Turkish, Serbian and additional Chinese qualifications are under consideration, and others will be introduced as needed.

Benefits of the Project:

The primary benefit of the new admissions structure is in providing at-a-glance understanding to pathways to admission to Trinity; and so ensuring compliance with Principle 3.2.3a of the QQI Code of Practice for the Provision of Programmes to International Learners: “Providers shall clearly specify entry requirements for international learners.” Beyond this, the structure provides a tool with which the University’s academic and professional staff can expand and refine admissions policies in a consistent, systematic and rational way.

Case Study 3: TCD - The Code of Practice for the Provision of Programmes to International Learners – Enhancing the Structure of Undergraduate Admission Requirements

1.5 Strategy, governance and management of quality

The AQRs submitted for this reporting period indicate that the impact of COVID-19 on longer term strategic plans was still being considered across the sector during the 2020/21 academic year. Nonetheless, the AQRs contained evidence of ongoing, albeit cautious, strategic development and planning. At institutional level, a number of HEIs reported postponing the finalisation of new strategic plans or reviewing those that predated the pandemic. In some instances, area-specific strategic plans were launched or initiated. Institutions also reported on how interim governance arrangements operated throughout the reporting period to enable the ongoing response to evolving public health guidelines.

- At TCD, COVID-19 governance structures established in the previous reporting period were updated and continued to operate in parallel with existing governance arrangements during the reporting period. The goals, targets and timelines of the college strategy 2020 – 2025, launched at the outset of the pandemic, were kept under review.
- At DkIT, an “Academic Contingency Planning” sub-group, established in the previous reporting period, continued to operate and deal with academic operations matters, as tasked by the academic council.
- At UCC, the ‘UCC 2022’ document replaced the final two years of the previous strategic plan and set out a thematic prioritisation of the college strategy. This took account of transformative changes to the institution’s core operations, not only in response to social and economic pressures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, but to geopolitical challenges and the escalating climate crisis.
- At Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT), academic council continued to meet more frequently due to COVID-19. The AQR coincided with the final academic year of the institution’s current strategic plan. The institution noted that although the impact of COVID-19 tempered full achievement of all targets within the strategic plan, the pandemic had presented a unique test of the institute’s resilience and flexibility.
- At UCD, implementation of the existing strategic plan continued, with projections of student and faculty numbers extended to ten years to inform a campus development plan. The AQR noted that the pandemic had provided some challenges to implementation of the UCD Strategy 2020 – 2024 ‘Rising to the Future’ but had also provided an opportunity for the university to progress the implementation of Enabler 4 within the plan - digital transformation. The new UCD Strategy for Research, Innovation and Impact to 2024 was also published in 2021.

- At Maynooth University (MU), an additional committee structure was in operation to facilitate the university's response to the pandemic. This included the MU COVID Oversight Group, MU COVID Policy Group, MU COVID Academic Planning Group and MU COVID Operational Group.

Notably, progress in the designation of technological universities saw a number of institutes of technology winding down existing strategic plans and working within their consortia to focus on post-establishment objectives (see 1.2.2).

1.5.1 QA supporting strategic objectives

During this reporting period, the focus of much ongoing QA development was on supporting more flexible learner engagement with higher education. Within this, there were some notable examples provided of developments in the area of micro-credentials and apprenticeship as a mode of learning in higher education. Work in these areas was consistently underpinned by a focus on facilitating progression and recognition of prior learning. Examples of work within HEIs in these areas include:

- At LyIT, new sections were added to the institution's QA procedures in preparation for the delivery of apprenticeships and NFQ Level 10 professional doctorates.
- In 2020, TCD received funding under Human Capital Initiative (HCI) Pillar 3 to support a pilot programme on micro-credentials. In May 2021, the University Council approved, in principle, the development of a micro-credentials pathway architecture proposal for consideration by Council in 2022. In 2020/21, a new micro-credentials team was appointed to support the achievement of this ambition, including the role of a Programme Director for Micro-credentials. In August 2021, Trinity launched its first portfolio of micro-credentials. It is envisaged that micro-credentials will be stackable towards a Trinity award.
- At WIT, green papers were submitted on offering micro-credential awards and submitting article-based PhDs (PhD by publication). These were expected to return to the academic council as white papers (draft policy) in the next reporting period.
- At DCU, a suite of new and restructured undergraduate programmes were accredited as part of the DCU Future initiative and offered through the CAO platform. The Academic Council also approved a proposed high-level future operating model for curriculum approval and management, devolving this to faculties to ensure agility and innovation. Centralised university structures will assure and support high standards of student and wider service-recipient experience, programme and module quality and relevance, and strategic decision-making.
- In response to COVID-19, Convene (a TU Dublin and UCD partnership) was central to the creation and delivery of a number of programmes, utilising a micro-credentials framework. Micro-credential capacity on the TU Dublin and UCD Joint Diploma in Transversal Skills was increased by 432 learners in 2021. Working with the Tourism and Hospitality Sector Careers Oversight Group, capacity was also created for 80 learners on micro-credentials relevant to the tourism and hospitality sectors.

1.5.2 Leadership and management structural changes

During the reporting period, a number of new senior appointments were made across institutions. These included:

- At TCD, a new provost, Professor Linda Doyle, was appointed and became the first female provost in the institution's history. A new senior management team and vice-provost were also subsequently appointed.
- The first president of MTU, Professor Maggie Cusack, was appointed following the establishment of the university.

- The governing authority of MU commenced the process of appointing a new president.
- The new governing authority of DCU held its first meeting in September 2021 and appointed a new chancellor.

Notably, new roles approved or announced across the sector during the reporting period reflected, in many instances, the growing prominence of sustainability and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) within strategic agendas. In other instances, appointments were indicative of capacity building in areas including research, innovation and well-being. Examples include:

- TCD reported that the role of Associate Vice-Provost for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) was created and the role of Vice-President for Biodiversity and Climate Action was approved.
- DkIT reported that the role of the Vice-President for Finance, Resources and Diversity was expanded to include EDI.
- NUI Galway reported that a Director of Governance was appointed to support the work of the Governing Authority and matters relating to good governance practice in the university.
- IT Sligo reported that a new role had been identified for a Graduate Education & Research Integrity Officer.
- GMIT reported that a number of new posts in the area of health and well-being had been approved, including in the areas of occupational therapy, mental health and counselling.
- DkIT reported that a new post was created for an educational psychologist to support access to diagnosis for learners with specific learning differences.
- RCSI reported appointing an inaugural chair of RCSI SIM Centre for Simulation Education and Research.
- IADT appointed a Director of Research, Development and Innovation and a Head of Research.

Limited structural changes were reported in the AQRs during this period. Those that were indicated in the reports reflected capacity building activity in relation to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) domains.

- At IT Sligo, a new Department of Engineering & Technology was approved and developed under the School of Engineering and Design. The focus of the department will be apprenticeships allied to the School of Engineering, with the majority currently being craft and one being consortium led.
- At IT Carlow, a decision was made to introduce two new departments. This split the existing Department of Aerospace, Mechanical and Electronic Engineering into the Department of Aerospace and Mechanical Engineering and the Department of Electronic Engineering and Communications. Additionally, it was decided that the Department of Science and Health would divide into the Department of Sport, Exercise and Health and Department of Applied Science.
- At UCD, two new research centres were launched during the reporting period. These were:
 - » The UCD Centre for Space Research (C-Space), led by the School of Physics, aims to boost Ireland's space industry with interdisciplinary and collaborative research, and provide skills and training for jobs of the future.
 - » The UCD Centre for Quantum Engineering, Science & Technology (C-QuEST), which will involve staff from the Schools of Physics, Engineering, Computer Science and Maths & Statistics, aims to accelerate the development of quantum research in Ireland and use this technology to address major global challenges.

1.5.3 Sustainable development goals

During this reporting period, many of the AQRs submitted reflected accelerated efforts toward achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Although reporting in this category was somewhat varied in the level of detail provided, the evidence submitted indicated that in many public HEIs emphasis has been placed on the implementation of action plans to achieve targets and objectives in this area.

A number of HEIs tracked and reported their progress toward the SDGs against international rankings, with some notable strong performances nationally. For example:

- UCC reported ranking 9th in the world for sustainability in the UI Green Metric World ranking and ranking 8th best university in the world in the 2021 Times Higher Education University Impact Rankings;
- UCD was ranked 24th in the world in the 2021 Times Higher Education University Impact Rankings. UCD ranked top of the class in Ireland in two individual rankings (SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth and SDG 9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure); and
- NUI Galway ranked 82nd place out of 1,118 institutions in the 2021 Sustainable Development Goals World Ranking, additionally ranking 14th in relation to SDG 7: affordable and clean energy; and 44th in relation to SDG 3: good health and wellbeing.

Sustainability was widely reported to be central to strategic plans, both existing and under development. Sustainability also featured prominently in charters, mission statements and values across the sector. The publication of annual sustainability reports was highlighted by many institutions including UCC, UCD, NUI Galway and TCD. At MU, the three faculty teaching and learning committees prepared an inaugural report on university teaching and learning's engagement with sustainability and the SDGs.

Much work was also undertaken to embed sustainability in the curriculum, often building on foundations laid in previous years:

- At NUI Galway, the number of modules offered with environmental/sustainability content increased from 231 in 2018 to 303 in 2021.
- At TCD, a pilot Master's Degree in Global Challenges for Sustainability was launched in September 2021.
- At TU Dublin, the AASHE-STARTS framework has been used to undertake a first-pass analysis of programmes to identify those that are classified as 'sustainable focused' and those that are 'sustainable inclusive'. A project team is working with programmes to embed sustainability.
- At LIT, five new programmes were planned for commencement in September 2022 with a focus on sustainable development.
- At GMIT, the first meeting was held of the Digital Academy for the Sustainable Built Environment (DASBE). This is a HCI pillar 3 funded project in partnership with LIT, AIT, Tipperary Energy Agency and the Irish Green Building Council to enable rapid design, development and deployment of education and training programmes to construction workers and professionals.

The design and delivery of standalone sustainability modules, typically offered to all students and staff, was also noteworthy.

- At NUI Galway, an Introduction to Sustainability module was rolled out to one college with the aim of becoming a university-wide module.

- At UCC, a university-wide digital badge in sustainability is being offered yearly.

A number of HEIs reported on actions indicating the explicit alignment of research activity to the SDGs.

- At TCD, a revision of the Policy on Good Research Practice includes ethical considerations around research using plants and ecosystems.
- At LIT, a new research institute was developed with a focus on sustainable development.
- At UCC, a toolkit was used to benchmark and encourage alignment of research activity to the SDGs.
- Progress was also reported across a number of HEIs in relation to green campus initiatives.
- NUI Galway joined an international sustainable campus network. All caterers on campus offer vegan, vegetarian and meat free options each day. A not-for-profit cooperative based in the business innovation centre provides hands-on bike maintenance workshops.
- IT Sligo was officially designated as a Green Campus during the reporting period and was awarded the Green Flag, which symbolises the commitment of the institution to continuous environmental improvement.
- At LIT, Green Campus status was awarded to the Thurles and Clonmel campuses.
- At TCD, the Provost's sustainability fund funded a number of small projects to create a more efficient and sustainable campus. For example, a 3D printing system was funded to enable the 3D printing of plastic cuvettes for teaching purposes from used cuvettes, eliminating the purchase and disposal of these.

The power of engaging students in higher education in furthering the achievement of the SDGs is reflected in the case study below from UL.

Case Study 4:

Continued Integration of UN sustainable development goals (SDG) *Students as social entrepreneurs and global citizens - UL Enactus Case Study*

Introduction and Objectives

It is increasingly acknowledged that social enterprises have an important role to play in the achievement of the UN's new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and social enterprises hold solutions to the many challenges brought about by COVID-19. Therefore, students must be challenged to actively participate in the broader societal dialogue of the issues covered by the SDGs and be equipped with the curiosity, determination and skills to actively engage in identifying solutions to social inequalities to improve the society in which they choose to live and work. Thus, it is incumbent on educational institutions to provide a supportive infrastructure and a learning environment that promotes an understanding of the complex challenges faced by businesses and the interlinkages between the social, economic, commercial and environmental dimensions of sustainable development through in curricula and extracurricular activities facilitating students.

The UL Enactus team is an important vehicle for students to proactively address real world problems by taking matters into their own hands and acting as social entrepreneurs and social innovators. The objective of the initiative is to create a learning climate and culture in which students give back to, and benefit the livelihoods of, individuals and communities who may not have the same opportunities.

The social issues addressed are wide-ranging, including austerity, ageing population, the integration of refugees, food waste, poverty, suicide, reintegrating prisoners, empowering women and minority groups and environmental concerns such as plastic waste. The group consists of 143 students from across a range of disciplines.

The success of their projects is demonstrated nationally and internationally as the UL Enactus team were crowned winners of the Enactus Ireland competition after competing against 10 other Irish Universities. It was the first ever win for a UL team. The team went on to a global stage to represent Ireland in the Enactus World Cup in October 2021 - see World Cup Presentation <https://youtu.be/2mUHTufChyl>.

The winning projects included Anytime of the Month, which sets out to alleviate the effects of period poverty in Ireland and tackles the stigma and lack of education around periods through awareness campaigns, secondary schools education workshops, network of friendly strangers, workplace ambassador programmes and the provision of period products to those most in need. The enterprise works with 21 third-level institutions across Ireland and the UK while also providing a menstrual health education programme to secondary schools across Ireland. The team are also working with companies nationwide to remove the stigma in the workplace and have expanded into sports, recently partnering with the Camogie Association to address the implications and problems of period poverty with girls in sports. Anytime of the Month also won first prize at the Social Enterprise Northern Ireland and Community Finance Ireland competition.

Another, Moyo Nua, has developed agricultural seeding planters for smallholder farmers in Africa. The project utilises simplified agricultural technologies that are both ergonomic and environmentally friendly and are validated by the farmers themselves. This project has a successful partnership with Goal who collaboratively have piloted the use of the seeding planters in Malawi. This pilot received very positive feedback and there is interest to scale the pilot to other regions of Malawi. The planters will be manufactured by local blacksmiths and distributed via local community shops generating a circular sustainable local economy.

In further recognition of the impact of this project, Moya Nua were crowned the inaugural winners of the World Trade Centres Association 'Peace through Trade Competition 2019' and the first Irish project to achieve this award. Two members of Moyo Nua project, Jack O'Connor and Catherine Hallinan, travelled to the World Trade Centre's 50th Annual General Assembly in Querétarom Mexico where they presented their project to an international delegate of 500 business professionals from 91 countries (<https://www.wtca.org/world-trade-center-queretaro>).

The team also has an article printed in FORBES magazine:
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/jennysplitter/2019/05/09/meet-the-irish-college-students-working-on-a-seed-planter-for-farmers-in-malawi/#17ab61a62955>.

The Sparked project - <https://sparked.ie> - designs and delivers an online Youth Development Programme to over 286 Transition Year students across a range of school types. In addition, Sparked provide a range of CV building workshops, building confidence and presentation skills workshops to TY students and work in tandem with teachers and corporate sponsors.

Restart <https://restartsocialenterprise.com> integrates International Protection Applicants to the local community through portfolio gardening and catering projects. They also provided employment training to 13 International Protection Applicants which resulted in 3 of the participants gaining employment. They have produced a cookbook entitled 'Restart Cookbook' which contains a mix of practical recipes from different cultures for use by all family members.

These social leaders inspire other students and serve as role models, providing roadmaps, approaches and toolkits enabling other students to be social changemakers.

In summary, encouraging and facilitating students to act as social entrepreneurs increases their awareness and understanding of the rapidly changing, interdependent and unequal world in which we live. By challenging stereotypes and encouraging independent thinking, students critically explore the root causes of SDG issues and how they interlink and provide sustainable solutions that enhance the economic, physical and mental wellbeing of individuals and communities. They have developed and tested successful models of collaboration between students, academic and business leaders who are committed to solving challenges in local communities by leveraging innovative and entrepreneurial actions. They demonstrate in a very practical manner how future business leaders can extend beyond a purely financial bottom line to a triple bottom line to measure impact in terms of financial, social, and environmental benefits to the community.

Further information available from Dr Briga Hynes, Kemmy Business School, Briga.Hynes@ul.ie

Case Study 4: UL Enactus - Students as social entrepreneurs and global citizens

Section 2:

Internal Quality Assurance System Enhancement and Impacts

2.1 Academic integrity

Academic integrity was brought to the fore during this reporting period as a result of ongoing challenges associated with COVID-19. Although some institutions documented activities supporting research integrity and pertaining to issues of academic freedom, it was the integrity of assessment of learning that was very much the focus of academic integrity reporting in AQRs across the sector. It was also notable that reference to academic integrity was not confined within a discrete section on that topic. Across the AQRs academic integrity is embedded throughout the descriptions of activities in governance, policy updates, teaching, learning and assessment, as well as student supports and staff development, indicating that academic integrity is now a firmly embedded consideration across all aspects of HEIs.

Participation in the National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN) was widely reported. Institutions additionally documented the formalisation of policies and regulations that take account of the greater breadth of assessment modalities being utilised to facilitate fully online programme delivery and the need to ensure the integrity of these.

- UCD undertook a root and branch review of the student plagiarism policy. The revised policy came into effect in September 2020.
- LIT approved a new policy on Academic Governance and Procedures on Assessment and Examinations.
- DCU refined existing academic policies and developed new policies. An addendum to DCU Marks and Standards was made to reflect arrangements for online exams in 2020/21.
- RCSI undertook a revision of its academic integrity policy and aligned amendments to examination and assessment and disciplinary regulations.
- AIT undertook a review of the institution's academic integrity and plagiarism policy.
- NUI Galway updated a number of policies including marks & standards, extenuating circumstances and the student code of conduct.
- TCD formed a joint postgraduate and undergraduate academic integrity working group to review its plagiarism policy and address challenges associated with essay mills, the implications of online assessment and assessment design to mitigate risks.

The AQRs indicated that proactive measures intended to raise awareness, educate and deter students from engaging in poor academic practices were also prominent in the activities of many institutions. Most institutions reported facilitation of events for staff and students during National Academic Integrity Week in October 2020. As the COVID-19 pandemic continued, many of Ireland's public HEIs also worked to strengthen the integrity of new, and in many cases, innovative, remote assessment methodologies.

- At DCU, an online academic integrity hub was established on the virtual learning environment (VLE), aimed at academic staff designing assessment. DCU also engaged in a pilot of interactive oral assessments in collaboration with Griffith University in Australia.
- At AIT, the library and academic writing centre held events and offered a series of student workshops. An academic integrity quiz was posted on electronic notice boards and social media and an awareness-raising slogan competition ran for students. An academic integrity resources pack was also piloted with some cohorts.
- At LIT, a practitioner guide for assessment and examinations was made available as a resource for staff. Further resources to support open book examinations were developed for both staff and students.
- At UCC, a suite of resources on academic integrity were developed by the skills centre. This activity built on the existing plagiarism policy, fitness to practice procedures (where relevant) and guide to examinations and assessment.
- At GMIT, an academic integrity working group was ongoing. It presented a '3-Level Framework' for approaching academic integrity enhancement; institutional, academic practitioner and student, which was adopted by its academic council in June 2021. An academic integrity guide was created to help students understand academic integrity and how to manage their college work.
- At UCD, a focus on academic integrity was included in a virtual module developed for students. The library also published a revised guide on academic integrity.
- At DkIT, the study and learning centre facilitated academic integrity-focused activities. The library continued work on a digital badge for students and a subscription was purchased for access to Epigeum's academic integrity modules for students and staff.
- At RCSI, an academic integrity working group was established as a sub-committee of the quality committee. There was also an expansion to a compulsory module that students are required to complete focused on academic integrity and plagiarism.
- UL identified that a specific team within the university would need to work with staff and students to promote academic integrity and manage matters where principles have been breached. The requirements to achieve this and deliver on national guidelines were scheduled for consideration at the university teaching, learning and assessment committee. UL also created a website to provide resources for staff on academic integrity.
- At MU, student interns contributed to the Irish University Association's (IUA) Enhancing Digital Teaching & Learning (EDTL) Instagram campaign during academic integrity week. The institution also engaged in resource sharing with DCU.

The AQRs do not specify the extent to which the pandemic, and the related move to online teaching and learning and alternative assessment methodologies, impacted on rates of academic misconduct. Notably, GMIT did document the number of reported breaches of academic integrity and discusses these in relation to the category or nature of the breach and in relation to trends in preceding years.

2.2 Teaching, learning and assessment

The COVID-19 pandemic unquestionably impacted all aspects of operations within Ireland's public HEIs during this reporting period. However, it was institutional responses to the challenges of delivering effective teaching, learning and assessment via hybrid and remote modalities that were the focus of reporting in the AQRs.

2.2.1 Policy Development to Support Online Learning

During this period, HEIs reported on the (re)development of quality assurance frameworks and policies in this domain. This activity was indicative of a shift from the emergency pivot of the previous academic year (2019/2020) to a more solid, if still somewhat transitional, footing. Policies and guidance were developed to enable and support good teaching, learning and assessment practice both during the pandemic and for the longer term.

- At GMIT, a policy on online and blended learning was developed and approved following on from the increased volume of online learning during COVID-19.
- At TCD, a report from the Head of Academic Services, Innovation & Digital Platforms presented approved changes in response to guidance on the use of appropriate technologies.
- At UCC, the university's first assessment framework was developed by the Vice President for Learning & Teaching. This work was envisaged to offer an anchor for relevant policy development.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, work in this space prioritised the development and implementation of baseline quality standards for the VLE. A number of institutions, including TU Dublin, UL and AIT, reported on actions taken to improve consistency and navigability within the VLE. The case study below provided by DCU is illustrative of the longer-term benefits of work in this area.

Case Study 5:

Leveraging Virtual Learning Environments in supporting a 21st Century Digital Campus

Context

DCU uses Moodle as the university virtual learning environment. DCU launched Loop as a brand with an underlying metaphor to better reflect the goal of developing a 21st Century Digital Campus. The term Loop was intentionally chosen to encapsulate a move away from a somewhat technical focus on Moodle to creating the concept of a rich loop or digital learning community bringing together both people and technology.

DCU's Loop virtual learning environment contains several years' worth of courses, a 'course' being a page for an individual module or some other ad-hoc educational activity. Module pages are automatically created by connecting to the student record system (ITS), which over the years had often placed pages in an unstructured manner on the site. Therefore, in 2021, the TEU commenced an initiative to re-structure Loop, by creating categories for each faculty, each academic year and each school, within which schools' relevant module pages would be housed. TEU and ISS then composed a protocol for all Loop managers to ensure this new site structure is maintained hereafter.

In addition to the restructure, the TEU further enhanced Loop by implementing a minimum standard as a course template for each faculty. This template was aligned with the internationally recognised Universal Design for Learning Framework and the Quality Matters Framework. The introduction of this template ensured that appropriate students had consistent layout and structures to their module pages.

Benefits

The benefits of restructuring Loop in this way means that module learning material and student engagement data are organised systematically by school and academic year. This ensures ease of data management and data privacy each academic year, and also offers potential for

developing structured reports and learning analytics interventions to gain insight into student learning and engagement behaviour as well as ascertaining levels of usage of Loop itself and its myriad features. For example, we now can generate reports to monitor the various elements' adoption of the UDL template and we can provide reports on a school or faculty basis with regards to the accessibility of resources that are provided on the course pages. Such a report will enable us to identify issues and provide targeted professional development to staff to enable them to improve the accessibility of their courses. Another example of a benefit of this restructure is that we can now easily identify pedagogical practices such as group work and self & peer assessment on a school or faculty basis. This type of oversight makes sharing of good teaching practice and fostering communities of practice significantly easier.

Case Study 5: DCU - Leveraging Virtual Learning Environments in supporting a 21st Century Digital Campus

Notably, learner feedback and the learner voice were considered in decision-making related to teaching, learning and assessment during this reporting period. At MU, a student-staff partnership established as part of the Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning (EDTL) in Irish Universities project was leveraged to ensure that the student voice informed the drafting of guidelines for lecture recording, as outlined in the extract below from the MU case study.

Case Study 6:

STUDENT AND STAFF PARTNERSHIP IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LECTURE RECORDING GUIDELINES

Following the rapid pivot to remote teaching due to the pandemic, students had raised concerns about variability in practice across the university regarding the recording of live online lectures. In addition, there was a lack of guidance for staff in this context, and staff had also raised a number of concerns about lecture recording, including issues surrounding intellectual property of recorded materials, the potential for the inappropriate sharing of recordings beyond the context originally intended, and decreased student attendance at live lectures.

As part of the Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning (EDTL) in Irish Universities project at Maynooth a student-staff partnership group has been established in order to ensure that decisions relating to digital teaching and learning are authentically informed by the student voice. Following preliminary discussions around staff and student concerns about lecture recording practices, the partnership group collaboratively authored a set of draft lecture recording guidelines. In order to incorporate perspectives of students beyond the partnership group, the Maynooth Students' Union Vice President for Education worked with individual class representatives (170 in total) to conduct consultations with every class, so that all students had the opportunity to contribute to the discussion. The draft guidelines were further refined in consultation with a range of university offices and staff/student committees.

Engaging in dialogue around issues relating to lecture recording allowed staff to better understand the perspectives of students, and vice versa, and by working in partnership we were able to incorporate these perspectives into the guidelines. After approval and implementation of the guidelines in 2021-22, further feedback will be sought as to next steps.

Case Study 6: MU - Student and Staff Partnership in the Development of Lecture Recording Guidelines

2.2.2 Innovation in online and remote learning

Although the pivot to fully online delivery was a universal challenge throughout the pandemic, disciplines that are highly dependent on learning through in person learning or within physical environments encountered unique challenges. The AQRs submitted for this reporting period showcased a number of innovative solutions and strategies for dealing with remote learning in such contexts. Many of the techniques employed were successful enough to be potentially retained and integrated into a broader suite of pedagogical options going forward. For example, UCC deployed virtual desktop software to enable students working remotely to have full access to proprietary programs normally only available within laboratory settings. The institution also provided electrical engineering students with kits that allowed students' home computers/laptops to be used as an electronics workbench for circuit development and analysis.

In the case study below from RCSI, technology facilitated a solution to the obstacles for teaching and learning in clinical environments resulting from public health restrictions.

Case Study 7:

Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement of the Digital, Campus and Clinical Environments in the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic.

RealWear

An exciting example of digital innovation was the introduction of RealWear glasses by the Department of Surgery. Realwear glasses are a hands-free device worn on the head which have a camera, a microphone, and a small display visible to the person wearing the device. This device can remotely connect to a Microsoft Teams meeting and thus the person wearing it may communicate with other people from afar. This was used to replace bedside teaching at the height of COVID incidence (Jan-Feb 2021) when acute hospital wards were closed to students in order to avoid extra health risks both for patients and for students. The consultant or clinical tutor would wear the device on the ward and would take a history from a patient (after obtaining the patient's consent), while the students would watch it live in allocated lecture theatre/ rooms. Since both the person wearing the RealWear glasses and the students were in the same Microsoft Teams meeting, it was possible to ask questions live, to show any scars or other relevant physical exam findings.

The student and consultant/lecturer feedback on this technology was consistently positive. This teaching method enabled RCSI to teach larger student numbers in a safe way at times when the maximum student number at bedside was very limited. It was also very safe for patients as they did not have to leave their ward, nor have to come into contact with a lot of people.

Case Study 7: RCSI - Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement of the Digital, Campus and Clinical Environments in the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic.

The AQRs submitted for this reporting period reflected a deepening awareness of the role educators can play in creating high quality learning materials for their discipline. The asynchronous learning materials created to support learning during periods of restricted access to campus were recognised to be valuable tools to augment student learning for the longer term. For example:

- At NUI Galway, funding was secured to develop professionally-produced videos of laboratory-based techniques taught throughout the four-year BSc in Practical Microbiology. NUI Galway reports that

97% of students reported increased understanding of lab principles and methods as a result of accessing the material. Moreover, the videos accumulated 40,000 views across 47 countries in the first 15 months online, indicating a benefit to the wider higher education community.

- LIT reported that recording booths had been kitted out on each campus to facilitate both the delivery of online classes and the development of online learning resources.

The extracts below from longer case studies (provided by IT Sligo and LIT respectively) are illustrative of the creativity and innovation underway across the sector as staff work to augment the learning experience for their students.

Case Study 8:

Development of a Graphic Facilitation Course for Staff

Graphic facilitation is known to help engage students in their learning and encourage retention by building confidence; fostering a sense of belonging; creating a space for reflection on the student journey and learning process; improving concentration and listening skills; making note-taking enjoyable; and providing flexible pathways into education for non-traditional learners.

Graphic facilitation incorporates a variety of visual approaches to teaching & learning in order to encourage participation, facilitate dialogue and provide a big picture perspective. Approaches vary, but all combine words and pictures. Graphic facilitation offers a simple visual approach designed to teach basic concepts, approaches and techniques quickly in order to engage students. Graphic facilitation methods are used by AGILE and SCRUM coaches, change initiators, software engineers, healthcare planners and community organisations.

A graphic facilitation course was developed during the reporting period to support lecturers and PMSS staff in using principles of UDL with their teaching methodologies through the principle of representation to support IT Sligo students. The initial course was offered over ten weeks to 16 members of staff. This initiative had a pan-institute appeal. Topics covered drawing basic shapes, people, environments, objects, developing poster templates, customer / learning journeys, visual CV, Business Snapshots, mind mapping, visual agenda, structuring content, storytelling, thinking in metaphors, and live drawing. Each participant was required to upload content into Microsoft Sway in the format of an e-Portfolio. Participants were introduced to a range of technologies including MS Teams, Sway, Miro, Moodle. The engagement with these technologies allowed opportunities to practice in a safe environment before implementing their newfound skills in classroom work-based situations. The programme was evaluated very positively and will continue to be delivered.

Case Study 8: IT Sligo - Development of a Graphic Facilitation Course for Staff

Case Study 9:

Mobile Technology Kits for asynchronous resource creation

The benefits for learners of creating engaging technology-enhanced asynchronous learning resources are well established. However it can be the case that access to higher production value technologies for academic staff can be a limiting factor and the equipment for creating such content can be heavy and bulky. The use of such technologies can be limited to pro-users.

A pilot project was initiated at LIT to trial Mobile Technology Kits and remove the barriers referenced. They are portable, mobile and user friendly. There are a total of 7 kits in all, designed to be available to LIT academics on all campuses and a range of in-person supports and how-to videos to upskill academics on their use.

The Tech Kits consist of:

- a tablet device and pen (iPad Air 2021 or Samsung S Tab 7)
- a Rode Wireless Go system (with receiver and 2 wireless lapel mics)
- a tablet clamp / stand, Bluetooth headphones and various accessories and carry bags.

Tablet devices allow great mobility, greater functionality than a phone or camera and are a gateway to a world of apps customisable to any academic's tastes and requirements. The portability and ease of use of the Tech Kits is a key design feature of the approach allowing academics on all LIT campuses to easily borrow a Tech Kit, set up in any location and capture excellent content towards unlocking their learning design for their respective courses.

The kits are being piloted by LIT lecturers including digital artist and educator Ken Coleman based at the Clonmel campus. Pictured below are examples of uses of the Tech Kits in the field, in a laboratory setting and connecting across LIT campuses. In this case study, Ken was able to take photos and videos in location settings 'en plein air' and edit the content on the iPad while mobile.

Animation academic Ken Coleman using the Tech Kit in the field.



The Rode Wireless Go lapel mic and iPad Air



SLR camera shoot captured by iPad

Ken said; "As a digital artist and educator, this mobile technology kit is a game changer. Now I can work in the field with my SLR camera, Bluetooth my photos over to the iPad and edit them there and then. I have access to all my content through the cloud and use the pen to edit images in ProCreate." The success of the pilot points to the potential to extend this initiative to staff on all campuses to use the Tech Kits for fixed time periods to enhance their respective programs' learning design. This project has been made possible with the help of the Strategic Alignment of Teaching and Learning Enhancement fund through the National Forum. The concept is a next step on first-hand experience gained using similar approaches at leading Australian Universities by Education Technologist, Mark O Connor.

2.2.3 Inclusive practice in teaching, learning and assessment

Measures such as the recording of lectures, enhanced provision of asynchronous learning materials and facilitation of remote learning are all recognised to facilitate greater inclusiveness and flexibility in higher education provision. Although the COVID-19 pandemic may have been the catalyst for widespread adoption of these strategies, their uptake has coincided with the promotion of the principles of universal design for learning (UDL) within several institutions. The emphasis on inclusion that this reflects transcends emergency measures and represents a broader trend. The AQRs contained multiple examples of strategies, projects and initiatives in this area. Illustrative examples include:

- At MU, an inclusive learning project was approved that will focus on tiered supports and accessibility in the online environment.
- IT Sligo integrated the adoption of UDL to the institution's strategic plan, and supported this with facilitation of the UDL digital badge for IT Sligo and Connacht-Ulster Alliance (CUA) partner institutes.
- At TCD, the Trinity Inclusive Curriculum (Trinity - INC) project commenced with a mandate to embed principles of diversity, equality and inclusion across all curricula.
- Both UCD and NUI Galway integrated Blackboard Ally for Learning Management Systems to the VLE to promote accessibility and inclusion.
- UCC made a commitment to becoming autism friendly and has made a digital badge available.

2.2.4 Developing academic staff capabilities for digital teaching, learning and assessment

A key enabler of efforts to maintain continuity for learners and enhance the provision of remote and online learning was the support offered by digital learning specialists and academic developers working in various configurations within public HEIs. The AQRs indicated that, in addition to ongoing provision of general accredited and non-accredited development opportunities, a significant amount of additional support was offered to academic staff seeking to improve the experience of online learning, teaching and assessment for their students. An indicative sample of the initiatives reported include:

- At TCD, the academic practice unit hosted open-book exam virtual workshop clinics for academic staff; IT services conducted training and information sessions to support academics in adapting to new platforms; and the academic practice unit developed a suite of resources to align pedagogy and assessment strategies to the online environment.
- At LIT, workshops on using open-book exams were facilitated along with customised workshops on re-designing assessment. One-to-one supports for staff were provided, including on the use of online assessment tools.
- At IT Carlow, accredited and non-accredited continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities and one-to-one supports continued. Scheduled workshops were also offered to linked providers.
- At IT Sligo, the centre for learning and teaching offered support in developing open-book exams.
- At LyIT, the flexible and online learning unit provided a suite of online digital teaching and learning training courses.
- At GMIT, a digital badges pathway provided self-directed learning opportunities for building digital teaching and learning capability among professional and academic staff.
- At UL, the Centre for Transformative Learning provided a website dedicated to supports for staff with the move to online learning.

The extract below from a case study provided by GMIT is illustrative of how supports for staff involved in teaching were customised to respond to individual and evolving needs.

Case Study 10:

Ask Me Anything: Answering the call of Academic Staff Transitioning to the World of Online Teaching and Beyond

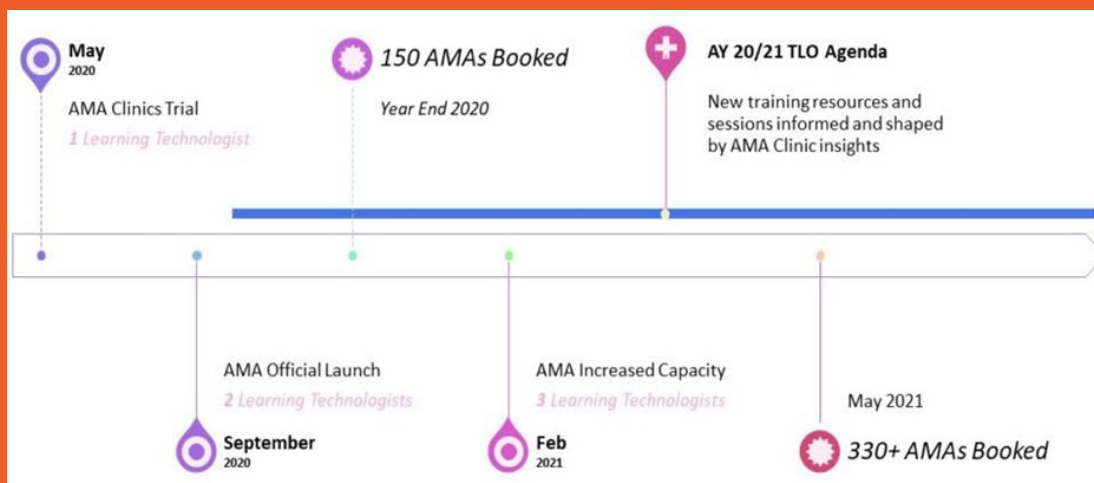


Figure 1 Timeline of setup and scaling of the AMA clinics over one year

The pandemic brought with it the introduction of this new service called 'Ask Me Anything' (AMA) – offered initially to a small cohort in June 2020 before being rolled out to all staff in September for the start of the new academic year.

The AMA clinics are simply a 15-minute online one to one session with a Learning Technologist from the Teaching and Learning Office where staff can ask just about anything they like! Teaching and learning approaches, the virtual learning environment, computer equipment, video conferencing, digital tools; no questions are deemed irrelevant or off limits.

Microsoft Bookings is the platform used to schedule the service across multiple timeslots over the course of the week which takes into consideration the personal calendars and availability of the Learning Technology team members. It provides the Microsoft Team meeting link and calendar entry for the client and the selected Learning Technologist.

From March 2020 to April 2021, this service has proven immensely popular with over 300 clinics booked. Feedback from staff indicated a strong demand to continue this service even when students return physically to campus. It has proven popular for many reasons, the obvious being that staff need ongoing support when using Moodle, MS Teams, and online tools to design and deliver effective instruction and assessments. Additionally, it was not surprising that the service also provided a sounding board to staff to talk through ideas and provided inspiration on how to implement them. Furthermore, the AMA service offered a friendly face and support to staff feeling the isolation of remote working and the frustration of having to get to grips with their new way of working.

An advantage of adding this type of support in addition to scheduled training and workshops was to create an environment for staff to ask questions. Before AMA's staff may have been unsure who or how to ask or even, in some cases, been embarrassed or shy to ask prior to COVID-19. The pandemic likely gave impetus and cover to staff, who could now say 'I've never had to do this before' or 'I have had no experience with this'. The AMA clinics created a space to simply 'ask anything' especially in a pandemic where there's no such thing as a stupid question.

Apart from just providing a singular immediate benefit for the AMA participant, these AMA interactions helped to shape and guide our institute-wide training as we, the Learning Technologists, heard first-hand the issues, frustrations, and needs of staff. Armed with this insight the delivery of timely and appropriate training materials became simpler and more effective.

The AMA clinics are open for booking all year round and have become a permanent fixture within the GMIT Teaching and Learning resources and support suite.

Case Study 10: GMIT - Ask Me Anything: Answering the call of Academic Staff Transitioning to the World of Online Teaching and Beyond

2.3 Student wellbeing and support

During this reporting period, public HEIs continued to focus on the wellbeing of learners dealing with high levels of disruption and uncertainty. Significant efforts were made to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on learners' experiences of higher education. In many instances, additional resources and supports were deployed, often targeted at cohorts known to be experiencing particular challenges. Staff within access offices, academic support units, international offices, libraries, disability offices and health and counselling services across the sector used a range of strategies to facilitate learner needs throughout a period of evolving public health restrictions. Examples of this include:

- At RCSI, student welfare supports included training on responding to students in distress and staff buddy programmes. In addition to learning supports, career supports and extracurricular activities, a specific programme of activities for international students was planned during the winter holiday for those unable to travel home. This included Christmas catering and outdoor events.
- At AIT, the nurse-led student health service introduced a telehealth platform and appointment service. A means-tested, laptop-on-loan scheme was launched to ensure socioeconomically disadvantaged students could access online learning environments. Some 320 successful applicants were invited to collect their laptop pack from a member of the library team, who utilised the opportunity to ensure the student was aware of the library services available to them. Laptop packs were distributed to students' homes when they were not in a position to collect them due to medical circumstances.
- At DkIT, emphasis was placed on supporting international students throughout COVID-19 with a number of activities and initiatives in this area reported. HEA funding also enabled a significant expansion of student counselling services. The health service continued to facilitate virtual activity and some in-person sports events were held during periods of less stringent lockdown.
- At UCC, access students were supported with devices being distributed to those needing them after university closure for COVID-19. The access team utilised virtual platforms to offer 1-1 supports. The AQR noted that many students found virtual supports less stressful to access and so these are continuing despite the subsequent return to campus.

Learner supports were also made more visible and accessible to learners via online platforms during the reporting period. Alongside the rapid enhancement of digital platforms across the sector, digital hubs for learner services and supports were established.

- DCU launched an online 'My DCU' portal for learners to access general orientation information, study skills supports and other services.

- DkIT reported ongoing work to create a student hub accessible in the VLE. This was launched in the reporting period.

2.3.1 Initiatives focused on inclusive learning environments

Additionally, many of the AQRs submitted also reported progress on wellbeing and support initiatives that transcended the immediate context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these activities reflected an emphasis on access, inclusion and the student voice. For example:

- At IT Sligo, a successful application was made to AsIAM to be considered an Autism Friendly Campus. Support staff are now in place.
- At IADT, a destigmatising disabilities campaign in 2021 won Equality Campaign of the Year at the Student Achievement awards. The project produced video and infographic information and resources. This success led to the filming of a similar video for the health services.
- At GMIT, new posts were approved to provide additional services in the areas of occupational therapy, mental health and counselling.
- At DkIT, an additional post was created for an educational psychologist to provide easier access psychological assessment for learners with undiagnosed learning difficulties. It was reported that having this service available on campus and with the capacity to provide ongoing support as well as assessment has had a major positive impact on academic outcomes and retention.
- At GMIT, a new access and participation office was established to promote the HEAR and DARE schemes as well as coordinate multi-campus supports for access route students.
- At TU Dublin, the 'Our Student Voice' project has produced digital resources to support the skills development of class representatives and the broader student population. A project deliverable is a set of digital badges for active class representation; curriculum co-designer; and quality assurance expert. These will be earned through exploration of the digital resources, participation in specific processes and completion of reflective pieces in a portfolio.

Noteworthy initiatives focusing on the first year experience, both in terms of retention and engagement, were also reported. For example:

- At MU, a collaboration between student services, academic units and other services units has been established to identify students who are disengaging.
- At UL, a first-year ambassador programme was launched. The programme enables first-year students to share their experiences of university life with others in digital formats, including through podcasts, blogs and vlogs.
- In the case study provided by DCU below, a cross-divisional initiative is highlighted that is gathering data from first-year students to drive tailored communications improvements.

Case Study 11:

First Year Check-In: An Online Tool to Monitor 1st Year Transitions

Introduction

Transitioning to university level study can be challenging for students. In 2020/21, incoming full-time undergraduate students who may have anticipated a “traditional” campus-based student experience had a very different transition to higher education. The First Year Check-in initiative was developed to gain insight into the challenges of entering students in establishing a personal sense of belonging at university, self-confidence in their ability to succeed in their studies, and their level of engagement with their programme. The pilot First Year Check-in was run concurrently in 2020/21 in both Dublin City University and University College, Cork.

First Year Check-in app and Survey

‘First year Check-in’ was based on an approach previously adopted by 13 UK Universities as part of the “What Works? Student Retention and Success Change Programme”. The short 16-question survey focuses on three behavioural indicators, which contribute to student success;

- **Belongingness:** the degree to which they are feeling a sense of belongingness to the university and or programme of study.
- **Engagement:** the degree to which they are engaging with student peers and/or teaching and support staff.
- **Self-Confidence:** the level of confidence in one’s abilities and/or performance at university.

The main objectives of this initiative were to:

- Gather real-time data on the first-year experience at this very unusual time for students, when the transition to higher education is affected by the changes brought by the pandemic;
- Analyse data patterns and provide information to decision-makers and those directing and supporting the student experience;
- Provide signposts to students on supports, resources, events, and activities that may help to build their sense of belonging and integration into the institution;
- Allow broad benchmarking of aggregated trends and patterns across the two institutions to explore different institutional contexts, responses and practices.

Participating in First Year Check-in

First Year Check-in used an existing technology, developed by the INSIGHT Centre for Data Analytics called ‘AthenaCX’. Students who chose to participate were asked to download an app, and were prompted each week to complete the short survey, which took less than two minutes to complete. Participation in this initiative was voluntary and anonymous.

Analysing Results

Data was collected and analysed on a weekly basis, and used to inform communications and information provision on events, activities and supports to assist in improving student belongingness, engagement and self-confidence. The analysis also tracked changes in index scores and responses to questions among cohorts throughout the first semester using interactive dashboards.

Participants were also able to use the app to understand their own index scores for Belongingness, Engagement and Self-Confidence. Individual scores were not benchmarked or compared to other participant scores, but allowed participants to reflect themselves on their current scores relative to this “neutral” index score.

During this reporting period, a number of institutions brought active consent and responding to sexual violence and harassment to the fore.

- At GMIT, PROPEL-guided policy documentation led to development of policy and procedures around sexual violence and sexual harassment. These were anticipated to be endorsed in Q1 2022.
- At NUI Galway, active consent workshops were rolled out as part of the first five weeks welcome programme. Some members of staff were also involved in disclosure training by Galway Rape Crisis Centre.
- At IADT, the PROPEL working group focused on active consent, with two thirds of first year students completing workshops on consent. Staff training was also provided in responding to disclosure of sexual violence.
- At UCD, the development of a virtual module for students with a broader focus included content on the active bystander programme.

2.4 Programmes of education and training

In preceding sections, this thematic analysis report has highlighted the ongoing challenges faced by HEIs during this reporting period as they worked to facilitate the delivery of existing programmes that were designed for classroom, laboratory and work-based learning. Despite this, work progressed across the sector to develop innovative and future-oriented programmes, often in close collaboration or partnership with industry.

- At UL, a collaboration was reported with industry facilitating residencies within an immersive software engineering programme.
- At GMIT, the School of Engineering established the TRANSCEND project which will drive the development of the disciplines of advanced manufacturing, automation and robotics within GMIT. The pilot project will build on the success of the Bachelor of Engineering in Automation and Robotics (Level 7) to deliver level 8 and 9 offerings in Automation, in Robotics and in Medical Device Design and increase relationships with industry.
- At UCC, HCI funding was directed to six new postgraduate programmes that were co-developed with enterprise partners. A number of industry partnerships were established to develop new programmes and provide scholarships on existing industry-relevant ones.
- At RCSI, several new programmes were approved in the area of technologies and analytics. HEA funding was obtained to establish a suite of programmes with a focus on emerging and future pharma technologies.
- At IT Sligo, new programmes were developed with an emphasis on STEM, engineering and construction in particular, but also in the domains of business including marketing, tourism and insurance.

Across the sector, a number of institutions reported a continued focus on providing access to underrepresented groups in higher education. For example:

- UCD reported that a 25% quota for access route³ students is established (places are reassigned

³ Defined at UCD as students entering the university with support from the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) scheme for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, the Disability Access Route to Education for school leavers with disabilities or specific learning needs (DARE), QQI-Further Education & Training, mature students, University Access and Open Learning.

to other access groups if not met within one). UCD stated that it takes a 'university for all' whole-institution approach to mainstreaming inclusion.

- LIT reported updates on a broad range of ongoing access initiatives with an emphasis placed on access routes for regional participants.
- RCSI reported joining the [HEA PATH Network](#) to promote and advance equality of access to higher education for underrepresented groups.

2.5 Staff recruitment, management and development

Preceding sections of this report have highlighted the work undertaken by HEIs to provide wellbeing and academic support for learners during a period of great uncertainty. During this reporting period, HEIs also reported on actions underway to support the wellbeing of their staff and to facilitate recognition of their work and achievements.

- At IT Sligo, a number of staff development and support policies and procedures were revised. These included the EDI policy, parental leave procedure, and policies and procedures for career break and leave of absence, compassionate leave, parents' leave and shorter working year.
- At NUI Galway, the employee assistance service offered a free, confidential and professional counselling and information service for employees and their family members.
- AT DCU, following a successful pilot, 18 staff were awarded Advance HE Fellowships. The scheme was opened to all staff in 2021 and a supported journey to fellowship was launched, resulting in over 60 DCU Fellows across all faculties.
- At IT Carlow, 22 teaching hero awards were made in conjunction with the student union.

The support provided to staff to facilitate effective online teaching, learning and assessment and to safeguard academic integrity has been discussed in sections 2.1 and 2.2 of this report. During 2020/21, HEIs also reported on provision of broader learning and development opportunities to staff. Initiatives in this area provided support for those pursuing higher level qualifications. Importantly, they also provided access to short courses and informal learning opportunities. This increased availability of opportunities to incrementally acquire knowledge, skills and competences reflects broader trends in workplace learning and development. Such opportunities for staff are indicative of capacity-building activity that will help HEIs to keep pace with digital transformation and the changing world of work. Examples of initiatives reported in this area include:

- MU developed policies to support staff undertaking ongoing learning and development activities, including an education support and an exam leave policy.
- NUI Galway made LinkedIn Learning available to staff and commenced facilitation of round tables as part of a leadership development programme.
- GMIT Staff Development unit supported 33 staff undertaking PhDs and 7 undertaking Level 9 studies externally.
- At IT Carlow, 135 staff participants were enrolled on accredited professional development modules.
- The MA in Learning and Teaching at LYIT welcomed its fourth cohort of enrolled academic staff in May 2020 and was delivered fully online (due to COVID-19 restrictions) throughout 2020/21.

A prominent feature of reporting in relation to staff recruitment, management and development was the promotion of EDI. HEIs reported a breadth of new initiatives, which cumulatively indicated this was becoming a significant priority for the sector.

- At AIT, the Institutional EDI Action Plan, Gender Identity and Expression Policy and institute policy for EDI were undergoing review as part of the TUS integration. An externally provided eLearning course was rolled out on diversity and inclusion in the workplace.
- At GMIT, the EDI Office worked on communications and awareness initiatives, as well as collaborating within the CUA on EDI in governance.
- At LIT, a gender neutrality guide was approved; EDI champions were established; and a focus was placed on the gender equality plan.
- AT MU, EDI training was provided for heads of department and an eLearning programme was offered to staff focused on EDI.
- At RCSI, the age-friendly university network held a week of online activities.
- At MTU, the library undertook an initiative to increase its EDI resources and collection.
- At UCD, the university management team endorsed a dignity and respect review report that focused on bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct.

A number of HEIs achieved Athena SWAN bronze awards during this reporting period, including AIT, DkIT, GMIT, IT Carlow, IT Sligo, LIT, NUI Galway and TCD. Some HEIs also progressed to departmental/school awards, including RCSI and MU. A number of institutions participated in the Aurora leadership programme for female staff. These included MU, IT Sligo and GMIT.

A broad suite of activities undertaken as part of the RCSI Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy are outlined in the extract from a longer case study below.

Case Study 12:

Equality, Diversity & Inclusion

RCSI has identified [Equality, Diversity & Inclusion \(EDI\)](#) as one of the three foundational elements of its [Strategic Plan 2018-2022](#), together with Quality and Reputation. Given that the work of RCSI is driven by an unrelenting focus on quality and reputation, and that our relationships are based firmly upon equality, diversity & inclusion, these elements are also the measure of success in implementing the Strategic Plan.

The RCSI Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy 2018-2022 sets out a road map for EDI and serves as a proactive and collaborative framework for advancing the EDI agenda at RCSI. It recognises that EDI must be embedded across all functions of the University so that each individual can make the most of their lives and talents. The Strategy is determined by the RCSI community of students and staff, and is derived from a comprehensive needs assessment which took place in 2017/18 to identify key equality, diversity and inclusion issues. The needs assessment identified structures and initiatives needed to support EDI, identified areas of inequality and prioritised areas for action, so that all members of the RCSI community have an equal opportunity to flourish.

Three new EDI staff and student forums were established during this academic year; Access for All; Ending Sexual Violence, Supporting Survivors, Promoting Consent (ESP); and Race Equality. Built on the principle of staff student partnership and engagement, forums are tasked with developing and implementing actions plans for specific EDI priority areas.

Advancing **race equality** was another EDI priority in 2020-21. RCSI was involved in the development of the first national Race Equality in Higher Education survey in Ireland, in November 2020. In January 2021, the first Race Equality Forum meeting of forty-two staff and students was convened. A Race Equality Action Plan will be launched in the 2021-22 academic year.

In May 2021 the EDI in Higher Education e-learning tool, a comprehensive foundation course for staff, was launched. This was developed over a four-year period in partnership with the Irish University Association (IUA) and reviewed by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, as well as a number of civil society partners. This builds on the extensive EDI training programme already available to staff and students with over 600 students and 50 staff completing the programme in 2020-21.

The second **PROGRESS Women in Surgery Fellowship** was awarded in 2021. The fellowship provides a bursary worth €45,000 to promote female participation in surgical training at an international centre of excellence outside Ireland for a period of one year.

The RCSI Access for All Forum was re-launched in 2021. This forum is responsible for the finalisation, implementation and monitoring of a dedicated Access for All Action Plan and Policy.

Case Study 12: RCSI - Equality, Diversity & Inclusion

2.6 Information and data management

This period saw substantial investment in improving systems infrastructure across all aspects of operations in HEIs. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in accelerating the digital transformation of the sector was explicitly acknowledged by many institutions. The AQRs reflected efforts across HEIs to improve the integrity of their data and harness data integrity to inform decision-making and good practice. This included initiatives that will utilise learning analytics. Examples of activity in this area include:

- At DCU, the new student information system proceeded to the first phase of implementation.
- At GMIT, improvements were made to academic information systems, including the introduction of online forms and general digitisation of student administration processes.
- At IT Sligo, a research information management system was purchased.
- At LIT, development of a bespoke CRM was commissioned to support students, staff and partner employers for the Careers Service Centre.
- At UCC, a multi-year investment was underway to improve data services, involving both technical streams and business/governance streams. The project was reviewed in the reporting period and was set to recommence in early 2022.
- At UL, operational and performance dashboards were put in place with metrics from various support divisions on their activities, e.g., support calls, usage of online meeting tools, web statistics etc. A research performance dashboard was launched to inform decision-making and planning within the university and is available to UL senior management and nominees.

- Also at UL, a policy was introduced on the use of data to enhance teaching, learning and assessment (learning analytics).

A pronounced theme across the 2020/21 AQRs was the increased effort to collect and use student feedback data to inform practice at HEIs. Almost all AQRs reported on institutional response rates for [StudentSurvey.ie](https://www.student.ie), with AIT and LIT celebrating the highest and second highest response rates nationally. Discussion within the AQRs frequently referenced the objective of making better use of StudentSurvey.ie data at school and department level and encouraging staff to close the loop on student feedback, although detail on how this would be achieved in practice was generally not provided.

A number of HEIs introduced or undertook additional surveys and worked to enhance quality assurance processes associated with student feedback. For example:

- IT Carlow administered two student surveys in conjunction with the students' union and student services to capture experiences of learning remotely.
- IADT's QAE committee and students' union jointly surveyed staff and students and provided them with the opportunity to provide feedback in relation to the pandemic. The information gathered was used to inform decision-making and practice.
- TU Dublin administered the same online student evaluation of programmes survey across all campuses for the first time. An analysis of the data obtained was considered at the academic council and circulated to heads of school. The institution is exploring the incorporation of module-specific questions for a random sample of modules within a programme in future iterations of the survey, as well as asking academic staff to respond to student feedback received. TU Dublin is engaging with staff representative bodies to design a system that will potentially inform and enhance programme and module development, design and delivery.
- UL introduced a student survey and feedback mechanisms policy. The StELA project focused on enhancing student feedback, moving from a manual to a digital process and closing the loop on feedback.

During this reporting period, work to ensure the security of systems and data within HEIs continued to be a priority. Examples of activities reported include the following:

- UCD published a data privacy strategy and action plan.
- LIT undertook a gap analysis of GDPR implementation and presented this to the audit and risk committee.
- TCD launched a cyber-crime hub on the university website.
- UL undertook ongoing measures to ensure that the university's critical assets are resilient to cybersecurity events. Actions undertaken to improve the security position of the institution included the roll out of multi-factor authentication; deployment of endpoint management as a mechanism to secure UL devices in use outside of the network; a focus on privileged access management; undertaking scenario-based penetration tests; and developing IT security awareness training material.

The case study below outlines how, at UCD, a GDPR champions network was used to promote good practice.

Case Study 13:

UCD GDPR Champions Network

UCD Office of the Data Protection Officer

Who are we?

In May 2018, when GDPR came into force across Europe, it substantially redefined the data protection landscape. Many organisations, including universities, were required to put in place a dedicated 'Data Protection Officer' (DPO) to assist their organisation with expert advice on data protection. UCD also hired a DPO, but subsequently additionally established an Office of the DPO. The DPO and the office look after the coordinated management of personal data breaches, help data subjects with exercising their rights, and offer the UCD Community data protection training along with workshops.

Why did we set up the GDPR Champions Network?

As important as the Office of the DPO and the role of the DPO is, achieving data protection compliance throughout an entire university employing thousands of people cannot be achieved by a single central point alone. This is why UCD decided to develop a network of individuals drawn from across the University. In addition to becoming a Champion, they continue to hold different functions in their respective areas but complemented by a special interest in data privacy.

What did we do?

The DPO is part of a UCD University Management Team (UMT) subgroup dedicated to overseeing data protection and GDPR developments in the university. This group makes recommendations to top university management and facilitated the drafting of the 'UCD Data Privacy Strategy and Action Plan', which the UCD GDPR Champion Network is an integral part of. Once approved by top management, the subgroup developed and agreed upon a Champion role description. This description intended to give a better idea of what the role entailed. Each head of unit or school was contacted by email with a letter from the subgroup and its Chair, explaining the proposed network formation. The email also included a copy of the role description and requested that each head would identify one or more individuals in their unit or school, who would be willing to become a local GDPR Champion. Smaller units or schools put forward one Champion, while larger units or schools mostly identified several individuals interested in taking on this additional role.

To get the network off the ground, an introductory meeting of Champions took place. Since then, Champions benefited from additional data protection training provided exclusively for this network by the DPO and the Office of the DPO. The design of the training consisted of knowledge transfer sessions and applied sessions; great effort was put into making the sessions as relevant to Champions as possible.

In addition to the training, a network Google Currents group was put in place to build and support this community of practice. The development of the Currents group was facilitated by the Office of the DPO and members of the network, who offered their practical and technical expertise. This Currents group allows network members to pose questions, to share experiences, and for the Office of the DPO, to communicate useful things to know.

Did it work and what are the benefits?

Yes, the formation of the network was a worthwhile project. It is the best way to assist data protection ownership at local and unit level. It operates in synergy with the central Office of the DPO and the DPO. Champions frequently act as contact points between the centre and their respective areas. In several units and schools Champions choose to support the Office of the DPO with the management of personal data breaches, in instances where the data incident affects data in their area.

Even though the GDPR Champion network is only a few months old, it shows great promise. It is anticipated that Champions will gradually build up their portfolio of data protection expertise and gain confidence supported by peers and their community of practice, while still facilitated by the central data protection office.

Case Study 13: UCD - GDPR Champions Network

2.7 Public information and communication

In addition to efforts to facilitate good communication and access to information for students and staff, many HEIs outlined successful external communications initiatives within their AQRs. For example:

- IT Sligo increased its marketing collateral through development of additional videography and digital information, noting that this was initiated in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The AQR noted that less time attending events meant the marketing and communications teams had more capacity to focus on enhancing publications, prospectuses, guides and brochures during the reporting period.
- At NUI Galway, the [Cois Coiribe](#) online platform for communications came on stream in January 2021. This online platform was developed with a number of objectives, including to increase the global visibility, brand awareness and reputation of the university and to engage with a national and international audience of students, academics, partnerships and alumni.
- At MU, the external relations office placed an emphasis on increased exposure of MU research in the media, virtual open days, new social media channels and creation of digital videos to support marketing and other objectives.
- At IADT, the marketing team launched a new website homepage with an emphasis on mobile usage. The site-wide navigation was redeveloped.
- At LIT and AIT, sections of the respective websites were dedicated to the publication of QA documents.
- At TCD, the annual Provost's report was configured as a 10-year retrospective.

2.8 Engagement with professional bodies and professional education

Institutions updated on their interactions with professional and regulatory bodies during the reporting period. Reports noted ongoing accreditation processes with professional bodies. Notably, programmes in which clinical or work placements of significant duration are central to student learning and assessment continued to face major challenges throughout the reporting period.

- At AIT, the accreditation of social care programmes by CORU was reported to be ongoing at the time of submission of the AQR. The programme team were compiling documentation outlining the changes, arising from the impact of COVID-19, on the operation of social care programmes due to the move to remote emergency teaching and learning.
- At IT Carlow, work was also reported to be underway to align the institute's social care programmes to CORU requirements.
- The case study below, provided by NUI Galway, outlines how students were facilitated to undertake speech and language therapy placements via telehealth during COVID-19 restrictions.

Case Study 14:

Establishment of an Innovative Telehealth Speech and Language Therapy Placement as a Rapid Response to COVID-19

Students on the BSc in Speech and Language Therapy are required to complete their practice education training through clinical placements in hospitals and healthcare facilities where they acquire and develop these skills. As a consequence of COVID-19, clinical placements became scarce due to reduced speech and language therapy services, increased measures of infection control and the redeployment of therapists to COVID-19 related duties. To deal with this crisis and provide enough clinical hours for our students, the discipline of Speech and Language Therapy at NUI Galway turned to telehealth.

Staff and students in Speech and Language Therapy embarked on a telehealth clinical placement offering approximately 30 online appointments daily in English and Irish. This clinical placement, using the HSE online platform Attend Anywhere, was run in collaboration with therapists from the HSE West, HSE Donegal and Voices for Down Syndrome Galway. The telehealth clinic was proposed to address the acute situation that arose during the pandemic in relation to clinical placements for Speech and Language students at NUI Galway.

The new facility offered learning opportunities and the ability for students to complete their practice education training through clinical placements, but also allowed clients to access health care services and therapy from the comfort and safety of their homes.

This was the first time that clinical placements for Speech and Language Therapy students were based on providing telehealth and not face-to-face work with clients. Every week, under supervision, 27 fourth year Speech and Language Therapy students offered approximately 30 telehealth appointments daily. To support the delivery of appointments the students created a bank of video podcasts which demonstrated activities they targeted in therapy. This helped to ensure families had support material to review between sessions. Sessions lasted from 20-45 minutes and were supervised by a qualified Speech and Language Therapist.

The telehealth clinic provided an insight into how the students' confidence, teamwork, problem-solving and adaptability developed and there was a hugely positive response from clients. The telehealth clinical placements also allowed a way to future-proof students for the world into which they will graduate, making them highly desirable healthcare employees.

An evaluation of the telehealth clinic was carried out. The aim of the evaluation was to explore practice educators' and students' experiences of the placement experience and a paper has been published on this, which is available [here](#).

2.9 Self-evaluation, monitoring and review

Significant variability was reported in the degree to which the periodic review of academic and professional units within institutions was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In a number of instances, quality reviews were postponed until a subsequent reporting period as institutions did not have capacity to facilitate those planned. In other instances, adaptations to processes were made to facilitate business continuity and ICT-supported solutions enabled review activity to proceed. For example, at RCSI a review of sectoral practice was undertaken to develop preliminary guidance for virtual peer review, which was implemented from September 2020. DCU was also able to complete all planned internal quality reviews using remotely-based approaches. The extract from a significantly longer case study provided by UL is illustrative of a carefully considered approach to conducting quality reviews using virtual environments.

Case Study 15:

Design and Implementation of an Online Quality Review Platform

Background and Context

The periodic quality review of functional units (academic, research, support and affiliates) at the University of Limerick (UL) represents a cornerstone institutional quality assurance/quality improvement mechanism. UL's quality review process was developed and continues to evolve in order to satisfy university quality policy and meet legislative QA requirements. Quality reviews of units take place at least once every 7 years.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, the university was in year 3, Q1 of a 7-year cycle of quality reviews. The university's institutional CINNTE review was delayed to later in 2020 because of the pandemic. The CINNTE review took place in a virtual environment in August 2020. The university was facing a period of considerable uncertainty during an evolving pandemic and overnight pivot to emergency remote working and teaching. The Executive Committee Quality Committee approved the use of online quality reviews until the second half of 2022. This fuelled the need to fast track the design and development of an online quality review platform and ensure business continuity.

Aims

The aim of the online quality review platform was to ensure continuity of the university's cycle of quality reviews by providing an easy to use, secure, online, browser-based platform for quality review.

Table 1 Key process enhancements and project outcomes

"Old" process	New process	Enhancement
Hard copy of documentation sent by registered post to Quality Review Group (QRG) with supplementary documentation on USB key.	MS Teams site used as online document repository. Can be accessed via browser or app.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ GDPR compliance ▪ Improved access control – QRG access granted for review and removed after with a button click. ▪ Browser access improves flexibility – no requirement to download app. ▪ If MS Teams app already downloaded, this can also be used.
Meeting notes were typed on recording secretary's own laptop and distributed by email to QRG	Meeting notes are typed real-time in document on private Teams channel and transferred to a QRG-visible channel once complete.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reduced risk – notes are typed directly to MS Teams (SharePoint). ▪ SharePoint version control and backup by default. This reduces the risk of data loss due to hardware failure and increases IT security of confidential documentation. ▪ Quality Support Unit (QSU) have access to this channel and the real-time notes in the event that recording secretary unavailable. Note taking can resume immediately using nominated replacement.
Each QRG member provided with a separate template as an email attachment and asked to provide their preliminary findings after reading the self-assessment report (SAR). Completed templates emailed back to QSU. QSU copy and paste the contents of each template to a master template. Duplicate requests for additional data manually removed. Master template of pre-visit findings emailed back to QRG.	A single online template provided. Each QRG member writes to this template. Synthesis document available in real-time to all QRG.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Confidential information not shared by email. ▪ Large reduction in administrative burden for QSU in compiling documentation. ▪ QRG have visibility of each other's findings, reducing duplication, prompting further discussion and increased opportunity to understand each other's thinking prior to the review.
Requests for additional data sent as an attachment to unit under review. Unit completes document and returns to QSU by email. QSU forward email attachment to QRG.	Unit completes response to additional data requests on MS Teams site, uploading any supporting documentation. QSU transfer this to review platform.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Secure document transfer eliminating use of email ▪ Response to additional data requests available on demand on Teams site without the need to find emails. ▪ Increased IT security and GDPR compliance. ▪ Simple file transfer (drag and drop) between sites. ▪ Reduced administrative burden.
Unit under review email copy of SAR and Appendices to QSU.	Parallel MS Teams site for unit under review and QSU to serve as document repository and communication platform.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Confidential documentation in single document repository and not shared by email ▪ New members of the unit's internal quality team can be added to the MS Team and have access to correspondence and documentation

One of the elements that HEIs report on in the AQRs is the composition of expert panels involved in quality assurance and programme approval processes. This identifies the gender, nationality and internal versus external institutional status of expert reviewers. It is noteworthy that review panels were consistently and overwhelmingly composed of Irish reviewers. Of the relatively small number of non-Irish review panel members reported, most were from the UK. Inclusion of EU or non-EU reviewers in review panels was rare. This is interesting to reflect on in the light of the emphasis on EU integration across the sector discussed in section 1.4 and also in relation to the easier access to international expertise that virtual review processes facilitate.

During this reporting period, not all public HEIs had yet completed the CINNTE review process. Of those that had, some AQRs made brief reference to addressing the recommendations made within the institutional review report and incorporating these into quality enhancement plans. At UCD, the recommendations were clearly integrated to reporting on QA and QE supporting the achievement of strategic objectives. IT Sligo mapped QA improvement and enhancement plans for the upcoming reporting period to CINNTE recommendations where relevant.

2.10 Quality assurance of research activities and programmes

The AQRs submitted for this reporting period noted that the COVID-19 pandemic also impacted on research activity and programmes. As noted in section 2.1, although some institutions documented activities supporting research integrity and pertaining to issues of academic freedom during this period, a concern with the integrity of student assessment dominated activity across the sector.

It is clear, however, that much work and progress was still achieved. Specific monitoring and review activity reported includes:

- TU Dublin undertook a review of the university's research programmes during the reporting period, obtaining feedback from key stakeholder groups and proposing a number of significant changes. An expert panel, including external and international members, supported the key changes proposed and made further recommendations for enhancement while commending the graduate school on the comprehensiveness of the review.
- At UCC, a research quality review technical group was formed to develop recommendations for a model of internal research quality review in light of prevailing approaches in HE. The group was reported to have temporarily halted work due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- At DCU, a number of research centres underwent externally-led reviews, including two by Science Foundation Ireland (SFI). A schedule and procedures were agreed for the review of DCU postgraduate research programmes at NFQ Levels 9 and 10 which are delivered by DkIT, a linked provider of DCU in respect of research awards.

Policy development reported within the AQRs reflected changes to the external contexts of research, as well as internal development at institutes of technology moving towards designation as technological universities.

- The UCC policy on governance of research centres and institutes was under review to ensure it remained fit-for-purpose in the context of a rapidly evolving, external research environment.
- At TCD, the policy on good research practice was revised to incorporate changes in legislation, with a focus on ethics and GDPR.
- At LIT, a new policy was established for the designation of research institutes, research centres and research groups.

Other activities reported reflect the breadth of research development, enhancement and support activities underway across HEIs.

- At UCD, schools that wish to benchmark internationally and inform strategic planning can avail of a research assessment process that is separately available from the quality office. This does not form part of periodic review but is available as a resource.
- At AIT, the three research institutes advanced their drive for market-informed research in collaboration with industry and academic partners. There was continued engagement by all faculties with the research committee.
- At TCD, the [Declaration on Research Assessment \(DORA\)](#) principles were adopted, which recognise the need to improve the ways in which researchers and research outputs are assessed.
- Also at TCD, SHAPE-ID launched a project toolkit focused on strengthening the integration of humanities and STEM disciplines in research. A template for case-studies of research impact was developed by the research impact unit.
- At IT Sligo, a cross-institutional research integrity training group was founded involving seven HEIs. The design and delivery of interactive workshops was a focus. The decision was also made to purchase a Research Information Management system with a full information flow for every part of the process.
- At LIT, a research student support programme facilitated a range of activities, information sessions, training and workshops.
- At RCSI, the RCSI Council established an all-Ireland Irish Forum of Surgical Research. RCSI joined the Health Research Board-funded Public and Patient Involvement Ignite Network and also established a Research Strategy Committee. RCSI further invested in developing biobanking resources.
- At MU, 188 students and 38 research staff benefited from HEA funding for extensions of 4 - 6 months due to COVID-19 disruption. Postgraduate students were given a one-semester fee waiver.

Notably, some HEIs reported specific achievements in this section of the AQR. For example:

- At UCD, a 7% increase was achieved on the previous year's performance in research funding.
- At UCC, the European Commission's HR excellence in research award was renewed for the third time.
- At NUI Galway, an increase in research income, quality and impact was reported with improvements noted across most metrics.

Section 3:

Quality Assurance Improvement and Enhancement Plans

There was significant variation in the level of detail presented in the AQRs pertaining to QA improvement and enhancement plans for the upcoming reporting period. Some HEIs set out planned actions and indicators with significant granularity and identified accountable units or teams under multiple thematic areas. In other instances, very limited information is provided. This variability may in part reflect the ongoing uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and other impacts on internal capacity.

The integration and design of new organisational structures was a dominant focus of much planned enhancement within institutes of technology and the new technological university sector. Nonetheless, it is difficult to ascertain broader, sector-wide themes within plans for the upcoming reporting period with a high degree of confidence. With this limitation noted, it is observable that:

- An ongoing focus on the development of teaching, learning and assessment with an emphasis on digital learning is evident.
- A focus on the ongoing development of practices to support and protect academic integrity and progress achievement of the SDGs is also evident.
- A continued commitment to further EDI within HEIs is evident.
- The continuous enhancement of quality assurance systems is integrated into objectives and planned actions for the upcoming reporting period, including the further development of mechanisms to capture and utilise student feedback.

Section 4: Conclusions

The AQRs are now a familiar feature of the quality assurance landscape of Irish higher education. This report offers a thematic analysis of the AQRs submitted by public HEIs in 2022. The AQRs reported on activities across the sector during the 2020/21 academic year. A consistent theme throughout the AQRs is that although the impacts and strains of the COVID-19 pandemic were still being felt by students and staff during this reporting period, progress was nonetheless made on the achievement of strategic objectives that transcended the immediate context of the public health emergency. For example, HEIs reported in great depth and detail on a breadth of activities underway to achieve the UN sustainable development goals. It is also clear that decisive action was, and continues to be, taken across the sector to build the cultures, systems and structures necessary to realise equality, diversity and inclusion in practice.

The AQRs reflect a robust response to the challenges to academic integrity that were accentuated by remote and online learning during the reporting period. A strong focus was also placed on the wellbeing of learners. HEIs worked to ensure that the learner voice was increasingly heard throughout institutional decision-making and through a noteworthy increase in the systematic use of surveys.

The AQRs also provided a window on the future landscape of public higher education in Ireland. Based on the evidence submitted, the higher education system is poised to produce increasingly outward-looking, globally-minded graduates who will benefit in the years ahead from the deepening European alliances and international collaborations of their institutions. Given the unprecedented pace of digital transformation and change in industry, significant numbers of new programmes can be anticipated that will align with evolving industry needs. Learners will engage with systems and processes that are digital by default and experience increasingly high-quality virtual and online learning to augment their on-campus and in-person learning experiences.





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