Policy for the Inaugural Review of Quality Assurance in Education and Training Boards

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1   Introduction

QQI established Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for all providers in April 2016, and Sector-Specific Quality Assurance Guidelines for Education and Training Boards (ETBs) in May 2017[1]. These guidelines collectively address the quality assurance responsibilities of education and training boards as significant public providers of further education and training. The scope of these guidelines incorporates all education, training and related services of an ETB, leading to QQI awards, other awards recognised in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), or awards of other awarding, regulatory or statutory bodies.

The ETBs were established under the Education and Training Boards Act 2013. ETBs are statutory providers with responsibility for education and training, youth work and other statutory functions, and operate and manage a range of centres administering and providing adult and further education and training (FET). ETBs also administer secondary and primary education through schools and engage in a range of non-accredited provision. These areas are not subject to quality assurance regulation by QQI.

In 2018, all sixteen ETBs completed re-engagement with QQI. Following this process each ETB established its quality assurance (QA) policies and procedures in accordance with section 30 of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012. QQI recognises that those policies and procedures are reflective of the evolving and developmental nature of quality assurance within the ETB sector as it continues to integrate the legacy body processes.

As outlined in QQI's Core Quality Assurance Guidelines, quality and its assurance are primarily the responsibility of the provider, i.e. an ETB, and review and self-evaluation of quality is a fundamental element of an ETB's quality assurance system. A provider's external quality assurance obligations include a statutory review of quality assurance by QQI, as outlined in the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012. An external review of quality assurance has not been previously undertaken for the ETBs, either through QQI or former legacy awarding body processes. The external review by QQI of quality assurance of the ETBs will therefore be an inaugural review process.

QQI is cognisant of the ETBs' current organisational context in which the establishment of comprehensive and integrated quality assurance systems is an ongoing process. A primary function of the reviews will thus be to inform the future development of quality assurance and enhancement activities within the organisations. For the inaugural reviews, QQI is adopting an omnibus approach whereby all sixteen ETBs will be reviewed within a relatively short timeframe as part of a coherent programme of review.

1.1   Statutory Context

QQI review functions are set out in various sections of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 (as amended) - referred to henceforth as 'the 2012 Act'.

The policy relates to QQI's obligation under section 27(b) of the 2012 Act to establish procedures for the review by QQI of the effectiveness and implementation of a provider's quality assurance procedures.

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1 https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Core%20Statutory%20Quality%20Assurance%20Guidelines.pdf
  https://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/Sector%20specific%20QA%20Guidelines%20for%20ETBs.pdf

The policy also relates to section 34 of the 2012 Act, the external review by QQI of a provider's (in this case an ETB's) quality assurance procedures. This encompasses both reviews of individual providers and cross-sectoral thematic review.

1.2   To whom does it apply?

This policy applies only to a specific class of provider, i.e. the education and training boards designated in the Education and Training Boards Act 2013.

The policy will also apply to QQI in conducting an external review of quality assurance of an ETB and reviewers commissioned by QQI to undertake reviews under this policy.

1.3   What is the purpose of this policy?

This policy outlines QQI's approach to the inaugural review of ETBs which will inform the development of detailed procedures for the process. It seeks to outline;

- the fundamental aims and purposes of the external quality assurance review;

- the criteria against which an ETB will be reviewed;

- the intended model and outline methodology; and

- the outcomes of the external quality assurance review.

The policy establishes clear parameters for, and understanding of, the scope, functions and effect of review for all stakeholders. It will enhance the ongoing development of quality assurance within the sector by enabling QQI and the ETBs to give effect to this core component of an ETB's quality assurance system (see Figure 1).

The policy does not seek to prescribe detailed measures for the conduct of reviews. This is to allow sufficient flexibility for detailed arrangements to be discussed, agreed and adapted as required and as appropriate.

Figure 1: National Context for Quality Assurance

2 Policy

2.1 Aims and Purposes of the Inaugural Review

The aim of the inaugural review is to provide an independent external evaluation of the implementation and effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures within each ETB. The reviews should contribute to a better understanding and valuing of quality culture at all levels of each ETB and go beyond a superficial overview of the existence of quality procedures. They should also help to build confidence in further education and training delivery by enabling greater transparency of, and accountability for, the quality assurance of that provision.

QQI has six specific multi-dimensional purposes for the inaugural ETB quality assurance reviews as follows (and which are further elaborated in Appendix A):

- To encourage a quality culture and the enhancement of the learning environment and experience within ETBs.

- To provide feedback to ETBs about organisation-wide quality and the impact of mission, strategy, governance and management on quality and the overall effectiveness of their quality assurance.

- To improve public confidence in the quality of ETB provision by promoting transparency and public awareness.

- To support system-level improvement of the quality of further education and training in the ETBs.

- To encourage quality by using evidence-based, objective methods and advice.

- To provide an opportunity for ETBs to articulate their stage of development, mission and objectives and demonstrate the quality assurance of their provision, both individually and as a sector.

2.2 Scope of the Inaugural Review

The scope of the inaugural quality assurance reviews will be the quality assurance arrangements established by each ETB within its area of operation pertaining to education and training provision (excluding first and second-level school provision) and related services (e.g. learner support services). The scope will be complementary and proportionate to the complexity of the ETB. It will include an ETB's engagement with other stakeholders, across their local and regional communities, with other ETBs, and with other awarding, regulatory, professional or statutory bodies ETBs may be working with for the purposes of providing programmes of education and training and related services.

The focus of the inaugural reviews will be an evaluation of the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of each ETB's quality assurance procedures, cognisant of their stage of development as integrated corporate entities.

The reviews will:

- examine the design and planning of existing internal quality processes and their consistency with QQI's Core, Sector-Specific and Topic-Specific Quality Assurance Guidelines (including on Apprenticeship and Blended Learning) and other policies and procedures as relevant;

- evaluate the effectiveness of internal quality assurance procedures for the purposes of establishing, ascertaining, maintaining and improving the quality of further education, training, and related services;

- identify perceived gaps in the internal quality assurance mechanisms and the appropriateness, sufficiency, prioritisation and timeliness of planned measures to address them in the context of the ETB's current stage of development; and

- explore ETB achievements and innovations in the quality assurance and enhancement of teaching and learning.

The review will seek to ascertain the extent to which the ETB has established arrangements to assure itself of quality in respect of all of its centres and provision (including contracted and community provision). Subsequent quality assurance reviews of ETBs will build on the findings of the inaugural reviews and provide for greater degrees of focus on ETB enhancement of quality as the organisations continue to develop and evolve.

The scope of the reviews will be primarily qualitative and will thus include a focus that is distinct from, but complementary to, the other regulatory frameworks to which ETBs are subject.

2.3   Model for the Inaugural Review

QQI will adopt a single model for the quality assurance review of ETBs with flexible features to allow for differentiation between individual ETBs. The use of a single model means that every review has the same stated purposes, follows the same general procedure, and has the same published Terms of Reference which clearly specify the objectives, criteria and broad outcomes for the review.

Within the single model there will be scope for differentiation. The primary basis for differentiation will be the profile of the ETB: size, scope etc. will be taken into consideration in the deployment and briefing of review teams and in the duration of review visits.

The review methodology will follow a model widely adopted internationally in tertiary learning contexts, i.e.:

a.   Publication of Terms of Reference;

b.   Completion of an inclusive self-evaluation report by the ETB;

c.   Appointment of an external expert team of peer reviewers. The review team conducts:

  i.   an external assessment of the self-evaluation and related material; and

  ii.   a site visit to explore and gather evidence about quality assurance within the ETB via interviews with key staff and learners and external stakeholders;

d.   Production and publication of a report by the review team, outlining findings and recommendations; and

e.   A follow-up procedure to review actions taken.

For further information on the procedural arrangements for the inaugural quality assurance review of the ETBs, see Appendix B.

2.4   Methodology

As the ETBs were all established at the same time and this will be the first review of its kind within the sector, the inaugural review is being undertaken as an omnibus review whereby all sixteen ETBs will be reviewed within a relatively short timeframe.

In addition to each individual ETB review, a sectoral report team will be established which will provide reflections and observations at a sectoral level on quality assurance developments, challenges and opportunities. The outcome will be the production of a separate sectoral report.

The 2012 Act states that QQI shall consult with SOLAS (the state organisation responsible for funding, co-ordinating and monitoring further education and training in Ireland) in carrying out a review of education and training boards. This will take the form of consultation with SOLAS on the Terms of Reference for the review and the provision of contextual briefing by SOLAS to review teams.

If information is uncovered during the review process that raises significant concern about an ETB, it may be necessary to call a halt to the periodic review process and commence a 'focused' review[2].

2.5   Criteria

The criteria against which review findings will be compared are the individual ETB's own mission and strategy, QQI Quality Assurance Guidelines and other relevant QQI policies and relevant European guidelines and practice on quality and quality assurance.

2.6   The Review Team

The reviews will be undertaken by a series of external review teams. The review teams will be composed of both national and international peer reviewers, who may be current or former staff and learners from the education and training system or relevant external stakeholders.

QQI will endeavour to ensure that the composition of each review team will be diverse and inclusive, including an appropriate gender mix. In order to ensure the independence of the process, no current ETB leader will chair a review team. The full team complement for each review team will include experts with knowledge and experience of further education and training, quality assurance, external review, and a proven ability in the advancement of teaching and learning.

The size of the teams may vary depending on the size and complexity of the ETBs within their remit. QQI will have final approval of the composition of each review team, ensuring that there are no conflicts of interest.

Each member of the review team will receive training on the Irish further education and training context, the ETB quality assurance context, the review procedure and their role in the review.

2.7   Sectoral Report Team

To facilitate the development of a sectoral report, a sectoral report team will be established. The sectoral report team will be appointed by QQI to engage with reviewers and other stakeholders to identify system-level observations on quality assurance within the sector.

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[2] See 'Procedures for Focused Reviews by QQI of the Implementation and Effectiveness of Provider QA Procedures': https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Procedures%20for%20Focused%20Reviews%20by%20QQI%20of%20the%20Implementation%20and%20Effectiveness%20of%20Provider%20QA%20Procedures.pdf

2.8   Outcomes

A key intended outcome of the reviews is the stimulation of an intra-organisational discourse on quality within each ETB through critical analysis and meaningful discussion. This should be reflected in the published self-evaluation report and carried through into discussions with the review team and follow-up.

Review teams will provide a draft review report in respect of each ETB to QQI. The report of the review team will set out its findings in relation to each of the objectives of the quality assurance review. As well as specific findings, it will provide a general statement regarding the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures of the ETB and their implementation. As an evidence-based review, the reports will only comment on what the review team has found in terms of evidence provided before or during the main review visit.

The ETB will be given a formal opportunity within the post-review timeline to check the factual accuracy of the review report and will be invited to provide a formal response to the review report. The report and response will be approved by QQI and published.

Following publication of the individual report, each ETB will prepare and publish an action plan addressing the recommendations of the review report. The action plan will be followed up on by QQI within one year as part of routine monitoring processes. Following publication of the review report, QQI will also seek feedback from the ETB on its experience of the process with a view to informing future approaches to review.

If the review team identifies what it considers to be significant areas of concern, particularly in relation to the ETB's fulfilment of relevant statutory requirements, these will be clearly identified in the report for consideration by QQI. Following consideration, QQI may set out directions to the ETB and an action plan will be agreed to address the issues identified. Where QQI considers that progress in implementing the action plan is inadequate, QQI may, in consultation with the ETB, intervene to secure a revision or acceleration of the plan, or move to establishing a 'focused' review.

The sectoral report team will produce a sectoral report detailing collective findings, reflections and observations. The sectoral report team will reflect on the contexts within which the ETBs operate, the procedures established by them in respect of quality assurance and quality improvement and identify overarching conclusions and recommendations for future strategic or sectoral activities. The sectoral report will be published by QQI.

2.9   Fees

Section 80 of the 2012 Act sets out a range of services for which QQI may charge fees. These include fees for the review of quality assurance procedures. In accordance with the legislation, QQI determines fees with the consent of the Minister for Education and Skills and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.[3]

3   Review of this Policy

The methodology for the inaugural review will be unique to this review event and will change for future cycles of review. This policy will therefore expire and be replaced once the inaugural review process is complete.

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[3] *The QQI policy on 'Fees for QQI Services' is available at:* *https://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/Fees%20for%20QQI%20Services.pdf*

Appendix A

Review Purposes

Purpose	Achieved and Measured Through
1. To encourage a quality culture and the enhancement of the learning environment and experience within ETBs	• Emphasising the learner and the learning experience in reviews. • Constructively and meaningfully involving staff at all levels of the organisation in the self-evaluation and external evaluation phases of the review. • Providing a source of evidence of areas for improvement and areas for revision of policy and change and basing follow-up upon them. • Exploring innovative and effective practices and procedures. • Providing evidence of quality assurance and quality enhancement within the ETB.
2. To provide feedback to ETBs about organisation-wide quality and the impact of mission, strategy, governance and management on quality and the overall effectiveness of their quality assurance.	• Emphasising the ownership, governance and management of quality assurance at the corporate ETB-level, i.e. how the ETB exercises oversight of quality assurance. • Pitching the review at a comprehensive ETB-wide level. • Evaluating compliance with legislation, policy and standards. • Evaluating the impact and effectiveness of quality assurance procedures.
3. To improve public confidence in the quality of ETB provision by promoting transparency and public awareness.	• Adhering to purposes, criteria and outcomes that are clear and transparent. • Publication of clear timescales and Terms of Reference for review. • Evaluating, as part of the review, ETB reporting on quality assurance, to ensure that it is transparent and accessible. • Publication of the individual ETB reports and outcomes of reviews in accessible locations and formats for different audiences. • Publication of sectoral findings and observations.
4. To support system-level improvement of the quality of further education and training in the ETBs.	• Publishing a sectoral report, with system-level observations and findings. • The identification and dissemination of effective practice to facilitate shared learning.
5. To encourage quality by using evidence-based, objective methods and advice.	• Using the expertise of international, national, learner, industry and other stakeholder peer reviewers who are independent of the ETB. • Ensuring that findings are based on stated evidence. • Facilitating ETBs to identify measures for quality relevant to their own mission and context. • Promoting the identification and dissemination of examples of good practice and innovation.
6. To provide an opportunity for ETBs to articulate their stage of development, mission and objectives and demonstrate the quality assurance of their provision, both individually and as a sector.	• Publication of self-evaluation reports, conducted with input from ETB learners and wider stakeholder groups. • Publication of the reports and outcomes of reviews in accessible locations and formats for different audiences.

Appendix B

Indicative Review Process

Step	Action
Preparation	Preparation of a provider profile by each ETB (e.g. outlining mission; strategic objectives; local context; data on staff profiles; recent developments; key challenges).
	Provision of ETB data by SOLAS (e.g. data on learner profiles; local context; strategic direction).
	Establishment of review teams and identification of ETBs for review by each review team, selected in accordance with the ETB provider profiles and data and in consultation with ETBs on potential conflicts of interest.
Self-Evaluation Report (SER)	Preparation and publication by ETBs of individual, inclusive, whole-of-organisation self-evaluations of how effectively they assure the quality of teaching, learning and service activities.
Desk Review	Desk review of the self-evaluation reports by the review teams.
Initial Meeting	An initial meeting of the review team, including reviewer training, briefing from SOLAS, discussion of preliminary impressions and identification of any additional documentation required.
Planning Visit	A visit to the ETB by the chair and co-ordinating reviewer of the review team to receive information about the self-evaluation process, discuss the schedule for the main review visit and discuss any additional information requests.
Main Review Visit	A visit to the ETB by the review team to receive and consider evidence from ETB staff, learners and stakeholders in respect of the objectives and criteria set out in the Terms of Reference.
Individual ETB Reports	Preparation of a draft ETB review report by the review team.
	Draft report sent to ETB by QQI for a check of factual accuracy.
	ETB responds with any factual accuracy corrections.
	Final report sent to ETB.
	Response to review report submitted by ETB.
Outcomes	QQI considers findings of individual ETB review reports and organisational responses through governance processes.
	ETB review reports are published with organisational response.
Follow-Up	Preparation of an action plan by ETB.
	QQI seeks feedback from ETB on experience of review.
	One-year follow-up report by ETB to QQI. This (and any subsequent follow-up) may be integrated into annual reports to QQI.
	Continuous reporting and dialogue on follow-up through annual reporting and dialogue processes.

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