



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

**Sector
Specific**

Designated Awarding Bodies (DABs)

Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines

developed by QQI for Designated Awarding Bodies

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Sector Specific Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines

DEVELOPED BY QQI FOR DESIGNATED AWARDING BODIES
(UNIVERSITIES, DUBLIN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY AND THE
ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS IN IRELAND)

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1 INTRODUCTION

These statutory, sector-specific, quality assurance (QA) guidelines for designated awarding bodies supplement the Core Quality Assurance Guidelines which are applicable to **all** providers. While the Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines provide the majority of the quality assurance guidance required, these sector-specific guidelines add to the core by addressing the specific responsibilities of the designated awarding bodies as set out in the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012 (the 2012 Act). Designated awarding bodies should also refer to QQI's other topic-specific quality assurance guidelines as appropriate.

The designated awarding bodies are those bodies with the authority in law to make awards and to whom the 2012 Act applies. At present, these are the previously established universities, the National University of Ireland, the Dublin Institute of Technology and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland. Designated awarding bodies have responsibilities towards linked providers in the 2012 Act which are referenced in this set of guidelines.

1.1 What is the purpose of these guidelines?

These guidelines set out additional, statutory, quality assurance guidelines specific to designated awarding bodies. These additional QA guidelines address the responsibilities of designated awarding bodies in their capacity as:

- Autonomous, independent, awarding bodies, setting standards and making their own state awards and awards for linked providers¹;
- Designated awarding bodies operating in cooperation with QQI and the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), as defined within the 2012 Act;
- Designated awarding bodies with responsibilities for linked providers;
- “Relevant providers” as set out in the 2012 Act; and
- Experienced higher education institutions seeking to continuously improve and enhance their internal quality assurance system.

1.2 To whom do they apply?

These guidelines are applicable to designated awarding bodies i.e. bodies with the authority in law to make awards and to whom the 2012 Act applies.

¹ A linked provider is a provider that is not a designated awarding body, but enters into an arrangement with a designated awarding body under which arrangement the provider provides a programme of education and training that satisfies all or part of the prerequisites for an award of the designated awarding body.

2 SCOPE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCEDURES

National policy is that the provider-owned, quality assurance procedures of designated awarding bodies will be comprehensive. This means that such procedures will cover **all** education and training, research and related activities of the designated awarding body. This should be understood to encompass all education programmes regardless of whether or not these lead to awards recognised in the NFAQ or to awards (single and/or joint) of other awarding bodies or none. Procedures will also cover the approval, monitoring and review of effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures of linked providers.

In addition to (or by encompassing) regular periodic review of study programmes, designated awarding bodies should undertake quality reviews of academic, administrative and service departments and as appropriate in units such as schools, faculties and colleges. It may also be useful to undertake thematic reviews of institution-wide issues as part of the regular cycle of unit evaluation.

The explicit quality measures envisaged by the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, May 2015* (ESG) refer to design, approval, monitoring and periodic review of study programmes; supports and training for teaching staff and regular student feedback and complaints procedures. In addition, well-established mechanisms such as the external examiner system and institutional research and strategic planning functions can contribute significantly to quality.

Periodic quality review should be understood in the context of a range of other mechanisms in higher education institutions, with which they must interact and which they must support if they are to be fully effective. Integrated institutional approaches to quality improvement should be geared in such a way as to eliminate unnecessary duplication, reduce burden and, most importantly, promote synergies. Such approaches should yield benefits and opportunities for the institutions to test the effectiveness of their systems and procedures with a view to ongoing enhancement; identify and disseminate good practice; identify challenges and areas for improvement and how to address them; enhance the student experience; enhance strategic and other planning as appropriate.

3 EUROPEAN REFERENCES

Ireland's European commitments are derived from our membership of the European Union (EU) and our participation in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). These guidelines are underpinned by the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Designated awarding bodies will also have regard to any European standards, guidelines, directives, policies or political commitments adopted nationally. Examples of such European commitments include but are not limited to the *Lisbon Recognition Convention 1997*, the *ECTS Handbook 2015* and the *European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, October 2014*.

4 RESEARCH

The designated awarding body is responsible for organising an integrated system of quality assurance in relation to its research activities. These should build upon the peer review mechanisms widely employed in research funding and publication and incorporate relevant metrics. These should complement the specific procedures put in place to quality assure research education and training.

5 RESPONSIBILITIES OF AWARDING BODIES

The guidelines are applicable to designated awarding bodies as autonomous awarding bodies, responsible for their own programmes of education and training, research and related services and for any programmes offered by linked providers leading to awards made by the designated awarding body. Designated awarding bodies are required to have regard to these quality assurance guidelines when establishing, renewing and reviewing their quality assurance procedures and when approving and reviewing the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures of their linked providers.

5.1 Quality assurance of linked providers

Where a designated awarding body makes an award in respect of a programme offered by a linked provider, it must include in its own QA procedures to **approve, monitor** and **review** the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures of each of its linked providers.

Such procedures will cover:

- Approval of the quality assurance procedures of linked providers whose programme(s) leads to an award of the designated awarding body, having regard to QQI QA guidelines as set out below.
- Monitoring of programmes leading to awards of the designated awarding body.
- Arrangements to ensure that enrolled learners can complete programmes leading to similar awards in the event that the initial provider ceases to offer the programme(s) for whatever reason, including withdrawal of the awarding function by the awarding body. These requirements are for the protection of enrolled learners on linked provider programmes leading to awards of the designated awarding body. Those linked providers wishing to seek the International Education Mark in future will be required to have arrangements in place for the protection of enrolled learners that accord with the conditions set out in Section 65 of the 2012 Act.
- Review by the designated awarding body of the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures established and implemented by the linked provider under Section 37 of the 2012 Act. The review of a linked provider shall be carried out by the designated awarding body in accordance with the procedures for cyclical review established by QQI. Procedures should include the provision to send QQI a copy of the report of the review.
- The withdrawal by the designated awarding body of approval of a linked provider's quality assurance procedures under Section 39 of the 2012 Act. This will include procedures to forward notice of any such withdrawal to QQI.

- The appointment of an independent appeals person for the purposes of hearing an appeal under Section 39 of the 2012 Act.
- The hearing of an appeal under Section 39 of the 2012 Act.

Designated awarding bodies may choose to adopt the following guidelines for their linked providers, QQI *Sector Specific Quality Assurance Guidelines, Statutory QA Guidelines for Independent/Private Providers coming to QQI on a Voluntary Basis, April 2016*.

5.2 Approving the quality assurance procedures of linked providers

QQI, in fulfilling its statutory responsibilities to provide QA guidelines directly to the linked providers, has directed linked providers to have regard to the Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines.

When considering the QA procedures of linked providers, designated awarding bodies will formally ensure that the linked provider has had due regard to the following:

QQI quality assurance guidelines as follows:

- *Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines*
- *Sector Specific Guidelines for Independent and Private Providers (that seek QA approval from QQI or a designated awarding body on a voluntary basis)* as appropriate. These guidelines indicate the broad due diligence and risk assessment that must be carried out by the awarding body approving a provider's QA procedures. They focus on the capacity of the linked provider to adequately deliver programmes leading to awards in the NFQ; compliance with legal requirements, provider resources and provider governance
- Any other topic specific QA guidelines, as appropriate

Designated Awarding Body specific requirements such as:

- Policies, procedures and guidelines of the relevant designated awarding body
- Directions on the form and manner of the publication of quality assurance procedures approved by the Designated Awarding Body (Section 33 (3) of the 2012 Act)

Designated awarding bodies should apply due diligence and be aware of any reputational risk to themselves and the sector and/or national qualifications system associated with any prospective linked providers and also during ongoing monitoring and review of established linked providers.

The following is a summary of indicative areas that designated awarding bodies should consider when determining whether or not to make awards in respect of a programme(s) offered by a prospective linked provider or to continue making awards in respect of a programme(s) offered by an established linked provider:

1) Legal, reputation and compliance requirements

- Is the provider a legal entity, with education and training as a principal function? Is the legal entity a clearly identified legal person, having rights and responsibilities under law?
- Has the provider clearly specified its dependencies, collaborations, obligations, parent organisations, and subsidiaries?
- Has the provider declared any third-party relationships and partnerships?
- Does the provider comply with applicable regulations and legislation in all jurisdictions in which it operates?
- Is the provider in good standing in the qualifications systems and education and training systems in any jurisdictions in which it operates (or in which its parents or subsidiaries operate) or enrolls learners, or in which it has arrangements with awarding bodies, quality assurance agencies, qualifications authorities, ministries of education and training, professional bodies and regulators?

2) Resource, governance and structural requirements

- Is the provider stable and in good financial standing?
- Does the provider have a reasonable business case for sustainable provision?
- Does the provider have fit-for-purpose governance, management and decision-making structures?
- Does the provider have arrangements for providing required information to the designated awarding body?
- Does the provider have capacity to deliver education and training as demonstrated through experience and track record in providing education and training programmes?
- Does the provider have sufficient resources, as well as corporate, structural and internal quality assurance systems in place, to sustainably provide education and training programmes submitted for programme approval to the designated awarding body?

3) Programme development and provision requirements

- Has the provider demonstrated its ability to design, develop, provide and review programmes as appropriate and comply with the standard conditions for programme approval specified by the designated awarding body?
- Does the provider have a fit-for-purpose and stable complement of education and training staff?
- Does the provider have fit-for-purpose premises, facilities and resources?
- Does the provider have structures and resources to underpin fair and consistent assessment of learner achievement?
- Does the provider have arrangements for the protection of enrolled learners?

4) Significant changes to requirements

Has the provider notified the designated awarding body of any significant changes to the requirements set out in 1) to 3) above following implementation?

Designated awarding body procedures set out under Section 33 (2) of the 2012 Act, will have regard to the fact that it may:

- Approve the proposed procedures of a linked provider;
- Refuse to approve the proposed procedures but make recommendations; or
- Refuse to approve the procedures.

6 STANDARDS AND AWARDS

Designated awarding bodies are required to establish procedures to ensure that:

- Each award made, in so far as is reasonably practicable, is recognised within the NFQ, including those awards made on behalf of linked providers. QQI is responsible for the policies and criteria on which the NFQ is based.
- Learners enrolled on programmes leading to awards recognised within the NFQ acquire the standard of knowledge, skill or competence associated with the level of that award.
- Professional regulatory bodies and QQI are consulted with on the standards and quality assurance of programmes leading to qualifications in regulated occupations.

6.1 Procedures for certification

Designated awarding bodies should establish procedures for the certification of awards and the maintenance of learner and award records. These procedures should apply to all awards made by designated awarding bodies, including those made on behalf of linked providers. These procedures shall have regard to:

- Award level, award class and type in the NFQ, including references to the total credit value of the award.
- Other such references that facilitate the implementation of the NFQ, such as the European Diploma Supplement.



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