

# Programme Review Manual

A Guide for Providers on HET Programme Review and Revalidation

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**QQI**

Quality and Qualifications Ireland  
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

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## 1 Introduction

**Programme review** is a provider-owned quality assurance procedure that addresses a single programme or group of related programmes. Its purpose is to:

1. Identify strengths in the programme as implemented since it's last validation by QQI
2. Identify areas for improvement which can be incorporated into a new version of the programme to be put forward for revalidation by QQI
3. Achieve independent backing for the findings of the review and for the proposed new version of the programme

This manual is specifically for those providers who intend to use their programme review process to help prepare for **revalidation** (see section 1.2). It

- (1) sets out the phases of programme review and revalidation process (section 1.5).
- (2) highlights the interactions with QQI; and
- (3) provides supporting guidance and templates.

## 1.1 Programme review in general

The following panel is an extract from section 3.3 of QQI's *Core Statutory Quality Assurance (QA) Guidelines* (pp 11-12). It implicitly defines programme review in the most general sense.

### **Programme monitoring and review**

Programme delivery is monitored in a way which allows for the identification of needs and modification and adjustment of the programme and the delivery method as appropriate. Ongoing monitoring and periodic review of a programme is used as an opportunity to evaluate that programme with the benefit of the experience of programme delivery incorporating feedback from staff and learners. Such evidence is reflected in learner enrolment and programme completion rate data; learner, teacher, trainer, employer and/or industry feedback and evaluations of the programme. Programme monitoring and review is taken as an opportunity to:

- ensure that the programme remains appropriate, and to create a supportive and effective learning environment
- ensure that the programme achieves the objectives set for it and responds to the needs of learners and the changing needs of society
- review the learner workload
- review learner progression and completion rates
- review the effectiveness of procedures for the assessment of learners
- inform updates of the programme content; delivery modes; teaching and learning methods; learning supports and resources; and information provided to learners
- update third party, industry or other stakeholders relevant to the programme(s)
- review quality assurance arrangements that are specific to that programme

Regular programme monitoring provides information for periodic programme review. The information collected is analysed and the programme adapted to ensure it is up to date. Revised programme specifications are published.

## 1.2 Revalidation

Revalidation of a programme of education and training is a formal QQI determination. It requires an application for revalidation by an eligible provider. Revalidation follows a **programme review** and is **distinct** from it. The programme review is a provider-owned process whereas revalidation is a QQI-owned process.

Revalidation is a type of validation (distinguished by the context) and is conducted with the same level of rigour as the validation of a new programme. Revalidation, and how to apply for it, are addressed in detail in section 13 of *“Core policies and criteria for the validation by QQI of programmes of education and training”* (pp 25-27). Similarly, to validation, QQI will publish the Independent Evaluation Report produced in phase 3 (9) (see page 7 below).

## 1.3 Limitations on what can be validated in the context of a programme review

In the context of a programme review, a programme may be modified significantly.

For example, it may be modified to include new minor awards, new exit awards<sup>1</sup> (includes new major and minor exit awards only), new electives, new locations for provision and so forth. The modified programme would have to be validated before enrolling learners and the QQI ‘revalidation’

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<sup>1</sup> Note that an exit award programme cannot be offered independently unless validated for that purpose.

process may be used for that purpose as described section 13 of “*Core policies and criteria for the validation by QQI of programmes of education and training*” (pp 25-27) and this manual.

A programme review might identify a requirement for a new programme leading to a QQI award as distinct from a modification to an existing one. In that case a new programme validation application must be made to QQI separately.

Fees applicable for the review and continuing validation of a programme are outlined in the current [QQI Schedule of Fees](#). Note that if new minor awards are validated through the programme review process, the normal fee for the validation of a new minor award programme will apply.

#### 1.4 The objectives of a programme review

The objectives of a programme review are to evaluate the programme as implemented in light of the provider’s experience of providing the programme over the previous five years with a view to determining:

- (1) What has been learned about the programme, as an evolving process (by which learners acquire knowledge, skill and competence), from the experience of providing it for the past five or so years?
- (2) What can be concluded from a quantitative analysis of admission data, attrition rates by stage, completion rates and grades achieved by module, stage and overall?
- (3) What reputation do the programme and provider have with stakeholders (learners, staff, funding agencies, regulatory bodies, professional bodies, communities of practice, employers, other education and training providers) and in particular what views do the stakeholders have about the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats concerning the programme’s history and its future?
- (4) What challenges and opportunities are likely to arise in the next five years and what modifications to the programme are required in light of these?
- (5) Whether the programme in light of its stated objectives and intended learning outcomes demonstrably addresses explicit learning needs of target learners and society?
- (6) What other modifications need to be made to the programme and its awards to improve or reorient it?
- (7) Whether the programme (modified or unmodified) meets the current QQI validation criteria (and sub-criteria) or, if not, what modifications need to be made to the programme to meet the current criteria?
- (8) Whether the provider continues to have the capacity and capability to provide the programme as planned (considering, for example, historical and projected enrolment numbers and profile and availability and adequacy of physical, financial and human resources) without risk of compromising educational standards or quality of provision in light of its other commitments (i.e. competing demands) and strategy?
- (9) What is the justification (or otherwise) for the provider continuing to offer the programme (modified or unmodified)?
- (10) What changes need to be made to related policies, criteria and procedures (including QA procedures)?

## 1.5 From programme review to applying to QQI for revalidation

The phases of the process are outlined here and elaborated in subsequent sections. The main flows are illustrated in a diagram at the end of this section.

### **Phase 1: Programme Review and Revision**

The provider should:

- 1.1 Plan the process so that programmes can be revalidated in time for the next planned intake (enrolment of new learners) after the last intake for which the programme is validated (allow about one year for the process to give time for a thorough review);
- 1.2 Consult QQI in writing on the terms of reference for the Programme Review;
- 1.3 Agree in writing **Terms of Reference** (ToR) with QQI. The ToR should include a broad outline of the scope of the review and a profile of the independent panel to be used. The Template ToR is available in Section 5.1.
- 1.4 Conduct a **Provider's Programme Review** (while managed by the provider, this will necessarily involve internal and external stakeholders)
- 1.5 Document the findings of the review in a **Provider's Programme Review Report** using the [QQI template](#) provided.
- 1.6 Revise the current programme(s) to address any shortcomings identified in the review while retaining those aspects which are working well.
- 1.7 Document the revised programmes using the [QQI Programme Descriptor template](#)
- 1.8 Document a self-evaluation of the revised programme(s) against the validation criteria.
- 1.9 Issue the documentation to the independent panel.

### **Phase 2: External evaluation and reporting**

The provider should:

- 2.1 Arrange for an **Independent Programme Review** (this will include a document review and site visit by an agreed independent panel to evaluate the Provider's Programme Review report and the documented programmes intended to be put forward for revalidation).
- 2.2 Request the panel to document their findings of both the review and the revised programmes in a combined document containing the **Independent Programme Review Report** and the **Independent Evaluation Report**. A [template](#) for this document is provided.
- 2.3 Produce a **Formal Response** to the panel reports. In doing this the provider should address any recommendations and / or conditions specified by the independent panel, to finalise and document the programmes to be presented for revalidation.
- 2.4 Send the **Formal Response** to the independent panel for consideration. The response should indicate clearly how the Programme Descriptor(s) has been updated.
- 2.5 Obtain **confirmation/signoff from the independent panel** that the changes to the programme(s) are to the satisfaction of the panel.

### **Phase 3: Revalidation**

The provider should

- 3.1 Apply on QHub to QQI for re-validation of the current programme(s) and upload the following documents.
- Programme Descriptor<sup>2</sup>
  - Self-evaluation Report
  - Evidence of PEL arrangements
  - Provider's Programme Review Report
  - Independent Programme Review Report and Independent Evaluation Report <sup>3</sup>
  - Provider's formal response to the independent panel's findings.
  - Confirmation from Panel Chair of panel's acceptance of any changes made to programme(s) in response to conditions and recommendations made by the panel
  - Fee Cover Note as per Fee Schedule

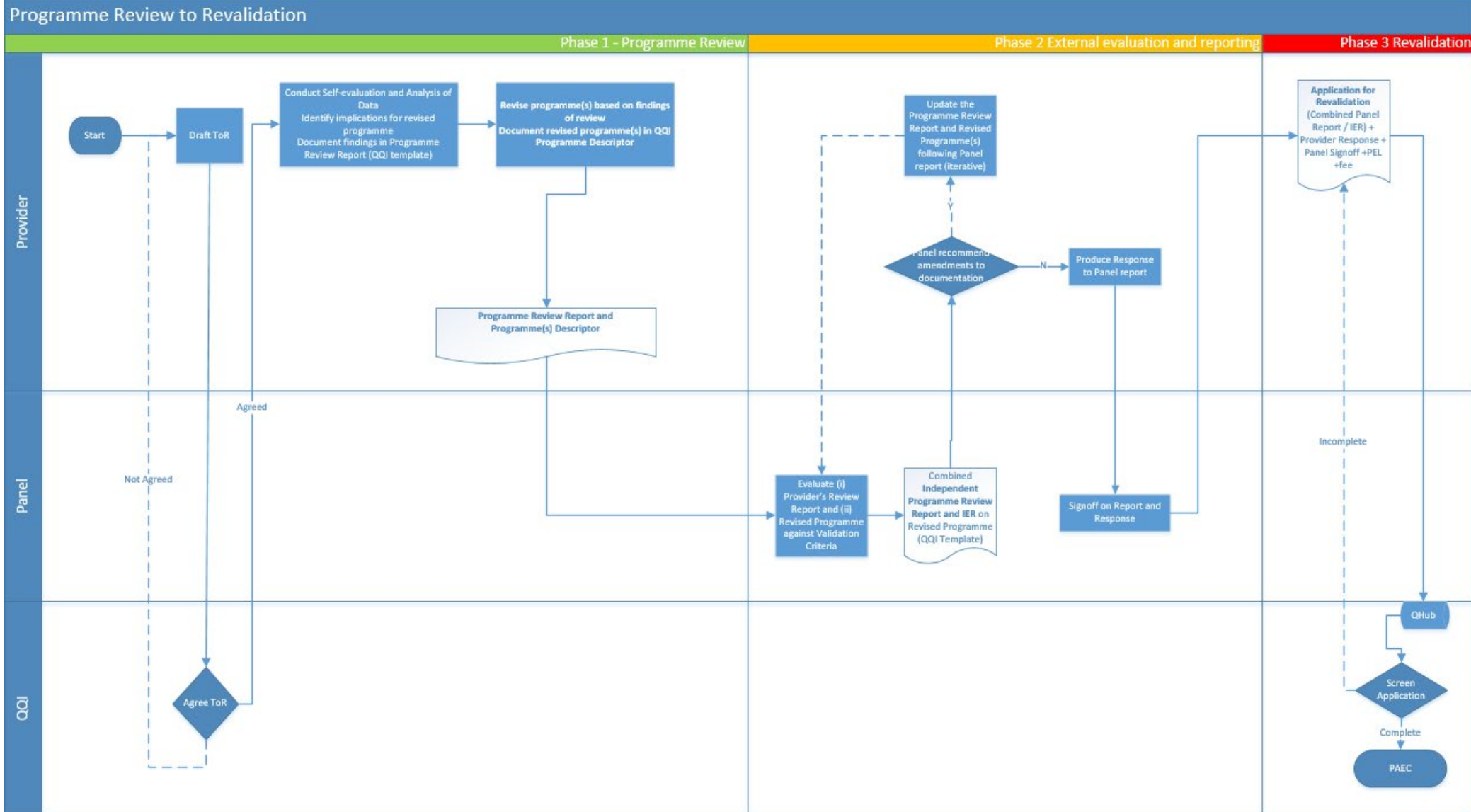
The remainder of the revalidation process is handled by QQI in accordance with [Core Policies and Criteria for the Validation by QQI of Programmes of Education and Training.](#)

The flowchart below summarises the process phases.

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<sup>2</sup> This can incorporate embedded programmes where appropriate

<sup>3</sup> can be a combined document





## 2 Managing the programme review

This section provides some methodological pointers.

### 2.1 Planning

A programme review is a complicated process that requires systematic planning for maximal effectiveness. The planning needs to involve people who are familiar with the programme, its operating context, the discipline area and the provider's overall strategy.

Planning should result in written terms of reference for the programme review. The terms of reference should

- (1) identify the programme(s) to be reviewed;
- (2) set out the review leader and team;
- (3) set out the timetable for the stages of the review up to the application for revalidation;
- (4) specify detailed objectives, strategies and plans for:
  - a. the Provider' Programme Review; this should be consistent with the approach set out in section 1 and
  - b. the Independent Programme Review;
- (5) set out when, how and by whom the necessary programme documentation versions, reports and responses will be prepared and approved;
- (6) identify the panel that will conduct the Independent Programme Review and (subject to QQI agreement) the Independent Evaluation Report.

Any programme review should ask whether a programme should continue to be provided. Therefore, a programme review should always be planned to be capable of making and defending a recommendation to cease providing the programme in case this may prove necessary.

The review process should be designed to ensure that conclusions and recommendations are always based on valid, reliable evidence including quantitative evidence.

### 2.2 Consulting, or agreeing Terms of Reference, with QQI

QQI should be consulted (in writing) on and agree to the Terms of Reference for the Programme Review.

The template for the Terms of Reference follows below in Section 5.1.

### 2.3 Conducting the programme review and preparing Provider's Programme Review Report

The *provider's* programme review is a thorough self-evaluation of the programme as it has been implemented since last validation. It's an opportunity to identify what has worked and what hasn't using actual data and feedback from all stakeholders. It involves a significant amount of work on behalf of the provider and is a critical element of provider quality assurance.

A [template](#) for the review report gives guidance as to what needs to be reviewed and who needs to be involved.

## 2.4 Organising the Independent Programme Review Report

The *Independent Programme Review Report* must be prepared by a group of evaluators (the panel) who are completely independent of the provider.

Evaluators must be objective and independent of the programme and its providers e.g. free of conflicting interests. If a provider intends to use the same panel for the programme review and revalidation phases of the process, each proposed panel member must complete and submit the QQI *Considerations for independent evaluators in QQI Validation Processes (including conflicts of interest matters)* and the QQI expert details form. Providers should notify panel members of this requirement in advance. By completing the QQI expert details form, panel members' contact details and affiliation will be recorded and stored on QQI's internal database.

Any related interests must be declared in the independent programme review report and the Independent Evaluation Report.

Independent evaluators must be competent to make a recommendation on whether or not the programme should be validated. Competence means the capacity to make judgements against the applicable QQI validation criteria. Specifically, a panel must be selected to have the competence to justify their recommendation whatever it may be.

Typically, evaluation groups (panels) will have expertise in the programme's discipline area and in generic areas including pedagogy, assessment, quality assurance and all the other areas indicated by QQI's validation criteria and the objectives of the programme review.

The panel should

- be gender balanced (40% of each gender)
- include a chairperson (who has attended a relevant QQI training event),
- Include a learner representative (who must be a current learner enrolled on a programme and be independent of the provider).
- Include a subject matter expert from the university sector to ensure diversity in panels for programmes at level 7 or above in the National Framework of Qualification
- Include an international subject matter expert for programmes at Level 9 in the NFQ
- include a secretary, who will draft the report in consultation with the panel.

The provider must not be involved in the drafting of the Independent Programme Review Report. The QQI report writing style guide should be forwarded to all secretaries (Current versions of the QQI Independent Evaluation Report template and QQI report writing style guide should be sought from QQI).

During this stage the panel should:

- (1) Individually evaluate the effectiveness of the Provider's Programme Review considering the Provider's Programme Review Report and the programme documentation and evaluate the programme and any proposed modifications against QQI's validation criteria;
- (2) Meet (virtually or otherwise) in advance of the site visit to review findings and plan the site visit.
- (3) Agree an agenda for the site visit identifying a list of topics that would benefit from discussion with stakeholders e.g. the provider's chief executive (or equivalent) and other of its leaders, its teaching staff, learners (current and, if possible, former learners), administrative staff, employers and any other category of internal and external stakeholders;

- (4) Conduct the site visit as per the agenda
- (5) Prepare a draft Independent Programme Review Report based on agreed findings in respect of the Provider's Programme Review Report.
- (6) Prepare a draft Independent Evaluation Report based on agreed findings in respect of revised programme(s) to be submitted for revalidation.
- (7) Supply the draft reports to the provider for factual accuracy checking before finalisation.
- (8) Finalise the reports and send to the provider.

### 3 Provider's response and implementation plan and panel's final response

The provider's academic committee<sup>4</sup> or equivalent should consider the Independent Programme Review Report and Independent Evaluation Reports and prepare a formal response and implementation plan.

The provider's response and implementation plan should be sent, along with the modified programme documentation, to the (independent) panel for its response.

The provider should request a signoff from the panel chair to confirm the panel's satisfaction that its findings on the programme review and the revised programmes have been taken on board by the provider, i.e. any conditions of validation set out by the panel in the IER have been satisfactorily met.

**Note that all necessary modifications to the programme should be made before it is presented for revalidation.**

### 4 Applying for Revalidation

The process for revalidation is set out in Section 13 of [Core Policies and Criteria for the Validation by QQI of Programmes of Education and Training](#)

All applications for revalidation must be made through QHub and should contain all the elements listed on Page 7 above.

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<sup>4</sup> This is the academic decision-making committee with the highest authority within the provider's organisation.

## 5 Templates

### 5.1 Terms of Reference for a Programme Review (Phase 1)

#### 1. The objectives and approach to the programme review

*The review objectives, approach and reporting should accord with QQI's Programme Review Manual 2022. (The 10 objectives of a programme review in section 1.4 should be listed here. A brief description of how these objectives will be met, along with the approach that will be used to do so, should be included)*

#### 2. Programme(s) to be reviewed

*Complete the following table for each programme to be reviewed. Please provide a brief rationale for any proposed modifications or special conditions.*

<b>Programme code</b>	
<b>Programme title</b>	
<b>ISCED code</b>	
<b>Proposed modifications for consideration</b>	
<b>Professional considerations</b>	
<b>Special considerations</b>	
<b>Last enrolment date (intake) for which the programme is validated</b>	
<b>To be discontinued (Yes/No)</b>	

#### Membership of the provider's review team

*Please provide a brief description of each member's role in the programme review process.*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Programme review function</b>	<b>Job title with the provider</b>

## Independent Panel

The independent panel for the review of a single programme should include a

- Chairperson (who must have been trained by QQI)
- Secretary
- Two or more subject matter experts
- Employer representative
- Learner representative

If more than one programme is being reviewed, the membership of the panel needs to be expanded. If the programme(s) is at Level 9 on the NFQ, an international subject matter expert should be included. See section 2.4 of the Programme Review Manual.

The secretary for the independent panel is responsible for drafting the report, checking its factual accuracy with the provider, and agreeing it with the chairperson. The secretary is a member of the panel and must be independent of the provider.

### Scope of the independent panel (tick as appropriate)

The provider proposes that the panel be used to evaluate <u>both</u> the programme review and the application for revalidation.	
The provider proposes that the panel be used to evaluate the programme review only.	

## Membership of the independent panel

Please include a brief rationale on the suitability of each proposed panel member.

Name	Programme review function e.g. Chair, Secretary, SME etc	Profile (e.g. expertise, experience)

## External stakeholders to be consulted

List the stakeholders to be consulted and outline how they will be consulted.

## Information sources to be used

The information sources to be used should include provider-produced sources, QQI sources and external sources. For example, provider sources might include internal policy documentation, feedback surveys, retention data and such like. QQI sources will include the relevant policies and award standards and such like. Other sources might include professional body and regulatory documentation, and analysis or research publications relevant to the programme and its operating context.

**Proposed timeline from programme review through to application for revalidation**

Milestone	For Completion by
Agree Terms of Reference with QQI	
Provider's Programme Review Report (Finalised)	
Site visit by Independent Panel	
Independent Programme Review Report (Finalised)	
Provider's Evaluation Report (Finalised)	
Application for revalidation	

## 5.2 Template for the Provider's Programme Review Report (Phase 1)

Providers who will be applying for revalidation following a programme review will need to document the programme comprehensively and conduct a systematic and detailed evaluation of the programme against the current QQI validation criteria.

The table of contents below gives a clear indication of what should be reviewed and reported on.

### **Executive Summary**

### **Introduction**

### **Programme Review Process**

### **Overall Findings and Recommendations**

### **Main Programme Changes being proposed following Review**

#### **Section 1 Context and Terms of Reference for the Programme Review**

#### **Section 2 Provider Information and Programme Context**

2.1 Provider details

2.2 Department details *(if applicable, may not apply to smaller providers)*

2.3 Programme details

#### **Section 3 Baseline qualitative and quantitative information**

3.1 Programme Overview

3.1.1 Applications for programme

3.1.2 Enrolment on Programme

3.1.3 Attrition, transfer, progression and completion on Programme

3.1.4 Grades / Awards Classification

3.1.5 Graduate Destinations

3.2 Programme Delivery & Teaching and Learning Strategies

3.2.1 Physical facilities and resources required for the delivery of the programme

3.2.2 Timetabling of contact hours

3.2.3 Learner workload by module and stage

3.2.4 Attendance

3.2.5 Teacher to Learner Ratios

3.2.5 Teaching and learning strategies

3.2.6 Learning Outcomes achieved

3.2.7 Assessment strategies

3.2.8 Application of community of practice learning

3.2.9 Programme documentation

#### **Section 4 Evaluation of the programme by stakeholders**

4.1 Evaluation by current learners and graduates of the programme

4.2 Evaluation of the programme by staff

4.3 Evaluation of the programme by external stakeholders

4.4 External examiner feedback

#### **Section 5 Programme Quality Assurance**

5.1 Complaints, appeals and commendations

5.2 Quality Assurance Systems and Processes

#### **Section 6 Summary Analysis of the programme considering the findings**

#### **Section 7 Revision of the programme**

### 5.3 Template for Documenting the Programme to be Revalidated (Phase 1)

A [template](#) is provided for documenting a programme to be submitted for revalidation. It can incorporate an embedded programme(s) where necessary.

### 5.4 Template for the Independent Programme Review Report (Phase 2)

The Independent Programme Review Report [template](#) follows the same section structure as the provider's review report. In each section, the panel is asked to provide an overall commentary on the effectiveness of the provider's review of this aspect of the programme and to record any recommendations it has relevant to that section.

### 5.5 Template for the Independent Evaluation Report (IER) (Phase 2)

The [template](#) to be used for the IER, appended to the Independent Programme Review Report template, is the same as that used for reporting an evaluation of a new programme.

## 6 References

The ACQUIN *Guidelines for Programme Accreditation Procedures* 2015<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.acquin.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/ACQUIN-Guidelines-Programme-Accreditation.pdf>.