QQI
Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

QUALITY IN THE IRISH PRIVATE AND INDEPENDENT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS 2021

QQI Insights

Table of Contents

Table of Figures ii

Mapping of ESG (2015) to QQI QA Guidelines (QAG) iii

Foreword 1

Background and Context: The Annual Quality Report 2

Section 1: Strategic Updates: QA Implementation and Related Developments 5

1.1 Contextual Factors Impacting on QA 5

1.2 Other Strategic Updates 10

1.3 Governance and Management of Quality 12

Section 2: IQA System Enhancement and Impacts 16

2.1 Academic Integrity 16

2.2 Teaching, Learning and Assessment 17

2.3 The Learner Experience 19

Section 3: QA Improvement and Enhancement Plans 29

Section 4: Conclusions 30

Table of Figures

Figure 1: List of HEIs that submitted AQRs in 2021 3
Figure 2: Word cloud comprising common words arising in the AQRs 4
Figure 3: Reengagement Action Plan 2020/21 for NCI 6
Figure 4: Impact of Reengagement at Setanta College 7
Figure 5: Extract from AQR submitted by St Nicholas Montessori College Ireland 8
Figure 6: Lessons Learned from COVID-19 at ICHAS 9
Figure 7: Devolution of responsibility at Griffith College 10
Figure 8: An example of an approach to governance of QA at DBS 13
Figure 9: CTC Gap Analysis prior to Reengagement 15
Figure 10: Extract from Dorset College, AQR 2021 (p42) 17
Figure 11: Digital Learner Architecture Project at Hibernia College 19
Figure 12: Screenshot from Carlow College Mailchimp Learner Communication Platform 20
Figure 13: Enhanced Staff and Student Communications at ICD 21
Figure 14: Student Success Classes at CCT 22
Figure 15: QA Enhancements for Online Learning at OTC 23
Figure 16: Example of staff development activity held at Dorset College 24
Figure 17: External Engagement at Griffith College 26
Figure 18: Examples of civic engagement and public information at IICP 27
Figure 19: Monitoring and review framework at SQT 28

Mapping of ESG (2015) to QQI 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				
8.0 – Monitoring and Periodic Review			1.9	On-going Monitoring and Periodic Review of Programmes
5.0 – Staff Recruitment, Development and Support	2.5	Teaching and Learning	1.3	Student-centred Teaching, Learning and Assessment
	2.6	Assessment of Learners		
2.3 – Teaching, Learning and Assessment	2.5	Teaching and Learning	1.3	Student-centred Teaching, Learning and Assessment
	2.6	Assessment of Learners		
3.0 – Learner Resources and Supports	2.7	Supports for learners	1.6	Learning Resources and Student Support
6.0 – Information and Data Management	2.8	Information and Data Management	1.7	Information Management
7.0 – Public Information and Communication	2.9	Public Information and Communication	1.8	Public Information
2.0 – Programme Delivery and Development	2.10	Other Parties Involved in Education and Training	1.9	On-going Monitoring and Periodic Review of Programmes
8.0 – Monitoring and Periodic Review				
9.0 – Details of Arrangements with Third Parties			1.2	Design and Approval of Programmes
2.0 – Programme Development and Delivery	2.11	Self-evaluation, Monitoring and Review	1.9	On-going Monitoring and Periodic Review of Programmes
8.0 – Monitoring and Periodic Review			1.10	Cyclical External Quality Assurance
4.0 – QA of Research Activities and Programmes	QAG for Providers of Research Degree Programmes			

Quality in the Irish Private and Independent Higher Education Institutions

This is the first synthesis report of quality assurance and quality enhancement within Irish private and independent higher education institutions to be published by QQI. It is based on the first phase of Annual Quality Reports submitted by 17 private and independent higher education institutions in 2021.

Foreword

This report is the first synthesis by QQI of the Annual Institutional Quality Reports (AQRs) of Irish private and independent Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The synthesis report provides an overview of the main topics and themes arising across the first suite of AQRs submitted in 2021 by 17 of the private and independent HEIs that offer QQI awards.

The AQR is a crucial element of QQI's quality assurance framework of engagement with and monitoring of higher education institutions. Submitted and published annually, it provides documentary evidence of the establishment, implementation and monitoring of a provider's internal quality assurance system consistent with QQI guidelines and requirements.

The publication of this synthesis report is a key milestone for the private and independent HEI sector, affirming compliance and adherence to QQI statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines and providing evidence of sector-wide commitment to quality assurance and its enhancement across these 17 institutions.

This synthesis report provides an overview of the main topics and themes arising across the quality reports submitted by the 17 institutions, including institutional progress in implementing required quality assurance changes and enhancements arising from the QQI reengagement process, and the impact of COVID-19 on teaching, learning and assessment and the institutional response to these challenges.

This report provides evidence of a breadth of activities illustrating the strategic commitment of the private and independent higher education sector to the quality assurance and quality enhancement of its teaching, learning and assessment activities. Within the challenging context of COVID-19, the learned-centred approach and focus of the institutions on supporting their learners was evident across the institutions.

This synthesis report is directed at the private and independent higher education institutions - it is an important mechanism for disseminating good practice in quality assurance and quality enhancement and supporting a culture of continuous improvement in the sector. It will also be of interest to other national and international stakeholders and contributes to enhancing public trust and confidence in the quality and integrity of education and training in the private and independent higher education sector.

Dr Padraig 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 (HEI). 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.

The AQRs are published on QQI's website and provide transparency on, and enhance public confidence in, 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 theme identified by QQI for this reporting period was: IQA Response to Emergency Situations/Covid-19 Pandemic**.** A collection of the unabridged case studies is published separately on QQI's website.

This is the first synthesis report of quality assurance and quality enhancement within the private and independent HEIs to be published by QQI. It is based on the first phase of AQRs submitted by 17 private and independent HEIs in 2021 in respect of the preceding academic year. These HEIs had their quality assurance procedures approved by QQI through the reengagement process[1], and offer programmes that are validated by QQI. Many of these providers also offer programmes leading to awards of other awarding and professional bodies.

This synthesis report is a qualitative analysis of quality assurance developments and enhancements within Irish private higher education institutions as reported on by the HEIs in their AQRs. Themes were identified using qualitative analysis software[2], with the aim of highlighting and disseminating good practice and identifying key areas of focus for the private independent higher education sector.

QQI acknowledges the challenging context and background against which the 2021 AQRs were compiled and submitted. During and beyond the reporting period, HEIs were impacted by public health restrictions imposed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This is, not surprisingly, reflected as a core theme within the reports.

1 Reengagement is a one-off process which was developed to enable existing private and independent providers to have their QA procedures (previously agreed with antecedent awards councils) evaluated and approved by QQI, in accordance with the 2012 Act. Reengagement process for independent and private providers (www.qqi.ie).

2 MAXQDA

This synthesis report is based on the Annual Quality Reports submitted by the following private and independent HEIs. Between them, these 17 HEIs represent 96% of QQI major awards made in the higher education sector during the period January to December 2021.

No.	Institution
1	Carlow College, St Patrick's
2	College of Computing and Technology (CCT) College
3	Children's Therapy Centre (CTC)
4	Dorset College
5	Dublin Business School (DBS)
6	Galway Business School (GBS)
7	Griffith College
8	Hibernia College
9	Institute of Business and Technology (IBAT) College, Dublin
10	International College Dublin (ICD) Business School
11	Irish College of Humanities and Applied Sciences (ICHAS)
12	Institute of Integrative Counselling and Psychotherapy (IICP) College
13	National College of Ireland (NCI)
14	Opening Training College (OTC)
15	Setanta College
16	SQT Training
17	St Nicholas Montessori College Ireland (SNMCI)

Figure 1: List of HEIs that submitted AQRs in 2021

Figure 2: Word cloud comprising common words arising in the AQRs

Section 1: Strategic Updates: QA Implemen tation and Related Developments

1.1 Contextual Factors Impacting on QA

This synthesis report is based on the first set of AQRs submitted by private and independent HEIs following their successful reengagement with QQI. The institutions reported on a range of QA implementation developments and enhancements across a number of thematic areas. Throughout the AQRs, two universal themes are identified as having overwhelmingly impacted strategically and operationally on QA implementation, development, and enhancements in the private independent HEIs during the reporting period, namely:

(i) Reengagement with QQI

(ii) Modifications in response to Covid-19

1.1.1 Reengagement

The strategic impact of the Reengagement Process with QQI is a common theme reflected in all 17 AQRs submitted. The HEIs reported on the positive impact of reengagement in strengthening internal quality assurance (IQA) systems, specifically in relation to the governance and management of quality, and in enhancing the integrity of academic decision-making structures and processes.

Strategic updates on QA implementation and developments related largely to the impact of the reengagement process on the HEIs' IQA systems, governance, management / staff structures and policies and procedures.

The commitment of the private HEIs to quality assurance, and to the enhancement and improvement of their IQA systems, is evidenced by changes and improvements made both in preparation for, and in response to, reengagement. The following activities are reflected across the 17 AQRs:

- changes to, and enhancement of, processes for governance of quality;
- enhanced representation of, and engagement with, learners;
- review and benchmarking of QA policies and procedures; and
- the creation of new leadership roles and recruitment of new staff to support quality and the learner experience.

HEIs provided updates on progress made in respect of both strategic and operational actions and impacts arising from the reengagement process. This is reflected in many of the themes highlighted in this report.

QQI RE-ENGAGEMENT ACTION PLAN 2019-2020 Progress Report		
QQI Report Advice	**Actions and Timelines to implementation**	
Theme	**Actions Proposed**	**Progress Update**
Academic Governance	A Quality Improvement and Effectiveness Plan (QIEP) 2020-2024 to be launched following Executive Team approval.	In Progress. Reprofiled for launch in next reporting period due to COVID-19 prioritisation
	Academic Council (AC) self-assessment undertaken and AC Terms of Reference/Membership refreshed in advance of a wider refresh of the NCI academic governance structure.	Completed
	Academic governance refresh process completed, undertaken through co-design approach with staff and students.	In Progress. Reprofiled for launch in next reporting period due to COVID-19 prioritisation
	Renew NCI's subscription to the National Student Engagement Programme NStEP) and co-deliver NCI Class Rep Training with the Students' Union 2019/2020.	Completed
	Student Voice structures reviewed and refreshed through a co-design process with staff and student representatives.	In Progress. Reprofiled for launch in next reporting period due to COVID-19 prioritisation
	College data and reporting systems reviewed and refreshed to enhance data accuracy, completeness, accessibility and utilisation within decision-making at a programme and institutional level.	In Progress. Reprofiled for launch in next reporting period due to COVID-19 prioritisation
Programme Management Lifecycle	Develop and launch a new Programme Management Lifecycle (PML) structure to ensure all NCI programmes are alignment with institutional strategic objectives, and can evidence financial viability, sustainability, relevance and responsiveness to stakeholder needs.	In Progress. Reprofiled for launch in next reporting period overseen by new Executive Sub-Group
	Refresh and relaunch the NCI annual programme monitoring structure to strengthen evidence of programme health, relevance, quality and impact. The outcomes of which will be analysed annually at an institutional level and inform Academic Council and Executive decision making and investments.	
	Review of Assessment and Examination Policies and Procedures completed by a working group of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee and outcomes implemented thereafter.	
Compliance	New Regulatory Framework to be designed and launched to increase awareness and understanding of compliance obligations on staff and students alongside minimise risks.	In Progress. Reprofiled for launch in next reporting period due to COVID-19 prioritisation
	NCI staff recruitment policies and procedures to be regularly reviewed (at least annually) to ensure continued compliance with Garda vetting regulations.	Completed
Collaborations	Establish and maintain a collaborative partnership register that includes a copy of each partnership contract.	In Progress. Reprofiled for launch in next reporting period due to COVID-19 prioritisation
	Collaborative Partnership Guides prepared and published for use by internal and external stakeholders.	

Figure 3: Reengagement Action Plan 2020/21 for NCI

Impact of Reengagement at Setanta College

Following the Q.Q.I. re engagement process of 2019 the College has updated its Governance structures.

The College has taken steps to redesign the governance structure and has now put in place a Governing Board whose membership profile now reflects a high ratio of independent members. Further, a clear separation of commercial and academic decision is now in place. The College has reviewed the reporting lines within the various units and individual roles of the College. These have been amended now in the updated Q.A. manual to reflect clarity regarding details of membership, quorum, terms of reference and reporting lines within all units of governance.

Following programmatic review in 2020 the college has since December 2020 began to offer the following additional programmes:

- Certificate in Advanced Personal Training
- Certificate in Youth Athletic Development
- Certificate in Health and Wellness

The addition of these programmes has allowed the College to diversify its offering of programmes and satisfy a market demand for shorter more focused programmes in the field of Strength and Conditioning, Personal Training and Health and Wellbeing

The upskilling and development of staff has improved over the last year with the addition of focused training on assessment and feedback. This has had a positive effect on learner engagement and learning throughout the programmes.

The College has extensively amended its Q.A. according to the panel's report the sections which relate to assessment. The College has ensured that within the area of Assessment that roles and responsibilities are documented.

Figure 4: Impact of Reengagement at Setanta College

1.1.2 Covid-19

The second ubiquitous theme arising is the impact of Covid-19 and the resulting shift for institutions, their learners, and staff to online learning.[3]

Although some HEIs had already established IQA infrastructures to support blended learning, the pivot to fully online learning still presented significant and unprecedented challenges to all of the HEIs' IQA systems. This resulted in adaptations to governance, QA policies and procedures, arrangements for teaching, learning, and assessment, and related support and development activities for both staff and learners.

HEIs reported on processes established for developing and approving contingency plans, managing and mitigating risks, and ensuring the maintenance of academic integrity. There is a strong culture of supporting learners and staff, and a commitment to the quality of teaching, learning and assessment activities and outcomes evident in the AQRs. This can be seen through the range of enhancement initiatives, activities and impact evaluation undertaken by the HEIs. HEIs also reported on accelerated development in some areas as a result of Covid-19, for example in respect of blended and online learning.

> In reality COVID 19 precipitated....
>
> a) 'this-generation' of programmes and skill-sets, being catapulted into a 'next-generation' environment and
>
> b) the need to immediately address the logistical, resource and operational implications of online learning, while at the same time dealing with an unprecedented amount of additional social, health and well-being issues for all members of the learning community; staff and learners
>
> Our 'learning ecosystem' shifted its boundaries, from a focus on what happens 'on-campus', both in and out of class, to additional 'off-campus in-class', and 'off campus out-of-class' considerations.

Figure 5: Extract from AQR submitted by St Nicholas Montessori College Ireland

3 The impact of Covid-19 modifications to teaching, learning and assessment within the private independent higher education sector has been researched and reported on by QQI, and the outcomes and findings are available in The Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education. This report provides detailed analysis of adaptations made by institutions to their QA governance, policies and procedures, assessment, teaching and learning activities, and programmes, as well as the contingency plans approved by QQI. Further detail in respect of these areas is provided in the institutions' individual AQR submissions.

Lessons Learned from COVID-19 at ICHAS

At a micro level and within the College's micro system, there have also been some key lessons. Many reflect those identified at the macro level. As a small College, we have been fortunate enough to have had systems in place which facilitated transformative processes. We have had a College Community, which has proven remarkably adaptable. As a college, we have survived and thus proven resilient and we look forward in hope.

From a learning perspective, the following highlight some of the specific learnings encountered.

i. The College was fortunate to have had processes approved which enabled the use of synchronous teaching methods as well as online assessment methods and/or assessment submission. This facility ensured continuity of education – albeit in a modified from what either students or the College anticipated.

ii. The QAE structures were both sufficiently robust but also adaptable to be able to support extraordinary and unusual as well as arguably unpredictable forced changes.

iii. There was a range of collegial support available from both PSRB's as well as regulatory agencies, including QQI which proved adaptable and supportive.

iv. The QAE developed for Blended Learning Programmes provided lessons that should support online delivery and that while there is a clear distinction drawn by ENQA (2018) between Online Courses and Online Programme delivery, there are also significant areas of overlap and commonality, where one could inform the development of the other.

v. Faculty and students are more adaptable than anticipated and accommodate changes more willingly than perhaps some might have expected.

vi. The College had a robust HR infrastructure in place and was able to leverage the combined expertise of Academic Staff who operate largely on a Lecturer/Practitioner basis, a highly dedicated Administration and Support team, well capable of providing both academic and pastoral support.

vii. Perhaps most importantly, in the circumstances, the College as a small college, was fortunate to have put in place a combined Educational Technology and Information Systems Department a number of years ago, which was highly influential in terms of bridging the gap between academic expertise and technological engagement.

viii. There was an unanticipated level of support for the online drop-in support structures for the pastoral support of both students and staff.

ix. Academic or corporate governance meetings worked well remotely, but clearly mechanisms for verification of digital signatures need some greater consideration

x. There is a need to have greater clarity around the policy and procedures for digital recording and storage of teaching or meeting sessions online, complying with GDPR requirements and the protection of Intellectual copyright.

It is important to note that these key lessons have not yet been formally appraised and these, therefore, comprise the initial analysis of lessons learned, gleaned from Student Representative meetings, dialogue with members of Lecturing and Administrative staff. They will be more formally considered for the next Review Period report.

Figure 6: Lessons Learned from COVID-19 at ICHAS

1.2 Other Strategic Updates

In addition to responding to the impacts of Covid-19, HEIs continued to develop and innovate, and the AQRs provided insight into a range of strategic developments across the institutions.

1.2.1 Devolved Responsibility

Applications to QQI for programme validation are independently evaluated against QQI's Validation Policy and Criteria. Where QQI is confident of an HEI's capacity, it may devolve responsibility to that institution for arranging this independent evaluation process and resulting report. This arrangement is established formally with the HEI through a memorandum of agreement.

During this reporting period, two HEIs reported on progress towards devolved responsibility for programme validation from QQI:

- DBS initiated its application to QQI for devolved responsibility. The institution reported that it regarded this as an important milestone towards readiness for Delegated Authority.
- Griffith College agreed a memorandum of understanding with QQI and applied for devolved responsibility for arranging (programme-validation-related) independent evaluation reports.

Devolution of responsibility at Griffith College

In November 2019 the college met with representatives of QQI to progress the college's interest in devolution of responsibility for arranging some validation sub-processes. On the advice of QQI, the college drafted some minor changes to its existing programme validation procedures.

The APC approved two procedures:

- QAE B2 – Programme Validation Procedure with DR
- QAE B3 – Programme Validation Procedure without DR

Upon approval of the procedures, the college agreed a memorandum of understanding with QQI and applied as per Devolution of Responsibility for arranging (Programme Validation Related) Independent Evaluation Reports at QQI's request: OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES.

The application was approved at the February 2020 meeting of the Programme and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC)

Figure 7: Devolution of responsibility at Griffith College

1.2.2 Athena Swan

Two HEIs reported progress towards attainment of Athena SWAN during the reporting period:

- NCI achieved the Athena SWAN Bronze Award and continues in its implementation of actions arising from the Athena SWAN action plan.
- Carlow College commenced its application process for the Athena SWAN Charter. A college Athena SWAN project was established and a joint proposal with IT Carlow was successful in securing funding under the Athena SWAN Capacity Building Fund.

1.2.3 Landscape Funding

Carlow College included an update on its successful joint application with IT Carlow to the Higher Education Landscape Funding Programme. It was successful in securing funding to establish a joint project office to support a range of new collaborative initiatives in respect of teaching and learning, further and higher education, progression, research, learner engagement, engagement with the community and local authorities, staff development, EDI, and internationalisation.

1.3 Governance and Management of Quality

All HEIs reported on reviews undertaken during the reporting period and on enhancements to governance and management of quality resulting from the reengagement process and implementation of reengagement panel advice. This included the strengthening of academic governance, with clear separation of academic and commercial / executive decision-making processes; enhancement of external representation and learner participation / engagement in QA governance; and review of committee structures and terms of reference. The following is a snapshot indicative of developments across the 17 HEIs that submitted AQRs:

- CCT reported on enhancements in relation to the representation of learners at its academic council with election of student members. It reported that this has greatly enriched the discussions at council meetings and has been vital in informing decision-making in respect of contingency planning, as well as new programme developments
- Griffith College appointed an external chair to its academic committee to strengthen independent external oversight. In addition, the committee membership was overhauled, which was found to enable greater representation of departments, lecturing staff, service staff and learners.
- In order to enhance quality assurance and academic governance, ICHAS appointed an independent chair to its academic council and established a quality and standards committee. It also appointed a quality assurance and enhancement officer.
- DBS reported on the positive impacts of the appointment of a new, non-executive director to its board, and the appointment of a new independent chair of its academic board. The college noted that this strengthening of its academic board was very helpful in responding to the Covid-19 emergency.
- Setanta College implemented a new governance structure following reengagement, which also included several new executive appointments.
- IICP reviewed its quality assurance manual and governance structure in response to the reengagement panel advice. The college reported a delay in some planned implementations, resulting from restrictions and additional workload arising from Covid-19.
- Hibernia College reported on several enhancements to governance and management that arose from reengagement. This included a review of its governance committees with enhanced learner representation across all committees.

See QAH Part A 1.2.2 Senior Governance

The overall governance structure of DBS comprises three related but distinct Boards: the Board of Directors; the Academic Board; and the Executive Board, also known as the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). The following graphics shows the composition and relative position of each Board.

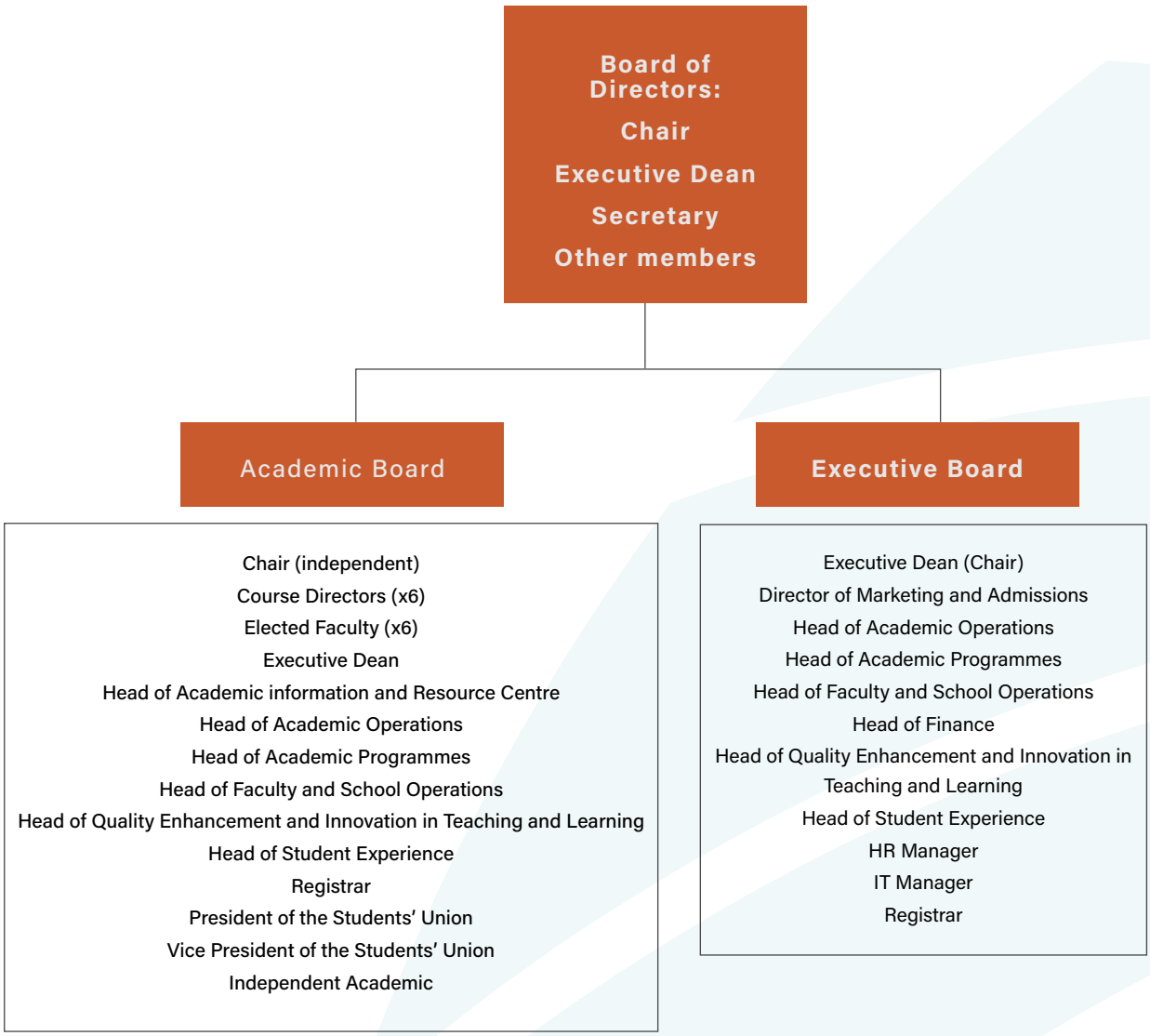


Figure 8: An example of an approach to governance of QA at DBS

1.3.1 New Roles

The HEIs enhanced their QA leadership and management teams with several new appointments, some of which arose from panel advice received during the reengagement process. Examples include:

- Carlow College appointed its first female vice-president. The college also appointed a new IT and student services manager.
- Dorset College appointed an Admissions Lead to the college's leadership team.
- CCT College appointed a student success lead to work with colleagues to develop and support college-wide efforts to improve outcomes for all students.
- As part of the reengagement process, ICD Business School appointed two new roles to its management team: Head of Academic Development and Head of Quality.
- Setanta College made several new appointments during the reporting period, including a College President, Academic Director, Teaching and Learning Coordinator, and Regional and International Coordinator, as well as implementing a new governance structure.
- NCI reported on the restructuring of its quality assurance unit into the Quality and Institutional Effectiveness (QIE) Team.

1.3.2 QA Policies and Procedures

The enhancing impact of reengagement on institutional QA policies and procedures is evident throughout all the AQRs. HEIs reported beneficial and positive engagement with staff, learners and stakeholders in the review of QA policies and procedures undertaken as part of preparation for the reengagement process. In most instances, HEIs further reviewed and amended their QA policies and procedures in direct response to advice from reengagement panels:

- At GBS, the impact of the implementation of the Reengagement Panel's mandatory changes has given additional impetus to the continual review of effectiveness and enhancement of policies. As part of reengagement, GBS re-developed and further enhanced the assessment policy for both staff and learners, particularly in relation to appeals, rechecks and reviews so that the processes and policies involved are understood and followed.
- IBAT developed a quality enhancement plan, which is updated with planned QA enhancement actions within its quality assurance handbook. This includes benchmarking with similar institutions both nationally and internationally and the use of key performance indicators (KPIs) to support internal continuous improvement.
- ICHAS conducted a significant review of its QA policies and procedures, responding to both mandatory changes and specific advice from the external reengagement panel. The college now believes it has a far more appropriate, accessible and robust set of QA policies and procedures aligned to national and international standards.
- As part of its reengagement, SNMCI undertook a root and branch review of its QA policies and procedures.
- Building on the momentum of reengagement, Hibernia College undertook further development and enhancement of its quality framework. This included the investment in 'Tweek' as a policy management system for the college. A large body of work was undertaken to migrate documents and populate the database. Initial feedback from staff and students has been very positive.

CTC Gap Analysis prior to Reengagement

The gap analysis findings resulted in extensive revisions to procedures and modifications to a range of documentation, including:

- GDPR: Production of stated policies and further development of procedures in bringing CTC in line with Data Protection requirements under GDPR. Procedural change had already begun and was in action but it had not been written up.
- Updated maps: organisational structure and programme development (and clearer process for programme development).
- Updating of policy statements (remove Traveller Community from E & D statement), and additional statements (Information Management Statement).
- Exploration of Risk (reputational, academic and financial) and Risk Management.
- Annual Report: Describe more fully the structure of the Annual Report.
- Learning Support Officer New position approved.
- Learner Representatives New structure.
- Submitting Assignments: New route to submit assignments online.
- Learner Requests: Update, describe and record more fully the procedures for managing deferrals, applications for extensions.
- Appeals: Revised appeals procedures for deferrals, extensions, and Examination Board decisions (plus addition of complaints against the appeals process procedure).
- Improve Descriptions: Opportunity to put in writing some procedures that were in action but not officially recorded (supporting scholarly activity, Team Days) Described more fully the process. of developing our annual Programme Improvement Plan and implementing minor modifications to programmes.
- External Stakeholders: Increased frequency of consultation and inviting evaluative feedback from placement sites and employers.
- Career Impact: Modification of end of year learner feedback to access data on the impact on career throughout the training period.

Specific improvements implemented following gap-analysis

In 2019 CTC's Governance Structure was refined to further separate corporate and academic roles. Terms of reference for committees and responsibilities for named roles were also specified with reference, e.g., to specific functions, membership, and frequency of meetings. Clarity in regard to procedures for rechecks, reviews and appeals was enhanced. The vulnerabilities that were identified through the gap-analysis process were compiled into a formal risk register. Clarity within the QA Manual itself was improved by the use of standard templates, divided into discrete sections for each quality area, and use of title pages and a version control mechanism.

(p.53, AQR CTC)

Figure 9: CTC Gap Analysis prior to Reengagement

Section 2: IQA System Enhancement and Impacts

2.1 Academic Integrity

The theme of academic integrity was included as a dedicated section in the AQR for the first time in 2021. An increased focus on the prevention of academic misconduct in online assessment during the Covid-19 pandemic was evident across the reports, with many HEIs reporting on the provision of professional development workshops and guidance in this area for staff. HEIs initiated a range of activities to develop and promote an institution-wide culture of academic integrity, and to strengthen and enhance internal systems to protect academic integrity. These initiatives included *inter alia:*

- the development and enhancement of institutional policies and procedures in relation to assessment design and implementation and academic misconduct;
- professional development for staff;
- the provision of relevant, institution-wide information and communications for staff and students; and
- the implementation of anti-plagiarism and proctoring software.

Participating HEIs reported on their engagement with, and importance of the work of, the sector-led National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN). The sector is actively participating through NAIN in the promotion of academic integrity. Alongside the sectoral representative body, the Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA), private and independent members of the network include CCT, DBS, Griffith College, Hibernia College, IBAT, ICHAS and ICD Business School. These HEIs reported on the importance of their membership of NAIN in informing their strategic developments and enhancements in relation to academic integrity.

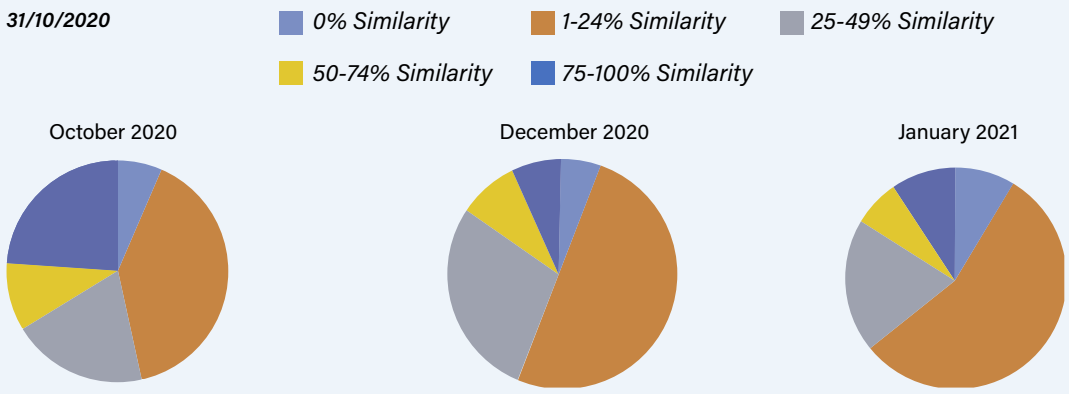
Examples of initiatives undertaken by HEIs to strengthen and safeguard academic integrity during the reporting period include:

- Within Carlow College, learners are introduced to the values of academic integrity through a mandatory academic and digital skills module. A range of relevant learner resources and supports are made available through programme handbooks and resources on the VLE. Workshops and one-to-one sessions are provided by the Academic Resource Office and the Essay Doctor Service.
- SNMCI revised the title of its policy on academic integrity, which had previously been the policy on academic misconduct. The revised policy is based on the work of, and guidelines from, NAIN.
- CCT College held its inaugural Academic Integrity Week, which led to 'Student Success Classes' being formally embedded within the curriculum. The Student Success classes, which are developed by staff across multiple departments and coordinated by the library service, encompass a range of academic and career topics. The college also implemented a mandatory requirement for all students to attend a Student Success Class. The impact of these developments, which coincided with classes moving online, has been greater participation in, and completion of, Student Success Classes than in previous years.
- ICD Business School reported on its implentation of the plagarism software, Urkund. It also noted that it provided information, guidelines and training for staff and students in relation to academic integrity. This has led to greater plagarism prevention and detection within the college.
- OTC established a plagarism policy, and reported that it uses Turnitin for assessment submission. It also informs students about academic integrity through online induction programmes and workshops.
- NCI implemented a range of initiatives in relation to academic integrity, and inter alia, reported on the importance and impact of partnership with NCI's students' union in promoting academic integrity during the

reporting period. The NCI Learner Voice Steering Group began work in 2020 to enhance the accessibility, transparency and consistency of information provided to students on a range of student voice initiatives, including expectations, policies, procedures, and support for academic integrity.

- Dorset College provided academic masterclasses to improve students' understanding of Turnitin, with specific attention given to plagiarism and Harvard referencing. The college noted that the impact of this initiative has led to an improvement in the quality of assessments submitted across all programmes, and improved confidence in learners' citation and referencing. The impact analysis of these measures is outlined in the extract from Dorset College AQR below.

Learners who have a one-stop-shop for their academic writing and this has seen their confidence grow and decreased the volume of individual emails and calls around academic writing and similarity levels are decreasing as follows:



Integration into Moodle and enhancement through academic masterclasses has seen an increased understanding of Turniting and achieving the goal of enhancement for our learners.

Figure 10: Extract from Dorset College, AQR 2021 (p42)

2.2 Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Enhancements in teaching and learning during the reporting period were mainly related to technological enhancements to support the transition to online learning and to mitigate the impact of Covid-19. Informed by QQI's Guiding Principles for Alternative Assessments, HEIs developed, and sought QQI's approval of, Covid-19 contingency plans. QQI temporarily extended all providers' approved scope of provision to include permission to deliver programmes in blended and online modes.

Approaches taken by HEIs were multifaceted and included, *inter alia*:

- adaptations to QA governance with new / enhanced committee functions to oversee and manage contingency planning and implementation;
- adaptations to policies and procedures, including the development of policies for blended and online learning;
- provision of information through dedicated website pages / other platforms;
- investment in, and deployment of, technologies to support online teaching, learning and assessment; development of virtual teaching and learning resources, including deployment of devices for staff and learners;

- researching and building on best-practice, national guidelines and supports, including those from QQI, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, and HECA;
- adaptation of assessment methodologies and timelines;
- staff professional development and supports; and
- development and implementation of a range of technical, academic and pastoral supports for learners.

Examples of measures taken include:

- NCI launched an academic risk register and Covid-19 contingency management and mitigation plan in April 2020. This was informed by QQI's Guiding Principles for Alternative Assessment.
- To enhance the quality of its online provision of its Applied Management suite of programmes, OTC conducted a mapping exercise to ENQA's Considerations for QA of e-learning provision. As a result of this exercise, the OTC adopted and integrated these indicators within its internal monitoring processes.
- ICHAS developed a training initiative for both students and service providers to support the provision of technologically facilitated therapeutic engagement. The college worked with relevant professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) to offer the training over a four-week period. In total, 152 PSRB-accredited members engaged in this training initiative, with further, free training offered to 43 guidance counsellors to support their work. Additional free training was also offered to students.
- The primary strategic development in respect of teaching, learning and assessment reported by CCT was the extension of scope of provision by QQI to encompass blended learning. This contributed to the college's successful management of Covid-19 contingency arrangements.
- Central to IICP's policy considerations was the college's risk management policy. Some of the key learnings and reflections identified by IICP include the need to review the policy with a focus on guidance and overarching principles; the importance of flexible governance structures that enable decisions to be made in a timely manner; and the need for context-appropriate, feedback mechanisms to ensure that data is available to inform decision making.
- For over half of its assessment activity, Carlow College transitioned from traditional exams to 'open book' online exams administered through its VLE. Learners were given 24 hours to complete the exams to facilitate international learners in different time zones, as well as learners with caring responsibilities and intermittent access to devices.
- At Hibernia College, over 1,000 students across both the primary and post–primary education programmes were assessed using a range of alternative assessment methods. Statistical analysis was carried out across all grades, which enabled the college to determine that grades were in line with those of previous cohorts and that all grade bands were represented in the overall results.
- GBS reported on its rapid adaptation of teaching, learning and assessment strategies to support the move to online learning, including its development and deployment of an online and blended learning policy; the purchase and integration of Zoom with its Moodle platform; the development of video and interactive resources; and the extension of the semester by two weeks to give necessary, additional time to learners.
- In evaluating the impact of the move to online learning, SQT sought feedback from its learners and clients / industry partners on what had worked well from a teaching, learning and assessment perspective. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with the general consensus being that the quality of the programmes had not been compromised by this new mode of provision.
- A self-evaluation of the effectiveness of contingency arrangements was conducted by CCT at the end of the academic year, including a consultation with external experts to establish best practice in relation to online teaching and blended learning methodologies. This feedback informed the provision of additional professional development opportunities; CCT's Excellence in Teaching Series and the development of online teaching and learning toolkits.

- A dedicated webpage was established by Carlow College as an institutional information hub for all Covid-19 updates.

Hibernia College Digital Learning Architecture Project

The planning and research phase for a new College digital learning architecture commenced during this reporting period. In autumn 2019, the Digital Learning Department organised and hosted a series of six workshops with college staff to discover requirements for the Next Generation Digital Learning Platform (NGDLP).

Each workshop focused on a specific theme related to current needs in the provision of online systems to support teaching, learning and assessment in the College. The workshop series focused on finding solutions within a teaching, learning and assessment context to identify technologies that could make a difference to the College today. In each workshop, an experienced member of the department presented relevant topics and conducted an open discussion exploring these topics in a brainstorming format. The Head of Digital Learning asked the participants two core questions at the outset of the workshop series:

- What should teaching and learning look like at Hibernia College in the next 5–10 years?
- What digital technologies do we need to support this?

Other key areas included the exploration and testing of a number of new tools for potential inclusion in the new architecture, including Zoom, Moxtra, Aula and Seats software. A further update on this project will be provided in the next reporting period. (p.17, AQR)

Figure 11: Digital Learner Architecture Project at Hibernia College

2.3 The Learner Experience

A learner-centred approach and culture of commitment to learner wellbeing is evident in all the AQRs submitted. HEIs responded to reengagement panel advice around enhancing learner information and supports, and technical and academic supports. Information and learning resources were provided to learners to enable their engagement with online teaching and learning environments established in response to Covid-19.

The emphasis on, and response from HEIs to, supporting learners' wellbeing and mental health during the particularly challenging environment of Covid-19 is noteworthy. A wide array of innovative and creative initiatives was developed and implemented. For example:

- CCT detailed that its strategic commitment to increasing accessibility of learner services and resources was already underway during the reporting period, including expanded office hours for student services and availability of virtual library services. These developments were then accelerated, and all made available virtually as part of Covid-19 risk assessment and mitigations.
- Griffith College reported on its plans prior to reengagement to review its supports for learners and its engagement with learners and their representative bodies. During the reporting period, the college established the Learner Wellbeing Group. Following wide-ranging consultation, the Group made a number of recommendations to the management board in relation to the organisation and availability of learner support services and on relevant indicators on the effectiveness of supports.

- GBS established a new Learner Wellbeing Group, tasked with making recommendations to the management board.
- SNMCI noted the capacity challenges in a small provider in relation to the provision of leaner supports. During the reporting period, SNMCI enhanced the supports available to learners and expanded the Student Engagement and Learner Support Officer roles. A further review of student engagement policies is planned in collaboration with the newly formed Student Council.
- IBAT identified a range of additional supports for learners made available during the reporting period. This included the addition of a Student Affairs Coordinator (SAC) to provide a personalised service and primary point of contact for students. The Coordinator engages on students' behalf, with relevant personnel in the college, including IT, academic, recruitment, registry and accommodation staff etc.
- The OTC report identified a range of student support procedures in place, reflecting the particular circumstances of e-learning. These include tutoring, pedagogical, technological and administrative elements. The college provides support to students for the development of learning, as well as enhancing digital skills and the use of e-learning resources.
- The Children's Therapy Centre detailed the new role of the Learning Support Officer to develop a suite of supports for learners on academic writing. This complements the online portal area dedicated to this topic.
- In response to the reengagement panel recommendations on learner information services, Carlow College engaged in several new initiatives, including the development of a communications plan to ensure learners have access to information in a variety of formats. This includes a fortnightly briefing through Mailchimp.

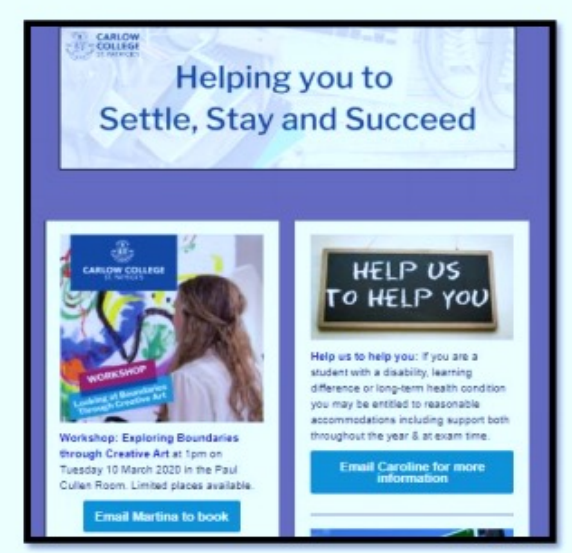


Figure 12: Screenshot from Carlow College Mailchimp Learner Communication Platform

Enhanced Staff and Student Communications at ICD

As a small provider with a strong one-to-one working relationship often existing between staff members and between students and staff, ICD has thrived on traditional communications systems such as face to face communications.

During the reengagement planning process and self-evaluation, ICD identified a benefit in enhancing staff and student communications to make more effective and regular use of IT communication technologies as follows: While the ICD Moodle Document Store for Staff existed prior to 2019, it was under-utilised as a resource to both send/post important documents/communications for staff and to receive/read such documents/communications.

Since summer 2019, this Moodle page is now regularly updated, and staff access rates have increased substantially. In September 2019, ICD launched the Moodle Document Store for Students as a centralised Moodle page accessible to all ICD students that would contain a comprehensive variety of important student related documents, communications, tutorials, guides, and more. This resource has high access rates among students.

Staff and student communication via Moodle, was under-utilised prior to Sep 2019 at ICD. This vital resource (e.g. discussion forums, announcement sections, a repository for notes/materials) has now been used much more successfully across programmes. - Reimagined and redesigned ICD Student Handbook (2019–2020).

The student handbook was completely redesigned and relaunched in September 2019 to incorporate a variety of important information for all learners both prospective and enrolled.

More regular meetings and communications between the Student Representative Committee and ICD staff/management. Prior to summer 2019, the SRC were a somewhat informal resource.

However, the level of communication between the college and the SRC has increased substantially since October 2019, with student reps providing regular feedback and communications to and from the college and students which assisted greatly in achieving successful reengagement but also most importantly in continuing to enhance programme delivery since October 2019.

All of the above have benefited the college in innumerable ways, most notably in their foundational importance in providing the platforms that have been used to devise, communicate, and implement delivery of online teaching, learning, and assessment as a result of the coronavirus crisis.

Figure 13: Enhanced Staff and Student Communications at ICD

2.3.1 International Learners

The private and independent higher education sector is diverse, with HEIs providing for both domestic and international markets. HEIs acknowledged the needs of, and specific supports available to, international leaners. For example:

- SNMCI noted the challenges arising in supporting international learners and the need to address particular concerns and issues they face. The college commenced learner support meetings to assess any cultural, academic or social issues impacting its learners. The college's planned student access service will include an SNMCI app to allow for clearer and more student-friendly communication.
- Within CCT Student Services, international learner supports include matters relating to visas, social supports, clubs and societies. The college also provides free access to mental health supports and counselling services, which are available in multiple languages.

CCT Student Success Classes

One particular initiative that was greatly received by students was series of Student Success Classes, and the transition of these online. The Student Success Classes, developed by staff from across multiple departments in the College, were coordinated from the library in the 2019/2020 Academic Year.

In the Autumn semester, they were held in physical classrooms, in the Spring semester the classes were moved online, using Google Hangouts. The classes encompass academic and career topics and were given by the Librarian, the Head of Enhancement and the Careers Advisor.

The topics addressed by the classes were as follows:

- Academic Success - Research Skills and Using Library Resources - Academic Integrity – What it is and why it is important - Effective Group Work This category incorporates a suite of classes expressly focussing on Academic Writing skills: - Effective use of sources - How to use Harvard Referencing - Quotation, Paraphrase, Synthesis and Summary - Literature Reviews and longer-form research assignments - Writing with confidence in your own style Career Success - Interview Skills - Workshop: Using LinkedIn and other social media effectively for networking - CV workshop: Designing your CV for the job you want. - Targeted Cover Letters.

These classes were run several times throughout the academic year to allow for maximum accessibility.

The move online saw an increase in average attendance, from approximately 10 per class in physical classrooms to 15-16 per class when held virtually. Online classes also allowed for enhancements such as Padlet, Mentimeter and Vevox to enhance interactivity and allow for anonymity.

The increased participation along with the positive feedback from participants justifies the continued virtual delivery of these classes, including after the physical campus re-opens. Additional subject areas will also be introduced including in the area of evaluating the reliability of information sources.

(p.35, AQR CCT)

Figure 14: Student Success Classes at CCT

2.3.2 Programmes of Education and Training

The primary focus for HEIs' programmes during the reporting period was the emergency move to blended and / or online learning and related QA enhancements to ensure the optimum delivery of programmes in an online or blended mode. HEIs noted their intention to pursue validation from QQI for fully online programmes. This is identified as a strategic goal by some of the HEIs. For example:

- OTC noted that its primary focus for programme enhancement during the reporting period was on the delivery of programmes in a fully online mode. The college developed blended learning QA policies and procedures to provide overarching guidance in this area and fully online indicators which will be used for monitoring purposes.
- SQT reported on the catalyst provided by Covid-19 for the implementation of a new approach to programme delivery, which had been a strategic goal. Since the pandemic commenced, SQT has progressed from undertaking contingency measures to embracing and integrating virtual and blended delivery methods into the re- development of its programme delivery framework.

QA Enhancements at OTC for delivery of fully online programmes

The primary focus for enhancement during 2019-20 was on the delivery of programmes in a fully online mode.

Part A of the AQR shows how the core QA documentation has been developed to provide overarching guidance in this area in terms of blended learning guidelines and fully online indicators which may be used for monitoring purposes.

In relation to the application for delivery of fully online programmes, the following enhancements were highlighted:

- The recording of lectures so that they could be delivered synchronously in the first instance, then viewed asynchronously, and repeatedly on the VLE
- Online workshops that included break out room activities, Q and A sessions and online presentations and discussions
- Additional podcasts
- Additional links and contemporary readings
- A substantial increase in tutorial support and hours ▪ Increased telephone/video and online tutorials
- Increased focus on online facilitation to support socialisation online ▪ An additional tutorial and podcast relating to fulfilment of the assignment brief
- Increased online security and procedures in place to monitor remote examinations ▪ Recorded skills demonstrations

These measures supplement existing approved QA procedures and controls in relation to materials provision, reliability of online delivery and the technical capabilities of relevant stakeholders. They are also in addition to established high levels of tutorial support, commitment to timely and meaningful feedback (as attested to repeatedly by External Examiners), and consistent high quality of programme delivery.

In addition, it was identified that there was a need for:

- additional declarations by staff and students in relation to the recording of synchronous lectures which may later be available asynchronously.
- additional monitoring and quality checks, particularly in relation to the technical elements (sound, visuals etc.) of asynchronous lectures.
- This initiative, its impacts and supporting research is further outlined in more detail in the Case Study, included as part of this report.

Figure 15: QA Enhancements for Online Learning at OTC

2.3.3 Work/Practice Placements

Public health restrictions imposed in March 2020 due to Covid-19 impacted on practice / work placements for learners. HEIs reported that for many programmes, learners had completed or nearly completed their work placements by this stage. Additional online / simulated activities were devised, and assessments adapted to enable learners to achieve the programme learning outcomes. However, HEIs providing programmes in professional and regulated areas, in particular in social care, faced specific challenges in enabling learners to achieve professional registration. HEIs reported on their engagement and collaboration with relevant professional and regulatory bodies in the development of detailed contingency plans to enable learners to satisfy the requirements for professional registration:

- Within Carlow College, detailed contingency plans were developed by the Practice Placement Advisory Committee in conjunction with the External Examiner and Office of the Registrar to enable learners to complete their placements and demonstrate attainment of learning outcomes and professional competencies.
- The OTC consulted with CORU and the Irish Association of Social Care Educators (IASCE) in the development of contingency arrangements and alternative assessment for students unable to complete their placement due to public health restrictions.

2.3.4 Staff Development and Support

In addition to the wide array of staff development initiatives implemented to support staff in the move to online teaching and assessment, HEIs continued to provide a range of professional development for staff. Additional initiatives were also put in place to support staff wellbeing in the online teaching and working environment. For example:

- During the reporting period, Hibernia College implemented a new Performance Model / Process to enhance staff development. A number of enhancements occurred as a result of this project, including (i) a revised Hibernia Human Resources, Staff Development and Continuing Education policy; (ii) development of a formal staff performance and development process; and (iii) creation of a Learning Hub as a central repository to support staff.
- Within CTC, staff training in assessment and marking took place during the reporting period. Additionally, an in-house training day was held for all clinical supervisors to enhance consistency of marking in regard to assessment of the clinical practice trainees.

Dorset Speaks

In July 2020, Dorset College organised the First DORSET SPEAKS, which was led by Faculty, external speakers and learners. The Event was open to the entire Dorset College Community.

Thorough the departmental review further formal sessions were deemed necessary in the following areas;

- Leadership Team - QA implementation;
- Wellness - Personal Development;
- Teaching and Learning Professional Development.

Figure 16: Example of staff development activity held at Dorset College

2.3.5 Information and Data

Within the AQRs, HEIs reported on the outcomes of internal staff and student surveys, and on how the outcomes were used to inform planning and ongoing enhancements to teaching, learning and assessment:

- Following reengagement, Setanta College implemented a new student information system to provide more robust enrolment, retention and completion data. The new system has resulted in daily operational tasks being more agile, and has enabled the college to engage, intervene and manage leaner engagement in a more streamlined and responsive way.
- Carlow College prioritised data analytics, which became more relevant due to Covid-19. The college's Learner Information and Retention Officer (LIRO) Pilot Project commenced during the reporting period. The college credits the implementation of the various strands of this project with an improvement in the retention rate of 11%, from 82% (2018 / 2019) to 93% (2019 / 2020).
- CCT implemented a number of initiatives to enhance information and data management and analysis within the college. Some examples include:
    - » CCT's Centre for Teaching and Learning launched the college's inaugural Graduate Outcomes Survey during the reporting period. The survey confirmed that 86% of CCT graduates are employed in a variety of business and IT roles, and 96% of respondents would recommend CCT.
    - » The college benchmarked its practice, technologies, services, and outcomes through participation in national initiatives such as the Index Survey, undertaking subject matter expert consultations, and seeking external, expert, peer reviews.
    - » A working group was established to review the college's student satisfaction survey. The project was impacted by the pivot to emergency online learning and the need to redesign the survey to reflect the data required in respect of the delivery of programmes and services remotely. The AQR provides details of adaptations to online programmes resulting from this internal survey.

In addition, two institutions reported on engagement with the national student survey, Student Survey.ie:

- DBS reported on its participation in StudentSurvey.ie for the first time during the reporting period, with a response rate of 25%, comparing favourably to a national response rate of 31%. The institution reported on comparing well across all indicator scores, particularly for higher-order learning, quantitative reasoning, learning strategies, collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, effective teaching practices and quality of interactions, and it identified some indicators, namely student-faculty interaction, for improvement.
- NCI was the first private HEI to participate in StudentSurvey.ie. The college reported a response rate of 23%, which was a 1% increase on previous years. However, Covid-19 impacted on the college's planned analysis of the results, due to additional internal demands and priorities, and this analysis was postponed. The college plans to conduct a 5-year thematic analysis of recurrent trends identified through the survey and to enhance the effectiveness and impact of the survey within the institution.

2.3.6 External Engagement

The HEIs reported on wide-ranging and diverse external engagement in their AQRs. This includes, *inter alia,* engagement with national agencies and representative bodies; and collaborations and partnerships with other institutions and with industry. HEIs also reported on their engagement with professional and regulatory bodies during the reporting period, and on the ongoing development of professional programmes.

The importance to the HEIs of sharing practice and collectively engaging with each other through national networks was explicit in the reports. Many HEIs noted the value of their engagement with HECA, and the role of HECA in providing guidance, supporting the development of good practice, and assisting its members in addressing challenges through its Higher Education Colleges Association Academic Quality Enhancement Forum (HAQEF). HEIs also noted the value of engagement with the National Forum for Teaching and Learning. The diversity of these external engagements is reflected in some of the following examples:

- Hibernia College noted a range of "high-level sectoral engagements" including, representation on national working groups; submissions to national sectoral consultations; associate membership of, and contribution to seminars for, the National Forum for Teaching and Learning; contributory articles to Ireland's Yearbook of Education 2019/20; and membership of the Teaching Council.
- A strategic objective for IBAT was to "engage with Influential employers in business and technology". This led to a reconceptualization of the former Business Advisory Group to become the Expert Advisory Group. It also reported on plans to recruit a Corporate Relations Manager / Business to Business Manager.
- CTC undertook a benchmarking and peer-marking process with Deakin University to provide comparability on standards and support staff development. The college received a commendation from the reengagement panel on this process and international link.
- Engagement with professional and regulatory bodies is reflected in Carlow College, where the BA in Applied Social Studies (Professional Social Care) was determined by CORU as suitable for the education and training of candidates for registration. The programme is now subject to monitoring by the Social Care Workers Registration Board.

External Engagement at Griffith College

External Advisor
The college employs an advisor to liaise with industry and contribute to relevant college processes and initiatives, such as programme development, funding and grant applications and work-based learning initiatives.

Mock panels/reviews
The college regularly engages external experts in the process of preparing for a validation event, planned developments in procedures, or a large-scale review (e.g. reengagement). This can take the form of a review of documentation, a review of processes or structures, or the hosting of a "mock" panel event.

Engagement with external QAE
Through its participation in professional and sectoral networks and its engagement with the requirements of validating bodies, the college engages with external QAE developments and best practice approaches to ensure its procedures are current and fit for purpose.

Engagement with external groups
College staff are active participants in a wide range of professional and sectoral networks. Participation ensures that the college actively contributes to QAE development and is abreast of developments in best practice. Such networks include:

- The National Forum for Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, of which two college staff are Associates;
- Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA) at board level, and at its working groups and sub- committees;
- The National Student Engagement Programme; and
- QQI's standing committees and ad hoc working groups, e.g., the working group that considered the AQR template.

Requirements of awarding and professional bodies
Awarding bodies for College programmes regularly issue new or updated QAE policy and procedure guidelines. Normally, such guidelines are developed in consultation with providers. This requires the College to reflect the new guidelines in its own QAE manual, either by updating an existing procedure or by developing a new one.

Figure 17: External Engagement at Griffith College

2.3.7 Public Information and Civic Engagement

HEIs reported some innovative enhancements to public information provision and civic engagement activities.

- ICHAS undertook a review of all forms of public information, which resulted in a revision of website content, paper-based information and marketing material.
- IICP reviewed its social media presence following its Covid-19-related transition to online teaching and learning. The college now hosts social media pages on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Linked-In to build a community of interested persons across three key demographics: professional groups within the helping professions; IICP students and alumni; and groups interested in counselling and psychotherapy and mental health. In addition, the content of social media posts was expanded, and inspirational quotes are used to promote positivity, fun, emotional support, and personal responsibility across the college's social media platforms.
- Carlow College identified public and civic engagement as one of its key strategic areas, and the college reported on a number of third mission/societal engagement activities under its Here Together: Reflections on the South East Project. The AQR detailed some of the various strands of the project, drawing on philosophy, theology, creative writing, social partnership, filmmaking, photography and music. The project sees colleagues and learners in Carlow College collaborate with colleagues and learners in IT Carlow, Waterford IT, VISUAL and other local and regional bodies.

Civic Engagement and Public Information Activities at IICP

IICP, on foot of the World Health Organization's identification of the psychological impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular elevated levels of anxiety and stress, and of its expertise as an education provider specialising in mental health, devised a series of open-access, online, mental health seminars for students and for the public.

The themes of the seminars were drawn from public discourses about the consequences of the pandemic, as well as from dialogue within the College. In total, 18 hours of open-access support was offered online, and 264 people participated in the seminars. Details of these seminars are as follows:

1. "Choosing Happiness through Behaviour and Connection" – This workshop was designed to equip participants with the knowledge and coping skills to support them through the challenges arising from COVID-19.

2. "Keeping your relationship together in these tough times" - This psychoeducational programme was designed to give participants tips and skills for navigating the relationship stresses they may be facing as we struggled with lockdown, home schooling and constant close quarters with our loved ones.

3. "Grief in a Time of Crisis" - During this period of self-isolation and quarantine, the effects of grief and how we mourn has been massively changed. This talk was created to offer support and comfort to our community.

4. "Fireside Chats" - These talks were held in a relaxed atmosphere in an open and compassionate manner by means of chatting and sharing about coping with grief and loss during these challenging times.

5. Empathic Listening in a Time of Crisis – Four separate one-hour talks created to cover an introduction to Empathic Listening skills for anyone who feels it would be of benefit.

Figure 18: Examples of civic engagement and public information at IICP

2.3.8 Self-Evaluation, Monitoring and Review

HEIs reported on both policy and programme monitoring and review activities, some of which were undertaken in response to Covid-19 adaptations as previously outlined. All the AQRs included details of programme reviews conducted and schedules for planned programme reviews.

There was some evidence provided in the AQRs of a systematic framework for monitoring and review of QA activities and the impacts of these within the HEIs. In addition to programmatic review, some HEIs reported on enhancement activities and reviews of service units. Given the very recent approval of HEI QA systems by QQI, the AQRs, as a whole, were largely and, as expected, descriptive of systems and recent developments. As the HEIs implement their QA systems in full post reengagement, it is expected that the AQRs will become more analytical and include evidence of the outcomes and impact of internal monitoring and review processes. Some steps already taken in that regard include:

- Griffith College developed and approved a self-evaluation report template aligned to QQI's Core Statutory QA Guidelines. This will be used by heads of faculties, departments, services units, and coordinators of activities within the college to monitor and report on compliance with the Core QA Guidelines, and to articulate any planned improvements and resource needs.
- IBAT reviewed: (i) Library and Library Services; and (ii) Students Services and Careers – leading to the introduction of JobTeaser powering the IBAT Careers Centre, and the appointment of a Student Affairs Coordinator.

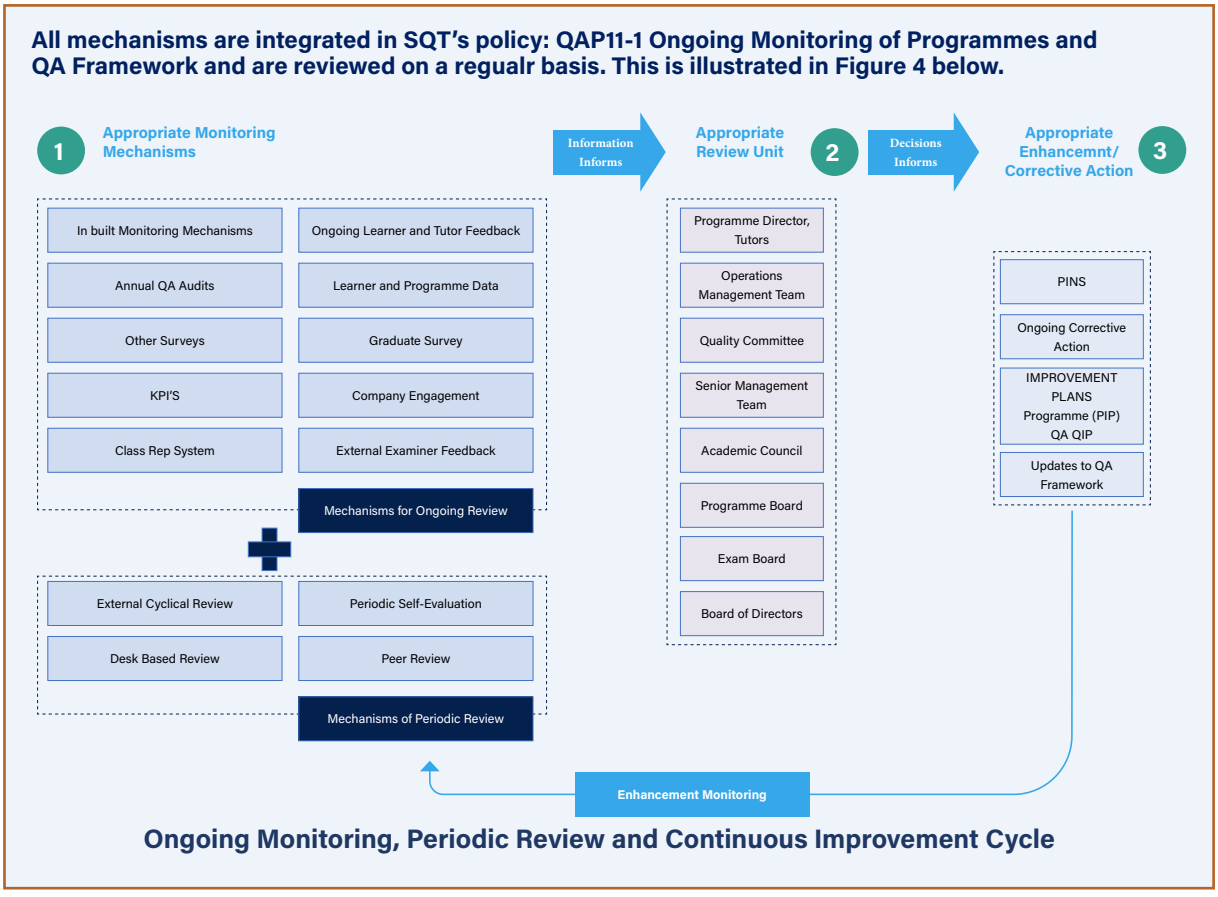


Figure 19: Monitoring and review framework at SQT

Section 3: QA Improvement and Enhancement Plans

The QA improvement and enhancement plans for the institutions include, *inter alia*, planned programme reviews and policy reviews, with a schedule of programme reviews included in most of the reports. New programme and policy developments are also planned.

The QA improvement plans included in the AQRs reflect the ongoing enhancements arising from conditions and specific advice given by reengagement panels, some of which will have medium / long-term strategic impacts on QA development and enhancement.

The lessons learned from institutional responses to Covid-19 have also informed, and are reflected in, the HEIs' QA improvement plans within the AQRs.

During the reporting period, the HEIs were working within an emergency response context, with interim policies and contingency arrangements approved by QQI to support online and blended learning. As noted elsewhere in this report, many HEIs reported on their plans to further develop, formalise and integrate these arrangements into their internal QA systems and to seek formal approval from QQI to extend their scope of provision to include blended and online learning provision. A small number of HEIs also reported on plans to seek approval for transnational delivery of programmes.

Other strategic objectives and plans include the enhancement of the student experience, further development of international collaborative partnerships, and embedding sustainable development goals within curricula and processes.

Surprisingly, only one institution included within its QA enhancement plan, a plan for completing its devolved responsibility application and developing readiness for delegation of authority to make awards, and for institutional review. Devolved responsibility affords greater flexibility to both institutions and QQI, and QQI will continue to work with institutions in exploring opportunities for expansion of devolved responsibility.

Other planned objectives and enhancements reported upon include:

- CTC reported that it will continue to monitor the effectiveness of flipped classroom strategies and blended learning as implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic in response to how effective and popular both were. Given the benefits achieved, the college hopes to explore ways to incorporate more of these approaches into its programmes in the long term. To this end, it will engage in research and review and add to its QA policies and procedures as appropriate.
- Following the recent approval of its QA procedures through reengagement, Galway Business School reported that it is now committed to further embedding those procedures and "aims to provide opportunities for learners and staff to increase their knowledge of policies and their accessibility by separating the QA Handbook into individual policy sections and creating links on our website and VLE (Moodle) to assist with document accessibility and control". It also identified the development of an academic integrity project for all learners.
- ICD identified a commitment to enhancing annual professional development and performance management initiatives, as well as enhancing career planning supports for learners.
- OTC was one of a number of providers that identified the development of fully online provision in its QA improvements and enhancement plans. This will include a review of the library services and procedures, as well as a full review of all technical infrastructure used in the delivery of fully online and blended learning.

Section 4: Conclusions

This synthesis report represents an important milestone in QQI's relationship with the private and independent higher education sector. In their totality, this first suite of AQRs provides assurance to QQI, and to internal and external stakeholders, that the HEIs' approved IQA systems both have regard to QQI's quality assurance guidelines and are being implemented appropriately.

The introduction of the AQR process has been well received by HEIs: during the Quality Dialogue Meetings, QQI received an overwhelmingly positive response from the private and independent HEIs to the process.

The AQRs provide an insight into the impact of reengagement on the HEIs' IQA systems, their governance and management, policies and procedures, programmes of education and training, teaching, learning, and assessment, and support services for learners. It is evident across the reports that there has been an evolution and iterative development of quality assurance within the sector, driven by reengagement and the HEIs' commitment to developing and enhancing their internal quality systems and culture.

The reports confirm the leaner-centred focus of the private and independent higher education institutions. This was particularly evident in the response taken during Covid-19 to meeting learner needs, and the provision of diverse and innovative learner resources and supports, both in the support of teaching and learning and learner health and wellbeing. The analysis and impacts of these enhancements will likely be reflected in the next iteration of the AQRs.

The diversity of the private higher education sector is reflected in the AQRs. The diversity of size and scale, mission and focus, and the different stages of development and maturity of the HEIs' IQA systems post reengagement are all reflected. Some HEIs are at the stage of addressing the outcomes of the reengagement process in the further development and refinement of their quality assurance systems, while others have evidently, well-established and mature IQA systems in place.

At outlined in its Statement of Strategy 2022-24, QQI anticipates that some of these more mature, private HEIs will, over the period of the strategy, receive greater autonomy through the granting of delegated authority to make their own awards. QQI is committed to engaging and working with the sector in progressing this objective.

QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

+353 (0) 1 905 8100

http://qhelp.qqi.ie

www.QQI.ie

@QQI_connect