



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

AN INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OF THE QQI ANNUAL QUALITY REPORTING MODEL



QQI
Insights

Conducted on behalf of QQI by
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Context and Acknowledgements

This report presents an evaluation of the usefulness of the Annual Quality Report (AQR), which forms part of QQI's quality assurance (QA) framework of engagement with Ireland's higher education institutions (HEIs). The evaluation was conducted during the period January - March 2023. Findings from the evaluation are set out in the report, alongside recommendations for ways in which the AQR process, template and guidance may potentially be improved.

The evaluation was commissioned by QQI and undertaken by a project team comprising Dr. Annie Doona, Dr. Cathy Peck, Dr. Deirdre Stritch and Ms. Laura Devlin. The project team are the authors of the report, which is published by QQI.

Both the project team and QQI would like to acknowledge that the evaluation of the AQR has benefited from substantial input from public and independent/private HEIs, QQI staff, and other key stakeholders in the sector, including the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, and HEI representative bodies: The Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA); the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA).

In particular, the project team and QQI would like to acknowledge that many institutional teams were engaged in preparing for the submission of the 2023 AQRs concurrently to making input to this evaluation. In this context, the effort made by those teams to provide insights and reflections through multiple fora is deeply appreciated. Moreover, the project team would like to express gratitude to all stakeholders participating in the evaluation for the open and frank manner in which they engaged with the process. Finally, the project team would like to reflect the appreciation expressed by all stakeholders, and HEIs in particular, for QQI's undertaking of this evaluation and for the "... spirit of openness, transparency and collegiality" in which they have done so.¹

¹ Comment from an independent/private HEI focus group participant.

Executive Summary

This report sets out the findings from a focused evaluation of the usefulness of the AQR in fulfilling its intended purpose and considers ways in which the AQR and associated processes may be improved and enhanced. The evaluation was informed by all of the key stakeholders in the sector. Inputs were made by both new and long-established HEIs, whose experience of producing and submitting the AQRs has richly informed the evaluation. The project team also engaged with representatives of DFHERIS, QQI and the HEA, as well as the IUA, HECA and THEA.

The analysis and recommendations set out in this report consider not only the diverse perspectives of these stakeholders, but the dynamic nature of the regulatory environment in which they are operating. As progress continues toward the achievement of a unified tertiary education sector, and the implementation of recent, relevant legislation,² it is evident that the AQR (or a near equivalent reporting process) has a valuable role to play. The precise nature of that reporting process should be determined with the existing (and future) monitoring/reporting processes and needs of co-regulators across the sector in mind. This evaluation therefore includes a tentative discussion of potential purposes the AQR might fulfil within a future tertiary education landscape.

Within this report, the evaluation methodology is set out in Section 2, with further detail provided in a series of appendices. In Section 3, the evaluation findings are organised thematically around the purposes of the AQR. These commence with a fundamental question: Is the AQR fulfilling its stated purpose(s)?

Although both contributors and the evaluation project team question the efficiency of the current template, the evaluation found that the AQR largely meets its first stated objective of providing documentary evidence of the development and evolution of a provider's QA system. This is discussed in Section 3.1.1.1. The evaluation found that the AQR only somewhat meets its second stated objective of providing QQI with assurance that internal QA procedures have been established and are being implemented consistent with regulatory requirements. Whilst HEIs were generally positive about the benefits of capturing an overview of the QA and governance systems in place, greater caution was expressed as to the ability of the AQR to capture information on the effectiveness of that QA system. This is discussed in Section 3.1.1.2.

A source of frustration for HEI stakeholders making input to the evaluation was that the AQR only somewhat meets its third stated objective of assisting HEIs with document management in the institutional review process. Inputs to this evaluation from HEIs reflected an expectation that the effort expended in completing the AQR would yield great benefits in the cyclical review process. This was consistently found by participants to have not been the case. Additionally, to the extent to which the project team could ascertain from the available evidence, the AQR does not meet its fourth stated objective of forming an important part of the evidence base considered by external review teams for the CINTE cycle of institutional reviews. These findings are discussed in Section 3.1.1.3 and 3.1.1.4 respectively.

The evaluation found that the AQR process largely meets its fifth stated objective of providing transparency on HEIs' assurance and enhancement of quality to external stakeholders through publication of the reports by both QQI and HEIs themselves; however, this transparency is somewhat

² For example, the Technological Universities Act 2018, the Higher Education Authority Act 2022 (hereafter the HEA Act), as well as amendments made in 2019 to the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012.

compromised by the AQR not being sufficiently highlighted to other key bodies, such as the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA). This is discussed in Section 3.1.1.5.

Whilst not explicitly stated in the AQR template as an objective, the project team understands from QQI and the thematic analysis reports that the AQR is intended to play a role in facilitating peer learning and promoting good practice. It largely meets this (unstated) objective. The project team heard very positive feedback from HEIs regarding the case studies in particular and a desire was expressed for QQI to further maximise the benefits of the case studies by hosting an in-person workshop or conference centred around the case studies following the submission of the AQRs. This is discussed in Section 3.1.1.6.

The subsequent section of the report addresses the question: What purposes does the AQR fulfil in practice? Findings set out in Section 3.1.2 explore inputs to the evaluation indicating that there is a lack of congruence between what the AQR is intended to achieve and what the templates, systems and processes associated with the AQR actually deliver in practice. Within this section, perspectives on the internal institutional benefits of the AQR are particularly considered. Notably, these perspectives diverge in a manner that broadly reflects the distinct HEI profiles now engaging with the AQR. Although the findings in this section explore a number of challenges associated with the AQR, it also discusses positive outcomes from the AQR process.

A distinct group of findings emerging from stakeholder input to the evaluation pertained to the potential for the AQR process to have a more visible and impactful role, potentially interacting with a number of other reporting, monitoring and enhancement processes in the sector. These findings, which are inherently more speculative and future oriented, address the question: What are the potential purposes of the AQR? This is discussed in Section 3.1.3.

The evaluation also considered the structure and content of the AQR template. Although this is highly interdependent with the purposes of the AQR, specific challenges and potential enhancements are discussed in Section 3.2. In particular, the evaluation considers stakeholder views on how appropriate the balance of quantitative and qualitative data in the current AQRs is. Notably, the project team does not concur with the consensus view of HEIs on this issue, taking the position, which is reiterated in the concluding remarks, that it is to the advantage of both HEIs and the sector that an increased amount of data be captured within the AQR, where it can be explained and contextualised in direct relation to the context, strategy and mission of the institution.

In Section 3.3, the perspectives of stakeholders regarding the timing and submission process for the AQR are discussed and endorsed by the project team, leading to several readily implementable recommendations for enhancement. In Section 3.4, the thematic analysis reports are considered, both in terms of their current value to stakeholders and in terms of threats to their capacity to present a comprehensive and representative analysis of activities in the sector.

Section 4 presents the conclusions and recommendations arising from this evaluation process. The discussion synthesises the outcomes of the evaluation under three interdependent themes: the clarity and coherence of purpose for the AQRs, the balance between the regulatory and enhancement-focused role of the AQRs and the format and timelines for submission. The project team concludes that, in trying to achieve multiple objectives, the purpose of the AQR has become somewhat diluted and obscured since its initiation. The evidence considered in the course of the evaluation indicates that in trying to achieve the dual purposes of being both a regulatory instrument and a mechanism to highlight enhancement and good practice, the AQR is currently achieving neither purpose in an optimal

manner. The project team conducting the evaluation recommends, first and foremost, that the current and future purpose of the AQR needs to be clarified and honed. Such clarification will enable QCI to be considerably more precise and focused in any subsequent adjustments made to the reporting requirements, supporting templates, submission process or timing of the AQR.

Section 1: QQI's Annual Quality Reporting (AQR) Model

1.1 Background

The AQR was developed for the Irish context drawing upon examples of good practice internationally, in jurisdictions including Scotland, Australia and New Zealand. Such contexts offered examples in which annual quality reports were accompanied by annual dialogue meetings between QA agency/regulator and provider. For publicly-funded institutions, the AQR offered a mechanism for transparency, with year-on-year progress captured in a published report. Notably, the AQR was envisaged to become an important element of QA oversight situated within a wider regulatory framework. A synergy between the AQR, institutional reviews and other processes was anticipated.

The AQR has been utilised by QQI since 2012 as a reporting model for the previously established universities³ and from 2015 for the institutes of technology. Enhancements have been made to the AQR process and template over time, with the most recent revision of the template occurring in 2019.

More recently, the AQR process was extended to include submissions from Ireland's independent/private HEIs following the approval of their QA procedures through the [reengagement](#) process. Introduction of the AQR process was piloted for this group in 2020, with 2021 representing the first official reporting period for those independent/private institutions that had completed the reengagement process. Therefore, although the AQR is a longstanding and well-established element of QA oversight for public providers, it remains a relatively new element of the QA processes of independent/private providers.

1.2 The AQR Process

The current AQR reporting process entails the circulation of a call and templates by QQI to higher education institutions (HEIs) in November. Reports are submitted in February for the previous academic year, covering a reporting period of September 1st to August 31st.

Subsequent to submission, the AQRs are published on [QQI's website](#) with the intention of providing transparency on, and enhancing public confidence in, quality assurance in Irish higher education institutions. Some providers also publish the reports on their own websites. The publication of the AQRs is particularly noteworthy as this means that any interested party may access and make use of the reports. For example, the reports may be accessed by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs), the HEA or the DFHERIS. There is also potential for the reports to be accessed and used by international quality agencies, institutional partners and collaborators or media institutions.

The submission of the AQRs in February precedes biennial quality dialogue meetings between QQI senior management teams and HEI senior management teams which are held in the early summer. These meetings afford an opportunity for the AQRs and issues arising within them, including identified

³ The AQR model was originally introduced for the previously established universities by the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB), a predecessor body of QQI, making it a long-standing feature of external QA oversight in that sector.

objectives for the coming period, to be discussed at a senior and strategic level. Previously, these meetings were held annually and were referred to as annual dialogue meetings (ADMs). They are now held biennially and are termed quality dialogue meetings (QDMs), which is how they will be referred to throughout this report (with the exception of direct quotations from provider staff).

QQI typically produces a summary synthesis/thematic analysis report on each group of AQRs (public HEIs and independent/private HEIs), which facilitates an overview of sectoral trends and developments during the reporting period. With the exception of 2022 and 2023, when they were published one year after submission of the relevant AQRs, the thematic analysis reports are typically published in quarter four of the reporting year.

In addition, as part of the AQR, QQI invites institutions to submit case studies pertinent to specific themes in quality assurance and quality enhancement in the reporting period. For example, for the reporting period covering September 1st 2020 - August 31st 2021, the themes identified were the impact of COVID-19, academic integrity and assuring and enhancing quality in digital environments. A collection of the unabridged case studies is published separately on [QQI's website](#).

Section 2: Evaluation of the AQR Model

2.1 QQI Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the AQR

In late 2022, QQI commissioned an evaluation of the AQR model. The project team were requested to:

Evaluate the usefulness of the AQR in fulfilling its purpose and suggest ways in which the AQR template and guidance could be improved (QQI Request for Tenders, November 2022).

At the time of this evaluation, Ireland's higher education sector was in the process of moving past the unprecedented disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, QQI was nearing the end of the CINTE external review cycle of public HEIs. Independent/private HEIs were progressing from reengagement, and the significant changes to governance and QA systems that this entailed, to a more stable period of QA implementation.

It was, therefore, deemed an appropriate juncture to evaluate the extent to which the AQR is fulfilling its intended purpose. Given its centrality to the quality assurance monitoring processes in Ireland and the volume of work entailed in the AQR process, it was also considered appropriate to identify whether adjustments can be made that will optimise the potential impact of the AQR within institutions and across the sector. As QQI is planning a broader review of its monitoring policy, it is anticipated that this evaluation of the AQR will function as a support tool to that process.

2.2 Methodology

The evaluation was conducted utilising a mixed methodology, collecting data via document review, surveys, focus groups and interviews with key stakeholders. Survey instruments were employed to facilitate broad participation and increase representation across the sector. The surveys were augmented by focus groups and interviews, enabling the collection of rich data and insights gleaned from discursive interactions.

The evaluation methodology was highly participatory, with HEI staff able to utilise multiple modalities to make input, including those individuals and teams within HEIs involved in compiling and authoring the reports. Other participant groups included external end-users of the AQRs, including QQI, the DFHERIS, the HEA and provider representative bodies - HECA, IUA and THEA. The mixed methodology also facilitated triangulation, ensuring that any recommendations made for change or enhancements to the templates and guidance are evidence-based and grounded in the documented concerns and considerations expressed by those working in various capacities across the sector.

The data collected in the course of the review is summarised below:

Document Type	Volume
2022 Public sector AQRs	20
2022 Independent/private sector AQRs	24
2023 AQR template	1
2021 Thematic Analysis reports	2

Table 1: Documents Reviewed

Surveys Undertaken

Three surveys⁴ were issued as part of the evaluation, opening on January 31st and closing on February 17th, 2023. Public and independent/private HEIs were asked to consult internally and provide a singular response to the survey that represented the institutional view. Survey response rates per participant group are summarised below:

Survey participant group	Population	Response Rate
Public HEIs	20	12 (60%)
Independent/private HEIs	24	17 (70.8%)
QQI senior staff	41	8 (19.5%)

Table 2: Overview of Surveys Undertaken

The project team was additionally provided with aggregate survey data from a limited sample of past CINNTE review panel members that specifically pertained to the AQR.

Focus Groups Facilitated

Four focus groups for HEI stakeholders were held. Institutions were asked to nominate one representative with good knowledge of the internal processes for compiling and submitting the AQR. Focus groups were scheduled as follows:

Stakeholder group	Date
Public sector HEI focus group 1	15th of February, 2023
Independent/private sector HEI focus group 1	17th of February, 2023
Public sector HEI focus group 2	21st of February, 2023
Independent/private sector HEI focus group 2	21st of February, 2023

Table 3: Overview of Focus Groups

⁴ The AQR Survey for Public HEIs; the AQR Survey for Independent and Private HEIs; and the AQR Survey for QQI Staff are available at appendices 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3 respectively.

Interviews Conducted

Interviews were conducted with representatives of the following organisations:

Organisation	Number of Individuals Interviewed
QQI	3
Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)	4
Higher Education Authority (HEA)	2
Irish Universities Association (IUA)	1
Technological Higher Education Association (THEA)	1
Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA)	3 ⁵

Table 4: Overview of Interviews

All data collection activities focused explicitly on evaluating the effectiveness of the AQR in fulfilling its stated purpose and identifying ways in which the current reporting process or template could be enhanced. Within this overarching objective, specific sub-objectives were defined. These were to:

- Identify whether, beyond meeting a regulatory requirement, the AQR is perceived to be supporting the development, implementation and enhancement of quality assurance within institutions;
- Gain insight into whether the AQR is contributing to the CINNTE review process by forming part of the evidence base required for panels to make their recommendations;
- Establish whether the AQR is providing sufficient or adequate detail to QQI to meet the organisation's regulatory and oversight responsibilities;
- Identify the extent to which the AQR or thematic analysis reports inform, or could inform in future, the work of the DFHERIS and the HEA, and other stakeholders across the sector.
- Identify whether the current process, template and submission timelines for the AQR are optimal.

⁵ Three representatives attended the interview between the project team and HECA to enable the organisation to make a comprehensive input in light of the fact that the role of chairperson was transitioning from one post holder to another at that time.

Section 3: Findings

In this section, findings have been collated under four main subheadings, which reflect the primary themes, issues and variables that emerged across the full range of stakeholder inputs to the evaluation. These are:

- Purpose of the AQR (discussed in section 3.1);
- Structure and content of the AQR template (discussed in section 3.2);
- Timing and submission process (discussed in section 3.3); and
- Thematic analysis (discussed in section 3.4).

Where appropriate, findings are presented alongside specific responses to surveys and illustrative quotations from interviews and focus groups. In all instances, the latter have been anonymised to protect the privacy of individual contributors.

3.1 Purpose of the AQR

The AQR process plays an important role within QQI's quality assurance monitoring and review framework for higher education providers. It is intended to provide confirmation and evidence to QQI that requisite quality assurance (QA) procedures are being implemented and regulatory requirements are being met by HEIs.

As one element of a wider system, the AQR is intended to interface with cyclical review processes by providing institutions with an iterative evidence base to draw upon when undertaking self-evaluation reports. It is also intended to inform QQI's quality dialogue meetings with each of the public, and more recently the independent/private, HEIs.

In its current format, the AQR process highlights areas of quality enhancement that institutions are concentrating on and signposts how this activity supports their strategic objectives. In this way, the AQR is also a mechanism for HEIs to keep a year-on-year record of completed and ongoing quality enhancement activities. As the report is shared (and thematic analysis reports are generated annually by QQI), it is also intended to act as a mechanism for peer learning and the sharing of good practice throughout the sector.

The purpose of the AQR is stated in the AQR template, which is circulated to HEIs annually. The current preface to the AQR template sets out the purpose and function of the AQR as follows:

The **Annual Quality Report** forms part of Quality and Qualifications Ireland's (QQI) quality assurance (QA) framework of engagement with higher education institutions (HEIs). The AQR provides documentary evidence of the development and evolution of each institution's internal quality system. It provides QQI with assurance that internal QA procedures have been established and are being implemented consistent with regulatory requirements.

The AQR, particularly part A, should assist with **document management** in the institutional review process and will facilitate institutions in providing review teams with procedural QA documentation in preparation for the external review process. It is an important part of the evidence base considered by **external review teams** as part of QQI's CINTE cycle of institutional reviews, demonstrating that the institution's internal QA system is aligned with QQI's Core and relevant Sector- and Topic-specific Statutory QA Guidelines, and with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area 2015 (ESG). It enables the review team to satisfy itself of compliance with these requirements for the purpose of the institutional review process.

Each AQR is **published in full on QQI's website**, providing transparency on the HEIs' assurance and enhancement of quality to external stakeholders. (As such, institutions should ensure that their submissions do not contain any data that they consider to be commercially sensitive.) Collectively, the AQRs comprise a single national repository of quality assurance practice in Irish higher education institutions.

Each year, QQI produces a synthesis report of the key themes highlighted across the AQRs, primarily arising from Part B of the reports.

The evaluation team tried to establish the extent to which the stated purpose is realised in practice. This was approached through focused questions in the surveys, focus groups and interviews.

3.1.1 Extent to which the AQR addresses stated purpose

The project team found that the extent to which the AQR meets each of its stated objectives is highly variable. Findings pertaining to each of the stated purposes of the AQR are discussed below and draw, as appropriate, upon inputs to the evaluation from HEIs, QQI and other key stakeholders, as well as the analysis of documentation conducted by the project team.

3.1.1.1 Purpose 1 – Provides Documentary Evidence of the Development and Evolution of Providers' QA System

Inputs to the evaluation indicate that stakeholders within both well-established and comparatively young HEIs have a sound grasp of the stated purpose of the AQR. In many instances, these purposes were explicitly endorsed and validated in inputs made to the evaluation; for example, public HEI representatives referenced the AQR in relation to its function as a tool for public accountability. For HEIs in general, it was noted that the AQR provides ongoing reassurance of compliance with *QQI's Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines* and, consequently, with the *European Standards and Guidelines (ESG)* via mapping within the template.

A finding of the evaluation is that the AQR largely meets this objective. Both public HEIs and QQI staff were positive about the extent to which the AQR effectively addresses this purpose, with all agreeing that the AQR is useful (67% and 63% respectively) or is somewhat useful (33% and 38% respectively) in providing a comprehensive overview of quality assurance within HEIs during the reporting period. Notwithstanding this fact, some comments from QQI stakeholders in response to this question in the survey were more cautious. For example:

I cannot ascertain whether the AQR is comprehensive - addresses the scope of QA or reports on all matters that arise in implementation e.g., whether scheduled reviews have taken place in an HEI, what the scope of QA is (e.g. does it extend to RPL, to campuses overseas or to partnerships). The sheer scale of HEI activities impacts this. (QQI staff survey respondent)

By contrast, independent/private providers reported more mixed views as to the AQR's effectiveness in this regard.

All stakeholders, however, indicated doubts as to the extent to which the AQR achieves other aspects of its stated purpose or the extent to which the AQR is used by QQI. "It is not quite clear what the QQI wants/expects from the AQR or uses them for. It is rarely discussed in detail during annual dialogue meetings." (Public HEI survey respondent).

3.1.1.2 Purpose 2 - Provides Assurance that Internal QA Procedures are Established and Implemented

The AQR somewhat meets this objective of providing QQI with assurance that internal QA procedures have been established and are being implemented consistent with regulatory requirements. Whilst HEIs were generally positive about the benefits of capturing an overview of the QA and governance systems in place within a provider, and the ability to showcase enhancement and good practice, caution was expressed as to the ability of the AQR to capture information on the effectiveness of that QA system. An illustrative comment from a public HEI respondent reflects much of the sentiment expressed during the evaluation:

Part A - Provided a comprehensive overview of QA policies and procedures in place in the organisation and highlighted changes in the QA framework from year to year. However, it doesn't necessarily provide information on the effectiveness of these policies and procedures or how consistently they are being implemented. It would be difficult to capture this within the AQR given unique policies and measures of success being used by HEIs. Part B - It wasn't clear from the document what should be included and the level of detail that was appropriate to include. It did provide an opportunity to highlight good news stories and quality enhancements within the HEI. The case study format was a welcome addition. The pace of change in HEIs is slow and therefore the quality impacts within the reporting period are not always significant. (Public HEI survey respondent)

This HEI perspective was shared by QQI staff:

The AQR certainly provides an overview of QA within HEIs but I am not sure the overview is comprehensive. Part A of the AQR deals with [the] internal QA system, which remains pretty stagnant year on year in these institutions. It is possible to copy and paste this section. This section provides an overview of the stated QA system but does little to interrogate the suitability of the system in response to changing external, internal & regulatory environments. It also doesn't necessarily consider the effectiveness of the system. Part B looks at QA - enhancement and impact which is [where] more of the detail and evidence is generated. However, this again, may not be comprehensive but instead are hand selected positive stories to tell. Maybe failing

to highlight failures, threats, weakness etc - all of which are necessary to have a comprehensive overview of QA. (QQI staff survey respondent)

Substantiating these views, the project team found no supporting evidence to suggest that the current version of the AQR provides documentary evidence of the implementation or effectiveness of the internal quality systems of public HEIs. A detailed analysis of the 44 AQRs submitted in 2022 revealed that although substantial narrative is provided regarding activities and initiatives undertaken, the impact of these is typically not captured within the reports. For example, in the 2022 AQRs, institutions were prompted to provide information pertaining to QA specific to academic integrity. The submissions offered descriptive detail on a broad range of student and staff facing initiatives. However, in almost all instances no data was provided that would yield insight into the effectiveness (impact) of these. Although it is acknowledged that impact is not always easily measured, in this example impact could feasibly have been considered in relation to the number of instances of academic misconduct recorded relative to previous reporting periods. The project team notes, however, that the current AQR template does not explicitly elicit such data and is not heavily directive to HEIs to include this.

Broader inputs to the evaluation also explicitly linked this finding to the nature of the information elicited by the AQR:

The AQR is not configured to fulfil this purpose, as the level of aggregation sits above the internal process tracking of improvement plans and associated records. Thematic analysis reports of issues arising from reviews are prepared for the university management team or Governing Body. (Public HEI survey respondent)

This finding was strikingly illustrated within survey responses from the public HEI sector, with no public HEI reporting unequivocally, for example, that the AQR is useful in enabling a demonstration of year-on-year progress in meeting institutional objectives and addressing review panel recommendations:

In your view, is the AQR useful in enabling your institution to demonstrate to an external audience year-on-year progress in meeting institutional objectives and addressing recommendations made by review panels?

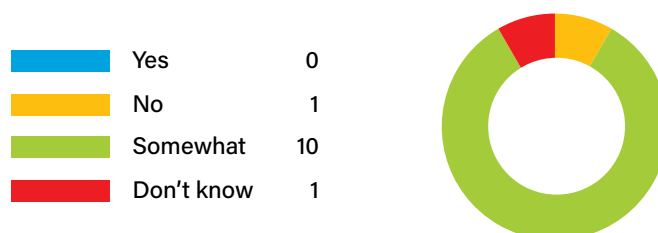


Figure 1: Public HEI survey response regarding the usefulness of the AQR in demonstrating year-on-year progress in meeting institutional objectives and addressing review recommendations

Commentary highlighted the perceived difficulty of demonstrating progress against longer term strategic objectives within a single reporting period. It was noted that objectives often transcend single AQR reporting periods and may also be vulnerable to shifts in both the external environment and internal priorities. A useful insight was provided in the following input from a survey respondent:

It is important that an external audience understands the context in which we work and that plans for enhancement and meeting objectives can be impacted by a number of factors e.g., availability of funding for projects or for staff to progress with enhancements or by a change

in priority within the institution as a whole or in a department. The AQR could be used to link the outputs of internal quality assurance as well as CINNTE with objectives. (Public HEI survey respondent)

An interesting finding within this aspect of the evaluation was that independent/private HEIs were somewhat more positive about the AQRs fulfilment of its stated purpose in this area.⁶ For example, 82% of survey respondents reported that the AQR is (53%), or is somewhat (29%), useful in enabling them to demonstrate to an external audience year-on-year progress in meeting institutional objectives and addressing recommendations made by review panels.

In your view, is the AQR useful in enabling your institution to demonstrate to an external audience year-on-year progress in meeting institutional objectives and addressing recommendations made by review panels?

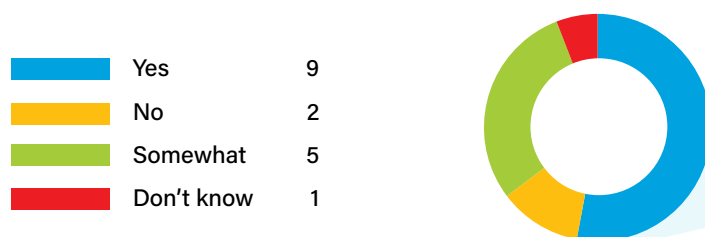


Figure 2: Independent/private HEI survey response regarding the usefulness of the AQR in demonstrating year-on-year progress in meeting institutional objectives and addressing review recommendations

The positive impact of completing the AQR and its integration with internal processes and embedding QA culture was also noted by many within this group. For some HEIs, the AQR was reported to be supporting the achievement of future strategic objectives, for example:

The engagement with the document, and its demonstration of year-on-year progress plays a welcome and enabling role in reflecting on and advancing the college's institutional objectives and addressing recommendations made by review panels. The college has increasingly embraced the opportunity to engage widely in completing the report to support this enhancement process, guiding the college's progress towards delegation of authority. (Independent/private HEI survey respondent)

One respondent, nonetheless, cautioned against future iterations of the AQR seeking information on how institutions have met panel recommendations or made progress in relation to specific objectives as it was felt that this would require the inclusion of too much additional detail. This is not a perspective shared by the project team: whilst recognising the need to reduce the overall length of the current AQR (discussed further in Section 3.3), the project team advises that strengthening the focus on the impact of a provider's QA activity, and the extent to which HEIs are effectively responding to recommendations and meeting their stated strategic objectives, is an important step in ensuring the efficacy of the AQR model. For example, the project team also observed a high degree of variability in the extent to which the reports made reference to or aligned with the outcomes of the CINNTE reviews.

Greater internal consistency was expressed in QQI staff responses to the question of whether the AQR is helpful in enabling HEIs to demonstrate year-on-year progress in meeting stated objectives and meeting recommendations arising from reviews:

⁶ Potential reasons why this might be the case are discussed in more detail in Section 3.1.21.

In your view, is the AQR useful in enabling HEIs to demonstrate year-on-year progress in meeting stated objectives and addressing recommendations made by internal and external QA review panels?

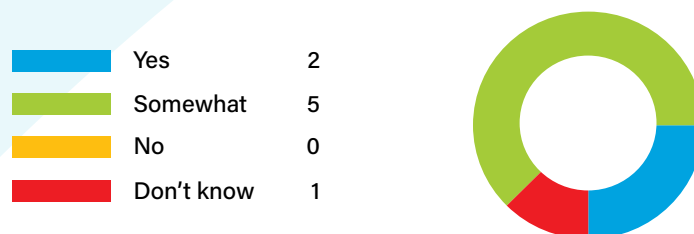


Figure 3: QQI staff survey response regarding the extent to which the AQR is useful in enabling HEIs to demonstrate year-on-year progress in meeting stated objectives and recommendations

Whilst the overall QQI staff response to this question was more positive than that from HEIs, and public HEIs in particular (see Figures 1 and 2), commentary from QQI staff reflected a degree of congruence with inputs from HEIs that outlined challenges in demonstrating the year-on-year progression of objectives:

The focus of the reports tend to be on QA enhancements/activities within a range of topics, used by institutions to showcase good practice. The functionality of the report as a year-on-year progress towards specific objectives/reporting on achievement of planned objectives is very variable. (QQI staff survey respondent)

In principle, I think this is the case, but the template for the AQR (as it is currently devised) can lend itself to repetition and a certain amount of predictability. HEIs are reporting what they think needs to be included but this doesn't necessarily lend itself to providing a full picture, which can leave it quite one dimensional. (QQI staff survey respondent)

Inputs from QQI staff also indicated that weaknesses in the current AQR process and template were potentially undermining the ability of HEIs to utilise the AQR as an effective tool for demonstrating the outcomes and impacts of internal QA activities, where such information is not explicitly sought.

Institutions tend to focus on the activity rather than the outcomes or impacts, e.g. information on the number of internal reviews undertaken and when they were completed, rather than any information on the findings of the internal reviews or the impact of previous activity. Having to report annually may inhibit the latter. (QQI staff survey respondent)

A comprehensive document review of the 44 AQRs submitted in 2022 was undertaken prior to the surveys being issued and focus groups and interviews being conducted. The document review largely triangulated the perspectives expressed in inputs to the review by HEI representatives and QQI senior staff and clearly validated these. The process of document review identified that the AQR is not structured in a way that appears to facilitate a clear view of year-on-year progress and development within HEIs. A high degree of variability in the nature of information reported, and the granularity of detail provided, also precluded the project team from making meaningful comparisons or extracting trends from the AQRs with a high degree of confidence.

3.1.1.3 Purpose 3 - Assist HEIs with Document Management in the Institutional Review Process

The evaluation found that the AQR only somewhat meets the objective of assisting HEIs with document management in the institutional review process or facilitating institutions in providing review teams with procedural QA documentation in preparation for the external review process. The following is an illustrative reflection of the feedback received in the public HEI survey:

It was a useful way of looking back to gain oversight of overall QA activity in the review period. However, there was additional data needed for the CINNTE review, e.g. student data, faculty overviews, and the student voice.

As demonstrated in Figure 4 below, public HEIs also reported that the current AQR template does not, or only somewhat, interact with, or complements, other forms of internal QA oversight or reporting, suggesting that “it is an output rather than source document” (public HEI survey respondent).

Does the AQR interact with, or complement, other forms of reporting or oversight of quality assurance within your institution (e.g., quality improvement plans; action plans arising from reviews etc.)?

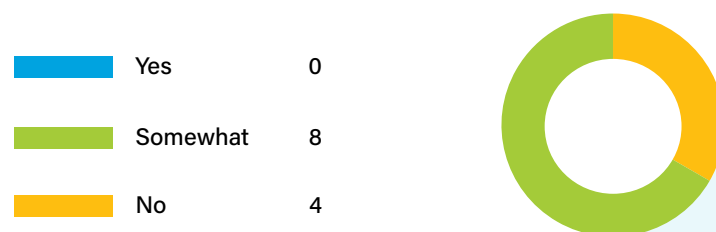


Figure 4: Public HEI AQR survey response on whether the AQR interacts with or complements other forms of reporting or oversight within institutions

Respondents provided mixed inputs regarding whether the AQR process assisted them, or somewhat assisted them, in preparing for cyclical review (CINNTE) by QQI. Feedback provided via survey inputs included reasonably positive commentary; for example, “The AQRs were used by working groups in the preparation of the ISER”; “A review of previous AQRs was useful to identify any additional matters that needed to be highlighted/referred to within the ISER” and “It was extremely useful when preparing stakeholders contributing to the ISER, and to report QA progress and developments over of a number of years.” (Public HEI survey respondents). However, commentary within focus groups representing the same sector reflected greater ambivalence:

We thought that the AQR would take a little bit of the work out of the ISER but it didn't. The focus was slightly different. The ISER was up to date for the review period whereas AQR is historic. (Public HEI focus group contributor)

Its use and value are not clear and the CINNTE review process does not draw on it. (Public HEI focus group contributor)

The feedback from those HEIs that had completed the CINNTE review process was that the institutional self-evaluation report (ISER) is not adequately aligned with the AQR, thus minimising its usefulness for that process. This was a cause of frustration to providers who had been operating on the understanding that the annual effort expended in completing the AQR would yield benefits in the cyclical review process.

The ambivalence expressed by HEIs on the extent to which the AQR is fulfilling its stated purpose in this area was mirrored in inputs to the evaluation from senior QQI staff members. These inputs validated many of the views raised by HEIs, indicating they are mutually held concerns. For example, QQI staff were divided as to the extent to which the AQR interacts with, or supports, other forms of QA oversight in which they or their teams are involved:

Does the AQR interact with, or support, other forms of oversight of QA within HEIs in which you and/or your team are involved (e.g., programme validation, institutional review etc.)?

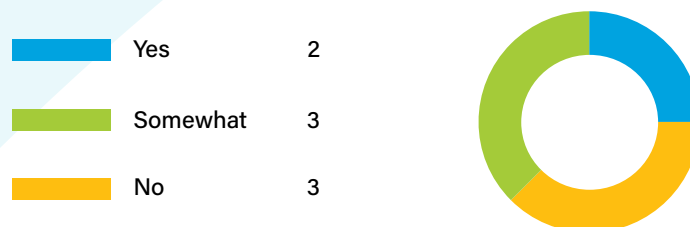


Figure 5: QQI staff survey response regarding the extent to which the AQR interacts with or supports other forms of oversight of HEIs

To maintain the privacy of respondents, the survey data was not gathered at a sufficiently granular level to indicate views on this topic per specific QQI process or operational area.

3.1.1.4 Purpose 4 - Forms an Important Part of the Evidence Base Considered by External Review Teams

To the extent to which the project team could ascertain from the available evidence, the AQR does not meet the objective of forming an important part of the evidence base considered by external review teams for the CINNTE cycle of institutional reviews. Some HEIs reported that the AQR was not discussed at the site visit and stated that it was not referenced in review reports. To answer this question more definitively, however, would necessitate engagement with panel members and this was deemed impractical by both QQI and the project team given the substantial time lag between this evaluation and many of the reviews.

[We] hoped it would be useful for CINNTE but it didn't prove so. The CINNTE panel said they didn't use it at all. This was what we were always promised by QQI for the AQR, but that wasn't the case in the end. (Public HEI focus group contributor)

One public HEI survey respondent suggested that "Much of the information in the AQR was included in the ISER for the Institutional Review. Suggest that, in future, the most recent AQR be submitted in lieu of an ISER for an Institutional review." The project team does not concur with this view. A comprehensive analysis of the 44 AQRs submitted in 2022 indicated that reports are not equivalent in terms of institutional self-reflection, nor do they provide the clear analysis of institutional development over a sustained period that is required to inform a CINNTE review team.

In further inputs to the survey, QQI staff expressed the expectation that the AQRs would support the CINNTE review process, in accordance with similar expectations expressed by HEIs. For example, "The AQRs covering the previous 2-3 reporting periods in advance of an institutional review provide accompanying documentation to the ISER submitted by the HEI." (QQI staff survey respondent)

However, QQI staff noted concerns that, in practice, the AQRs had not integrated well into CINNTE processes, an observation that is congruent with statements made by public HEIs.

The AQRs are designed to inform the institutional review process, but from experience ... the review team have not found it particularly helpful. They have found the AQRs being single year, hard to cross reference to the ISER, which is for a longer period of time and much more reflective/analytical. (QQI staff survey respondent)

3.1.1.5 Purpose 5 - Provides Transparency on the HEIs' Assurance and Enhancement of Quality to External Stakeholders

The evaluation found that the AQR largely meets the objective of providing transparency on HEIs' assurance and enhancement of quality to external stakeholders through publication of the reports by both QQI and HEIs themselves; however, this transparency is somewhat compromised by not being directly shared with, or highlighted to, other key bodies, such as DFHERIS and the HEA. Findings from stakeholder interviews conducted to inform this evaluation indicate that non-HEI stakeholders have a limited awareness of the AQR's role and significance. These bodies indicated that, in some instances, that they were not aware of the AQR reports and, when made aware, had difficulty in finding them on the QQI website. This indicates that the AQR's stated purpose to provide transparency on the HEI's assurance and enhancement of quality to external stakeholders may not be being realised to its full potential.

Both HEIs and the external stakeholders interviewed also expressed that the reports are long and hard to navigate or search by topic, which results in them being under-utilised by staff and/or limits their potential for future use. The project team endorses this view, having found the AQRs submitted in 2022 to be overly lengthy and to lack comparability by topic across the sector.

The thematic analysis reports produced by QQI were more widely utilised among external stakeholders; however, this was not consistently the case. For example, some DFHERIS representatives confirmed in interviews that the thematic analysis reports are regularly received and may be sent to the minister. However, in other instances these were not thought to be received directly but accessed through searching QQI's website.

Notably, survey responses indicated that in some instances HEIs proactively share the completed AQRs with external stakeholders to their institutions. Five out of 12 (42%) of public HEIs responding to the survey reported that they share the AQR with other bodies, including regulatory bodies in other jurisdictions in which the HEI operates; PSRBs; and as part of externally funded programmes or collaborative provision. One independent/private HEI reported the same, stating that they shared their AQR as part of European funding applications.

3.1.1.6 Purpose 6 - Plays a Role in Facilitating Peer Learning and Promoting Good Practice

Whilst not explicitly stated in the AQR template as an objective, the project team understands from QQI and the thematic analysis reports that the AQR is intended to play a role in facilitating peer learning and promoting good practice. It largely meets this (unstated) objective, which is discussed further in Section 3.1.2.2. The project team heard very positive feedback from HEIs regarding the case studies in particular and a desire was expressed for QQI to further maximise the benefits of the case studies by hosting an in-person workshop or conference centred around the case studies following the submission of the AQRs. This is discussed further in Section 3.1.3.2.

3.1.2 Purposes in Practice

Whilst the majority of providers agreed that the AQR is a worthwhile process, inputs to the evaluation indicated that the stated purpose of the AQR and the purposes it serves in practice frequently diverge. It was also repeatedly voiced that there is lack of clarity around how the AQR is actually used by QQI (or other non-HEI stakeholders), which combined with the lack of feedback from QQI discussed in Section 3.1.2.2 below, has resulted in the report shifting away from its regulatory and accountability purpose and towards a stronger focus on highlighting enhancement activities. Providers voiced that:

The intended primary audience and purpose of the AQR needs to be articulated in objective terms, so that the compliance and comparative objectives of the reported data can lead to

simplification of the Report. The Report does appear overly onerous, and the use case for each of the data field items should be clarified so that the limits and opportunities of the Report as a monitoring mechanism can be established more clearly. (Public HEI survey respondent)

Nonetheless, benefits (as well as challenges) associated with the AQR process were reported by HEIs. These are described in the sections below.

3.1.2.1 Internal Benefits and Integration of the AQR Process

In considering findings related to the internal benefits and integration of the AQR process within HEIs, it is noted that although the evaluation methodology elicited data from two distinct categories of HEI (public and independent/private), these two groups are internally very diverse. The public HEI sector encompasses long-established universities, newly formed technological universities and the remaining institutes of technology. The independent/private HEI grouping includes well-established providers offering suites of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes across multiple domains and locations; highly specialised providers delivering major awards in specific domains; and small, niche providers that offer, in some instances, less than three programmes to a small number of students annually.

In this context, the facilitation of very well-attended focus groups during the evaluation provided a useful mechanism for discerning further nuances in HEI experiences and perspectives. These inputs enable the analysis in this section to tentatively extend beyond the conventional grouping of providers as either public or independent/private sector. This distinction has been found to lack explanatory value in the context of this evaluation. This was particularly apparent in relation to the internal benefits that providers felt were yielded through participation in the AQR process. Although outliers exist, inputs to the evaluation pertaining to this were predominantly clustered around three, rather than two categories. These can be roughly characterised as (1) established universities and institutes of technology (2) new technological universities, and large independent/private providers, and (3) small, niche independent/private providers.

Group 1 - Established Universities and Institutes of Technology

Although all twelve public HEI survey respondents reported that the AQR is, or is somewhat, useful in providing a comprehensive overview to an external audience of quality assurance activity in the institution during the reporting period, within established universities the AQR was not considered to be a core aspect of the QA system, and was often characterised as somewhat incidental.

It's a rehashing of things reported in different places in different ways. So people are copying from other funding reports, strategic reports etc. It can be useful to pull together all the good things that are happening; a summary of all the quality processes. But the end product needs to be more user friendly to be of help. (Public HEI focus group contributor)

It has very little impact once it's done. It's done because QQI wants it, it's not widely used. (Public HEI focus group contributor)

This is perhaps reflected in the finding from both the project team's review of public HEI AQRs submitted in 2022, and from survey inputs, that AQRs are not elevated to greater prominence or brought to the senior governance structures of these HEIs for review or approval.

While the Report as an instrument provides the necessary sectoral assurance and compliance with ESG, in its detail it does not offer significant opportunities to meet internal reporting requirements to management teams, governing committees or governing bodies. (Public HEI survey respondent)

Group 2 - New Technological Universities and Large Independent/Private Providers,

In contrast, dialogue with representatives of both the newer technological universities and the larger independent/private HEIs indicated that the AQR had typically been incorporated into core, internal reporting processes as part of the transformative amalgamation or post-reengagement processes respectively. The significant changes to governance and QA systems incurred as part of these processes were harnessed as an opportunity to embed the AQR and maximise its potential for internal benefit. In these contexts, the AQR was reported to be realising its potential to serve internal QA needs. For example, the AQR was reported to provide a mechanism to bring together the processes of merging institutions under a shared umbrella within technological universities. In independent/private HEIs, the process of compiling the AQR was reported to encourage ownership or 'buy-in' on an annual basis amongst staff. In these HEIs, the providers' QA processes were either relatively new or being re-developed as part of amalgamation or post reengagement. As such, there was scope to embed the AQR, rather than it being imposed on top of alternative and pre-existing reporting mechanisms.

As a new organisation, the AQR probably will be useful going forward to tell all staff exactly what we've done during the reporting period. This has been a starting block period. So the AQR is more useful now than it was before. A lot of people are informed by it. (Public HEI focus group contributor)

Group 3 - Small, Niche HEIs

Some very small providers reported in both the survey and in focus group discussions that the burden of completing the AQR is too great in relation to its perceived benefits. They articulated that they don't have the resources to fully support this reporting model whilst simultaneously continuing other QA activity. It was further expressed that the current template is not fit-for-purpose in the context of small 'micro-providers' and an alternative model more suited to the size and scale of such providers should be considered:

We have QA accreditation with other organisations in other ways; [which involves] a 5 year inspection on your business and they look at marketing and areas that QQI don't look at or cover - they do a mid-point review for the 5 year cycle, there isn't a questionnaire for you to fill in - it is not one size fits all - there are no boxes that you have to leave empty because nothing has changed ... Some of the [AQR] questions are challenging; there is a one size fits all approach at QQI. A more open reflective piece would be better where you state what you say you're going to do, what you've done and what you're going to do next. The AQR is just an administrative task that I have to box tick to do and be able to move on. (Independent/private HEI focus group contributor)

The amount of time taken to pull the document together - QQI need to look at something more streamlined. Some changes could be very simple like the upload mechanism in the portal which adds additional time for no benefit. (Independent/private HEI focus group contributor)

It is noted that the perspectives expressed in inputs from public and independent/private sector institutions in this section are congruent with the reflections on the AQR among QQI staff members. They are also validated by observations gleaned by the project team from a comprehensive document review and analysis of the 44 AQRs submitted by HEIs in 2022.

In terms of the regulatory burden imposed by completion of the AQR, half of the public HEIs responding to the survey reported that the current reporting process is unreasonably burdensome, and views were mixed as to whether review of each other's reports was useful or insightful for peer learning:

Does review of the AQRs of other higher education institutions provide useful insight and/or learning for your institution?

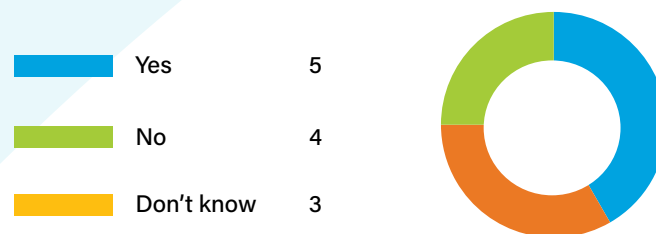


Figure 6: Public HEI survey response regarding the extent to which review of other HEI's AQRs is beneficial to providers

By contrast, 77% of independent/private HEI respondents reported that the reporting process is light or significant but reasonable.⁷ Independent/private HEI respondents were also somewhat more positive about the benefits of reviewing other providers' AQR reports with 59% seeing this as beneficial.

These benefits arising from the AQR process reported by independent/private HEIs may be somewhat hampered by recent amendments to the reporting requirements. Among several of the independent/private HEIs making input to the evaluation, it was apparent that attempts had been made to ensure that the AQR interacted with, or complemented, other forms of internal QA reporting and oversight. However, the uncertainty at the time of this evaluation pertaining to future requirements for submission of the AQR for this sector was an area of significant concern. Independent/private HEIs had been informed that an AQR submission was not required from them in 2023 and no QDM had taken place the previous year. Contributors to focus groups indicated concerns that significant work undertaken to embed the AQR into internal processes may subsequently be devalued internally and make the AQR difficult to reintroduce:

There was an argument in the college as to how much energy to give to the AQR. Someone has to champion it. And then suddenly it wasn't required and that threw us. You have to start the argument again. If it is brought in again, it has to be clear what the requirements are. (Independent/private HEI focus group contributor)

...they are not doing it this year. That in itself makes you question the value of it. What is the focus for it? We find it useful internally as we lined it up with internal processes and hopefully it will feed into cyclical review, but you would wonder about QQI's priorities when it was dropped this year. (Independent/private HEI focus group contributor)

We were sold this - we worked hard [and] we got buy-in and made progress and had a positive first quality dialogue meeting. Then it was dropped - and if it is now reintroduced it is going to be doubly hard to reintroduce this. (Independent/private HEI focus group contributor)

3.1.2.2 Wider Benefits of the AQR Process

Seventy-five percent of public HEI respondents and 76% of independent/private provider survey respondents stated that there were benefits to their institution of completing the AQR, whilst three public HEI respondents indicated that they didn't know and four independent/private HEI respondents stated that it did not have a benefit for their institution. One public HEI respondent noted that:

⁷ The AQR template for both public and independent/private providers is very similar with some modifications to reflect sector-specific topics, such as CINNTE reviews.

The AQR has been useful in requiring all areas in the University with responsibilities with regard to quality assurance to be reflected in a public document. These responsibilities are much broader than the Quality Office. It provides an opportunity to take a holistic look at the QA ecosystem within the institution, and to demonstrate the complexities of that ecosystem externally. (Public HEI survey respondent)

Independent/private HEIs were, in general, very positive about the internal benefits derived from the introduction of the QR process. The following example is illustrative of the kinds of feedback provided:

The AQR serves as the key document that drives the agenda of the Quality Assurance Committee in the College. We have also implemented a modified version of the template to be completed by all key offices within the College to a) raise awareness of quality assurance across the institution and b) encourage all internal stakeholders to take responsibility for quality assurance in their area. When we piloted this new report, the Governing Body specifically singled out the document for giving them a better sense of the work that the various offices are doing. (Independent/private HEI survey respondent)

This positivity is also reflective of the fact that 88% of independent/private HEI respondents reported that the AQR interacts with/complements (76%), or somewhat interacts with/complements (12%), other forms of reporting or oversight of quality assurance within their institution. Perhaps reflective of this, and in contrast to practice in the public sector, in independent/private HEIs the Academic Council (or equivalent) approves all AQRs submitted.

Benefits flowing from the inclusion of case studies were widely reported by the majority of HEIs. The following comment is indicative of views expressed:

The introduction of case studies has been very helpful. Being able to showcase particular projects is very useful. QQI need to think of ways they can showcase those case studies more widely. This has helped us to really broaden the discussion in terms of quality. (Public HEI focus group contributor)

Loved the case studies and learned loads from them. (Independent/private HEI focus group contributor)

The role of the AQR in enabling HEIs to highlight and showcase enhancement activities in which they are engaged, particularly through the inclusion of case studies, was frequently discussed by HEIs. It was noted the AQR may sometimes represent the first or only opportunity for a HEI to collate all such information in one place:

It helps bring a number of activities together that may not be in the immediate sight of the quality office. This is particularly true of larger organisations. It is also useful to showcase the range of enhancements undertaken across the University. (Public HEI survey respondent)

However, even here there was a desire for more clarity from QQI on what kinds of information are useful to include:

With enhancement it's harder to know what to include. You want to be able to showcase what's happening. Sometimes you only find out the good work when you consult for the AQR. How useful that is to QQI is another question. (Public HEI Focus Group contributor)

Similarly, it was noted that "Enhancement can and does include everything. But is that useful?" (Public HEI focus group contributor). Notably, 83% of public HEI respondents and all independent/private

HEI respondents reported that thematic prompts on topical challenges for the sector (e.g., academic integrity) are helpful or somewhat helpful.

Inputs to focus groups indicated that the synthesis/thematic reports produced by QQI were considered somewhat useful in this regard by HEI stakeholders. However, among this group alternative mechanisms for peer learning are also explicitly sought and these are discussed further in Section 3.1.3.2

3.1.2.3 Feedback on AQR Process to Providers

All providers unanimously reported that they receive no substantial feedback or communication from QQI on the quality of their AQR submission or the extent to which it meets QQI's expectations. This makes ensuring that HEIs include the 'correct' or 'desired' content challenging and potentially reduces the capacity of the AQR to meet its stated objectives. It also demotes the importance and value placed on the report, which for some public HEIs has increasingly become a routine, bureaucratic exercise. One provider noted that "We don't get any feedback, so [there is] no sense [that] it is valued." (Public HEI focus group contributor). This view was reiterated by the majority of other HEIs. For example, "We didn't receive any substantial feedback - it is like putting something into a black hole, you don't know if it's useful ... are we actually providing value?" (Public HEI focus group contributor) and "We had absolutely no feedback from QQI on this." (Independent/private HEI focus group contributor).

Among public HEIs, a further and notable disconnect was perceived between the contents of the AQR and the focus of the quality dialogue meetings (QDMs) held between senior management teams in QQI and HEIs. HEI staff expressed an expectation that the QDMs would centre on the AQR, but reflected that in practice this is not always the case. Whilst the AQR is a standing agenda item for QDMs, feedback from public HEIs indicated that the report is often not sufficiently addressed in discussion. For example, a focus group contributor summarised views in the group stating that, "There is no picking up on any themes from the AQR and no sign that anybody is terribly familiar with the AQRs at those meetings."

Independent/private HEIs that had had the opportunity to engage in QDMs with QQI noted that this had been a valuable experience. In contrast with the perspectives shared by public HEI representatives, the experience of this sector was that the AQR informed the quality dialogue meetings, of which there has been one round to date for this sector. The QDMs were reported as an avenue for the provision of feedback on, what were in many cases the first or second, reports produced by these institutions. There was unanimous agreement that the AQRs were central to those meetings; that QQI staff had thoroughly engaged with the reports and were well-informed on their content; and provided useful and constructive feedback on the submissions.

I found the AQR dialogue meeting very worthwhile. I got a lot out of it. It was feedback that we were far too descriptive in the AQR - the observations were very valid and helpful. I'd say a lot of us fall prey to that and write descriptively and not reflectively. (Independent/private HEI focus group contributor)

It was widely agreed that the QDM held to date with independent/private HEIs represented a very positive and worthwhile engagement from the providers' perspective and disappointment was expressed that it wasn't carried through in following years. Providers appreciated that capacity issues may restrict the ability of a full QQI senior management team to engage in annual quality meetings, but expressed a desire to meet at least one QQI representative to discuss the preceding AQR and any related or other quality matters.

The view of the project team is that much value can be gained from placing a greater emphasis on the provision of feedback and ensuring that dialogue with providers (in both the public and the independent/private sector) is facilitated on a routine basis. Feedback from QQI could be anticipated to lead directly to material improvements in the consistency and comparability of the information reported in the AQRs. Regular dialogue meetings could be anticipated to augment that feedback and further validate the engagement of institutions with this and other monitoring activities.

3.1.2.4 Additional Challenges for the AQR

As the AQRs are published on QQI's website (and in some instances, also on the HEI websites), it is noted that it is therefore open to other parties to use the AQRs to serve their own ends. During this evaluation, representatives of public HEIs queried the role and value of the AQR for a broader external audience during focus groups. Dialogue reflected that there was a lack of clarity pertaining to any specific uses for them across the sector: "Who is the external audience for the AQRs? Who's reading them? This needs to be answered before talking about content. Other than QQI, who reads an AQR?" (Public HEI focus group contributor).

Interviews with representatives of the DFHERIS and the HEA, however, confirmed that some (though not all) staff within those organisations are aware of and use the published AQRs. Notably, the AQRs are used as a tool to inform independent, expert evaluation panels by the HEA. Interview data also indicated that they may be used to provide reassurance that a provider's governance and QA framework is sufficiently established by the HEA and subsequently influence funding decisions for independent/private providers in particular, for example in respect of Springboard and the Human Capital Initiative (HCI).

HEIs are also cognisant of the implications associated with the AQRs serving additional functions beyond those originally intended by QQI. This is an important consideration in relation to the manner in which information is presented, the sensitivity of the data elicited and the capacity of institutions to ensure this is properly contextualised for unknown audiences that may lack knowledge of the dynamics of the sector or the policy backdrop. Representatives of independent/private HEIs noted that commercial sensitivities were a consideration for any published documentation.

There is a tendency to have to use this as a marketing brochure and a fear of publicising something negative like you changed your mind or some other action that means you're not going to meet an objective in your [Quality Improvement Plan]. You fear to put that into a published report, and there are also issues of commercial sensitivity. (Independent/private HEI focus group contributor)

Challenges were also cited by HEI representatives that derive from a lack of a shared definition of (or agreement on how to measure) key terms, for example, progression. It was noted that this engendered a lack of true comparability of data and led to tensions around whether the presentation of more or less data was desirable. Mixed views were expressed by providers and various other stakeholders in relation to this. These inputs often overlapped with comments discussed earlier, in which stakeholders noted ambiguity surrounding whether the AQR is an enhancement-led document that captures good practice or is a regulatory tool that emphasises compliance, transparency and comparability. The views of the project team and other stakeholders in relation to this are discussed further in Section 3.1.2, which deals in more detail with the appropriate balance of quantitative and qualitative data.

3.1.3 Potential Purpose(s)

Feedback from all stakeholders indicates a significant future role for the AQR (or other QQI-led annual report) in the oversight of the sector. Inputs to the evaluation from DFHERIS, the HEA, HEIs and other stakeholders reflected a desire to maximise the value of the reports and a desire to further explore what contribution the AQR might make in the context of the substantive changes in progress and on the horizon for the tertiary education sector. DFHERIS, in particular, welcomed this evaluation as a potential input to its development of a quality agenda for the HE sector.

3.1.3.1 Wider Sectoral Role

Interviews with representatives of DFHERIS indicated that whilst some staff used the AQRs on an 'as needs' basis, some senior staff were not aware of the AQR or the sectoral thematic analyses and stated they had not received copies of them to date. Nonetheless, all departmental representatives indicated that they would value increased reporting of clear metrics that could inform policy making in the AQR or via an alternative mechanism. It was suggested that useful metrics would pertain to key aspects of the student experience, for example, student-teacher ratios; workload balance between research and teaching and learning for academic staff; retention, progression and completion rates; metrics on inclusion of underrepresented or disadvantaged groups; and the extent to which stakeholder feedback is sought and used, including employers and Student Survey data. Understanding the impact of funding initiatives was also a concern. It was acknowledged that a clearer picture of what metrics would be desirable to collect through the AQR (or alternative mechanism) will become more apparent as the [Funding the Future - Investing in knowledge and skills: Ireland's competitive advantage](#) working group progresses its work.

No definitive suggestions were made that the AQR is the appropriate or only mechanism for gathering this data, though the benefits of harnessing an existing reporting process were noted. Departmental representatives were keen to stress that any existing mechanism that is working well and serving both QQI and HEI needs should not be undermined by diluting or diverting its purpose. Moreover, an appetite for the expertise within QQI to be harnessed and utilised to provide policy-focused digests drawing upon the AQRs was indicated.

Inputs to the evaluation from the HEA mirrored those of DFHERIS; some staff are aware of the AQR and confirmed that they are used to provide supplementary background and quality information on public HEIs to independent panels on a range of processes, including those involved in evaluating performance compacts. Other staff indicated that they had not been aware of the AQRs or the thematic analyses; however, now that they are aware and have reviewed some, they can envisage an important role for individual AQRs in providing reassurance that appropriate governance and QA is in place for independent/private providers making applications for allocation of Springboard and HCI funding. An earlier publication of the documents at the end of the year would be beneficial in facilitating this use.

A view was expressed that the AQR may usefully play an enhanced, and potentially statutory, role in the context of future developments in the tertiary system, for example, in relation to designated bodies under the HEA Act and the greater accountability required in relation to the Funding the Future strategy. However, it was noted that for the AQRs to be more widely useful they would benefit from being truncated and made more accessible to the reader. All HEA respondents indicated that the AQRs had not been shared with them directly (to their recollection), had not been discussed at inter-agency meetings and were difficult to find on the QQI website.

Within HEIs, there is broad agreement that some sort of annual accountability measure in respect of the QA system is needed. This was particularly recognised in dialogue during focus groups with public HEI representatives, who acknowledged that there must be public accountability for the publicly-

funded institutions. However, concerns were expressed that if the AQRs are going to be used to inform wider decision-making/funding decisions as outlined above then work is needed to ensure that reports are generating comparable information. Questions were also raised as to whether the degree of accountability required from the publicly-funded public HEIs is the same as for independent/private providers (which may or may not be accessing public funding).

This focus on the comparability of the current content of the AQRs, which the project team found to be highly dependent on the individual reporting choices of HEIs, was congruent with various inputs to focus group dialogue. Within focus groups, doubts were expressed regarding the usefulness of the current profile of information in the reports. However, suggestions for how this may be addressed varied widely.

Include more data and remove the waffle and self-congratulatory elements. Replace this with real tangible achievements and data that can be used as a sector. (Independent/private HEI focus group contributor)

It's hard to say what should be in there and what shouldn't. The info in Part A is important. It's important to show that the institutions are carrying out QA in HEIs – student feedback, internal reviews and accreditations, external examiners, etc. It's important to show what they're doing with the info they're getting from those quality procedures. (Public HEI focus group contributor)

I agree that the reports should be more qualitative. It would be a very constrained report with a more quantitative focus. Those metrics are already with QQI in terms of certification numbers etc. and already available on the infographics in the main. (Independent/private focus group contributor)

3.1.3.2 Future Role Within QQI

QQI staff expressed a variety of views as to possible future uses of the AQR as illustrated in Figure 7 below:

Is it intended that the AQR will interact with, or support, other forms of oversight in future (e.g., delegated authority to make awards, monitoring and review of the IEM etc.)?

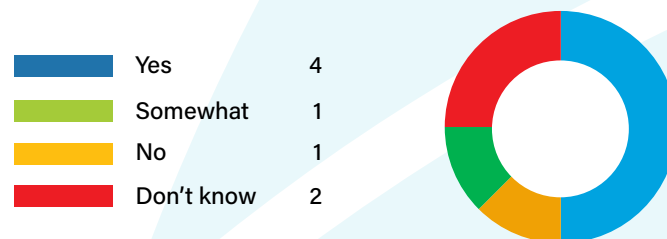


Figure 7: QQI staff survey response regarding whether the AQR will interact with or support future oversight functions

QQI is planning a review of its monitoring policy. In that context, whilst some staff expressed a view in the survey that the AQR could be adapted and utilised for other purposes, for example, in relation to new functions including the International Education Mark (IEM) and Listed Awarding Bodies (LABs), there are divergent views as to whether it will be possible to achieve a single monitoring instrument for the full range of QQI's QA regulatory activities.

Viewed collectively, these inputs reflected that there is scope for both an internal and a broader national conversation between QQI and its national partners around quality reporting that serves broader national needs. They also indicate that the current evaluation of the AQR is particularly timely, as it presents an opportunity to reflect on mechanisms that will inform future oversight of the sector.

3.1.3.3 Potential Enhancement Events

A unanimous and consistent theme throughout focus group dialogues with both public and independent/private HEIs was the desire for the AQR and thematic analysis reports to be linked to, or followed up with, sector-wide, in-person events focused on enhancement and the sharing of good practice. These could be informed by, or centre on, the case studies submitted. Feedback included:

The report serves accountability but this needs to be complemented by a forum - we need a quality forum - you send it in and you neither get feedback nor any engagement with colleagues. (Public HEI focus group contributor)

Do have forums for discussion and do have the annual QQI conference. Perhaps use that a little bit more. (Public HEI focus group contributor)

Contributors to focus groups emphasised the need to facilitate in-person events to supplement online communities of practice, noting that substantially more was gained from these.

A workshop day to coincide with the thematic analysis would be great, highlighting some of the good practice included in the report. Otherwise you don't give it the time that's needed. Online events are less effective. An away day would be good. (Public HEI focus group contributor)

You pay more attention and are more committed to offsite events. Webinars and other online events don't get hold of your attention in the same way as other distractions are there. (Public HEI focus group contributor)

Although some independent/private providers indicated an appetite to engage in events as a HE sector, others noted that smaller providers would value opportunities to network and engage in peer learning with others operating at a similar scale.

As a small provider you get lost in a generic QQI event with the big players. We need something for private providers rather than a larger HE event. QQI could act as a facilitator - create the space for a themed event for private providers with QA front and centre, where the case studies and exemplars of good practice could be showcased and shared. We need space for conversation between providers. (Independent/private HEI focus group contributor)

3.2 The structure and content of the AQR template

HEI representatives made specific inputs to the evaluation on the AQR template as a whole and in relation to Part A and Part B of the current template specifically. In addition to some positive comments which reflect and reiterate the stated and intended objectives for the AQR, the following comments reflect some of the more ambivalent views expressed:

In terms of the template itself, it's time consuming to complete. In true QQI style, if you're not an expert in the lingo it is daunting. It's hard to know which section to put info in. I can see in the attempt to not be too prescriptive it's become too ambiguous. (Independent/private HEI focus group contributor)

Part A is just a rehashing of QA which had just been done for reengagement so it is laborious and of no value to anyone. Part B was more interesting and I'm more interested in the case studies as providing real life examples of dealing with issues. But even Part B - when you only have a small number of programmes, there is not a lot to be said. A one size fits all approach is not appropriate. (Independent/private HEI focus group contributor)

Part A

Both public and independent/private HEIs reported mixed views as to the extent to which the current format and headings in Part A are adequate, with independent/private providers slightly more likely to agree that the current headings and format are adequate:

Are the current format and headings in Part A of the AQR adequate to demonstrate the range and nature of quality assurance activity in your institutions?

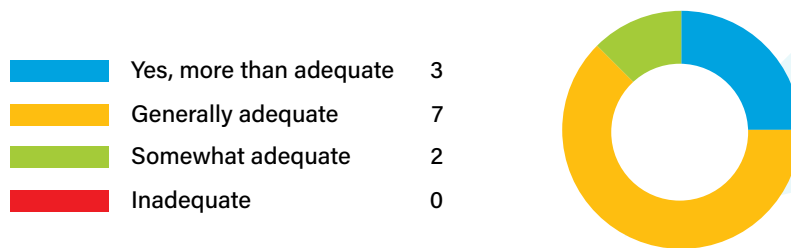


Figure 8: Public HEI survey response regarding the adequacy of the current format and headings in Part A of the AQR

Are the current format and headings in Part A of the AQR adequate to demonstrate the range and nature of quality assurance activity in your institutions?

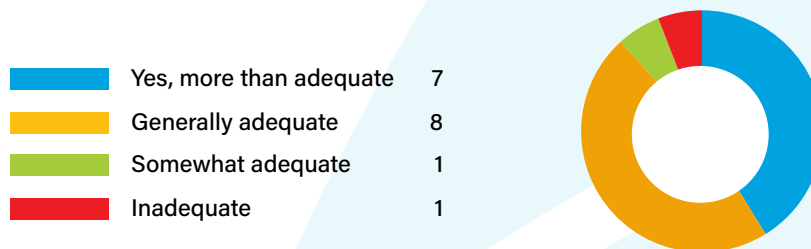


Figure 9: Independent/private HEI survey response regarding the adequacy of the current format and headings in Part A of the AQR

Suggestions for streamlining and enhancing the report made by survey respondents included:

Do not repeat headings from Part A in Part B, as it leads to duplication. Part A should include the static policy context where links to policies and procedures are provided, and updates to these should be provided on an annual basis, year-on-year. In the same section, enhancements currently addressed in Part B should be included. (Public HEI survey respondent)

Consider [the] use of a template derived from the Statutory Guidelines which could be populated by institutions with urls indicating published policies and procedures that are publicly available. (Public HEI survey respondent)

I feel there is too much repetition between part A and our QA Manual. (Independent/private HEI survey respondent)

HEIs also requested improved navigability of the report template to enhance its functionality for HEI staff. The project team endorses the suggestions made by HEI representatives that part A of the AQR be significantly truncated and reduced to simply include links to policies and procedures, a summary of changes to these since the last reporting period and a consistently formatted list of any new appointments/roles.

Part B

The majority of public HEIs reported in the survey that the format and headings in Part B of the AQR are generally or somewhat adequate to capture significant developments or enhancements to quality assurance activity in their institutions. The majority of independent/private HEI respondents were more positive and expressed that the Part B headings were more than adequate or generally adequate. Only one public and one independent/private HEI reported that these are inadequate. Feedback on how this section might be enhanced focused on minimising length and "scope creep".

We need to be mindful of scope creep where topics not necessarily directly related to QA/E are included e.g. SDGs. There may be a danger of the AQR being a 'dumping ground' for everything. Improve emphasis on outcomes of internal quality assurance rather than external quality assurance. (Public HEI survey respondent)⁸

An independent/private HEI respondent noted that:

There are currently too many sections where the same information could be located. Why is there a need for reporting of strategic QA updates, along with updates on the previous year's objectives and then again recording of QA developments? Between the 3, there is too much potential for repetition. (Independent/private HEI survey respondent)

Lack of comparability across reports was also noted. For example:

Also, one university might frame some practice as a major new initiative, while for others that might be considered standard practice, though by not reporting on it, it might seem that your institution isn't doing anything in that space. (Public HEI survey respondent)

Challenges with the navigability of the report were raised again, as was the frequency of reporting:

Significant developments by their nature are less likely to be annualised - the current format of an annual lens on enhancement activity is insufficient to capture the full lifecycle of an enhancement approach (define, implement, review). Consider making enhancement biennial or alternatively define contemporary national enhancement policy priorities against which institutions report such as academic integrity which as a shared concern could provide QQI with information on institutional practices and could lend itself to effective analysis of stages of development of practice. (Public HEI survey respondent)

QQI staff also expressed a view that the current format and headings in Part B of the AQR are generally or somewhat adequate to capture significant changes/developments or enhancements in HEI QA procedures. Additions requested by QQI staff include:

It would be useful to include a summary of trends arising from internal QA measures, e.g. analysis of data (e.g. retention, progression, grade distribution), external examining, internal reviews, staff/student surveys etc. An analysis of the impact of previous activities.

8 SDGs refers to the UN Sustainable Development Goals

Include section on risks/threats to QA; include section on thematic analysis of internal QA reviews; schedule for review of internal quality system/ policies etc.

I think it is difficult to continually add detail each year as the AQR probably becomes quite unwieldy and would therefore be viewed more negatively. However, similar to the case studies, I wonder if there would be merit in choosing some areas for specific focus and rotating these in different years

The process of document review undertaken as part of the evaluation provided substantial triangulation of the difficulties expressed by some of the HEIs in earlier comments. Project team observations from the document review process were largely congruent with inputs from providers. Issues identified by the project team pertaining to Part B specifically encompassed: inconsistency in what providers reported under the headings in this section (potentially because they were unclear on what was required); the need for word and page limits; a sense of repetition from Part A; a lack of substantial data (potentially due to lack of common definitions and also scarcity of prompts eliciting this information); and a lack of information that tracks and follows up on the outcomes of internal quality reviews and CINTE reviews. An emphasis on sharing good practice was noted to be at times obscuring analysis of the impacts of particular initiatives or activities. It is clear that guidance for providers can be refined to enhance the consistency and comparability of reporting in Part B. However, the project team is of the view that recommendations for specific enhancements to Part B should be made subsequent to a clarification of the current and future purposes of the AQR as discussed in Section 3.1. The optimal focus for Part B is highly interdependent on whether, going forward, the AQR is to have a primarily regulatory focus or act as a vehicle for enhancement.

3.2.1 Balance of Qualitative and Quantitative Information

Stakeholders were asked to make input to the evaluation in relation to the balance of quantitative data versus qualitative description to be included in the current AQR. QQI staff views were equally divided as to whether the current AQR template requires an appropriate balance of qualitative and quantitative data:

Does the current AQR template require an appropriate balance of qualitative information and quantitative data?

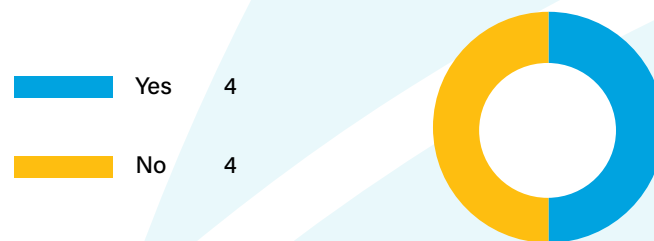


Figure 10: QQI staff survey response regarding whether the AQR requires an appropriate balance of qualitative information and quantitative data

Within this, a higher degree of consensus was discernible within comments from all stakeholders regarding a desire for more data on the learner journey. Comments from QQI staff specifically suggested expanding the AQR to capture the following data:

The more balanced the data the better able QQI would be to benchmark the results.

Qualitative information is very helpful in interpreting data and in demonstrating the value/ impact/outcome of initiatives.

Data in relation to volume of new programmes/programme reviews/ programme cessation per year/cycle Data related to RPL applications including successful/non-successful at which levels and for what credit volumes Data in relation to ATP Data in relation to monitoring of internal QA review recommendations - how many per review/ how many resolves and in what time frames/ how many outstanding.

Staff; Student Ratios; RPL activity; retention; progression; grade distribution.

Would it be useful to link in with other national tools like Student Survey numbers of responses? Might encourage institutions to push this more and therefore increase the response rate and representation of the data presented?

Student origins, progression rates, profiles, diversity, % students with disability, measures & analysis of student engagement, measures of impacts of QA activities/specific enhancements - whether students/staff/community/environmental.

The incorporation of data included in the IRQ.

Benchmarking requires the use of the same definitions/parameters for quantitative data e.g. types of learner or programme. Data on overall numbers of reviews (a rough guide to scope of activity), panel membership (to show diversity) is helpful alongside qualitative info which explains/interprets the data.

New qualifications information, Student performance, Pathways analysis, Learner focus.

I think more evidence of impact of activities would be beneficial - how do they know standards are being met, how do they know improvement initiatives had the desired effect (see NFETL Insights on impact for advice on how to do this).

In contrast to the QQI staff survey responses and the views expressed by DFHERIS staff, 83% of public HEI respondents and 94% of independent/private HEI respondents reported that the current AQR template contains an appropriate balance of qualitative information and quantitative data. Those who disagreed expressed a desire to see a stronger focus on the quantitative data referenced in QQI QA Guidelines for which it was requested that QQI provide definitions. It was suggested that:

Specific metrics e.g., dropout rate, graduate destination, employer surveys, widening participation data etc could be provided and where subject to annual/periodic quality changes could then provide specific reflection where changes have occurred. (Public HEI survey respondent)

The need for QQI to provide common definitions was repeated across responses: "Progression and achievement data but this would first require a shared understanding on how these are measured to prevent comparing apples with oranges." (Independent/private focus group contributor)

In response to a question on what kind of data could be usefully included in the AQR to help institutions benchmark against one another in different areas of practice, public HEIs expressed that they did not view this as a useful purpose of the AQR. Difficulties with using the AQR for this purpose were noted:

Need to be careful in comparing institutions or benchmarking against institutions without providing specific context for example size, maturity of institution or range of programmes. Quality assurance processes, metrics are designed by institutions (or companies) to reflect the needs of that specific institution and delivering on both its strategy and objectives. Equally in comparing programmes consideration of student entry points may be a factor when looking at practices such as student retention. (Public HEI survey respondent)

While some independent/private HEIs shared this view, a number suggested that programme numbers; student numbers (including recruitment numbers per intake); progression and achievement data; and academic misconduct data could usefully be included for this purpose.

The project team acknowledge the valid concerns of HEIs regarding a lack of clear definitions and shared understanding of terms that would facilitate accurate and comparable quantitative reporting. Addressing this is a necessary precursor to any request for greater reporting of quantitative data. The project team also acknowledge that the reporting obligations of independent/private HEIs (who may or may not be accessing public funding streams) may legitimately be distinct from those of publicly-funded HEIs. However, beyond this, the view of the project team diverges from the majority view among HEIs that the current balance of quantitative and qualitative data captured in the AQRs is appropriate.

The project team views the current predominance of descriptive and narrative information in the reports, which is typically (though not always) presented without accompanying data, and rarely inclusive of data that focuses on impact, to be something of a wasted opportunity. For example, a detailed analysis of the 44 AQRs submitted in 2022 revealed that the current submissions preclude QQI from capturing and synthesising a truly national view (encompassing both independent/private and public HEI activity) of new programme levels, domains, types and modes of delivery, as this information is not consistently reported. However, such information would valuably inform HEIs themselves, as well as other stakeholders and provide a high-level view of opportunities available to Irish learners to access and progress within the tertiary education system. Similarly, the current template does not provide information regarding staff to learner ratios or academic staff workload models, both of which can yield insights into the student experience. Such information would also provide useful contextualisation of feedback from learners captured via student survey mechanisms, including StudentSurvey.ie.

The project team is therefore of the view that it is to the advantage of both HEIs and the sector that well defined and comparable data points be not only captured and reported regularly, but presented within the narrative context of the AQR. This facilitates the contextualisation of data in direct relation to the context, strategy and mission of the institution.

When asked what, if any, changes they would make to the AQR, QQI staff had a number of suggestions as captured in the table below.

QQI Staff Suggestions on Desired Changes to the AQR

Refine, explicit purpose/focus, revised structure if to incorporate other functions, enhance digitalisation, revise frequency of reporting.

Difficult to say at this point in advance of a review of the monitoring policy. The AQR is currently designed [to] monitor the institutional QA framework in place in larger HEIs (both public and private). It would be interesting to consider whether the AQR needs to be developed to facilitate a more diverse range of providers and assess if there is any value in comparing this data more generally or in specific or topical areas.

It is difficult to read them from start to finish. that may not be the intention. any changes should try to meet QQI needs re assurance/IEM and ESG and HEI capacity to respond. suggest that adding IEM monitoring be considered if the format and frequency of reporting supports this.

Extended information about qualifications development [learner] access information development

I think finding a way to shorten the AQR, focus on what we need to know and what it will tell us. I think the impact of the AQR needs to be improved - what is the value for QQI and HEIs?

The current AQR process seems designed to be a transparency mechanism rather than a monitoring mechanism. It is unclear to what extent, if any, each institution's report is subject to interrogation/follow-up by QQI or, (short of a failure to undertake any internal reviews, for example) what within the current format would prompt further investigation/action by QQI. The provision of a suite of indicators and a commentary from the institution on trends in these would make them of more value in this regard.

Overall, it is evident that a huge amount of work (both from QQI and from institutions) goes into the AQRs so I think it would be helpful to consider how to reduce the burden. I wonder if it would be possible to consider offering institutions the option of including short videos (with transcript supplied) rather than having to produce lengthy documentation. If this worked, then if institutions were willing, these videos could be shared with different aims- sharing best practice, highlighting collaborative initiatives, showing institutions new to AQRs what kind of content is desirable etc.

3.3 Timing and Submission Process

Numerous inputs were made to the evaluation via surveys and focus groups from HEI representatives in relation to this aspect of the AQR. Both public and independent/private sector HEI representatives indicated that the current submission process was not well aligned to internal calendars or conducive to easy completion. The sense that the time lag was too great between the events captured and the submission of the AQR was clearly reflected in these responses.

Even from the timing perspective, because this time of year for submission is hard as they are reflecting on the previous academic year. You're finishing your reporting period when these projects have already been concluded or been moved on from 31st of August from previous year. Timing is the most jarring part of it. The workload attached to that and figuring out the timing. (Independent/private HEI focus group contributor)

It was noted in both the survey responses and in the focus groups that it would be helpful if the template was provided earlier in the year, perhaps over the summer so that quality offices could commence work during a typically quieter period and to facilitate internal consultation and approval processes. Currently, the template is circulated two months after the reporting period ends and this was viewed as too late, especially in terms of trying to collate case studies, the themes for which change annually.

The template should be sent out in the summer so you have relevant internal docs to hand. Feb is problematic because if you're semesterised, in Jan you're coming back and doing exams so very hard. (Independent/private HEI focus group contributor)

The gap between when they report and the reporting period is too long. People forget. It's always challenging to do these, but bringing the periods closer together and using the summer period, which is the quietest, would help. (Public HEI focus group contributor)

Responses indicated some debate on the frequency or annual nature of the submission, and the difficulty of capturing and reporting on multi-year developments adequately in this process.

It would be worth emphasising the frequency of reporting - biennial might be enough; progress is slow and reporting annually fragments the narratives. (Public HEI focus group contributor)

It's a time warp which causes a head warp. There's an artificial cut off point. You're reporting on activities but not always the outcomes. (Independent/private HEI focus group contributor)

The minute you submit an AQR it's out of date so you never have a current one. Reviewing the full content for an annual submission is challenging - the bang for buck could be better with a greater interval. (Public HEI focus group contributor)

It was noted that the template could be further enhanced in this regard by explicitly requiring providers to report progress in addressing recommendations arising from both internal and external reviews.

A majority of independent/private and public HEIs (71% and 58% respectively) reported that the annual nature of the AQR is appropriate. Reasons cited by those who disagreed included:

Annual reporting can be too frequent in respect of policy developments where typically there is minimal material change, if any. Annual reporting on strategic developments is also often too frequent as it isn't typical that strategic objectives are planned, implemented and reviewed within a one-year cycle. (Independent/private HEI survey respondent)

In most instances the annualised format of the report truncates information about initiatives which may be multi-annual meaning that the report provides a partial picture as activities are ongoing. For example, periodic quality review of units usually delivers a majority of recommendations which are medium-term, may require resource investment, and will usually take 1-3 years to implement, and evaluate. The lens and frequency of the AQR makes this difficult to convey. A more useful approach may be a biennial submission of part B in terms of institutional strategy, objectives and planned enhancements with a requirement for annual confirmation of Part A procedures, schedule of reviews, review panel composition, new collaborations. (Public HEI survey respondent)

The issue with the annual nature of the report is: for Part A, if the HEI is newly established, Part A will not represent a complete picture. One can attempt to capture this transition in Part A, however often one finds that if one prepares Part A in advance, it is out-of-date by the time the report is submitted. for Part B, some of the activities can be captured annually, such as quality reviews, schedules of committee meetings. However, some of the other items that we might cover remain relevant from year to year, but we don't capture them every year as there may not be much more to report, but we are still doing them. For example, if we report how we've enhanced how we look at and interpret student performance data in one year's report, we don't repeat that in every report, but it might be considered that we don't do that, if one is looking only at one report (this very issue came up in one Annual Dialogue Meeting). (Public HEI survey respondent)

QQI staff expressed mixed views on timing:

Is the annual nature of the report useful?

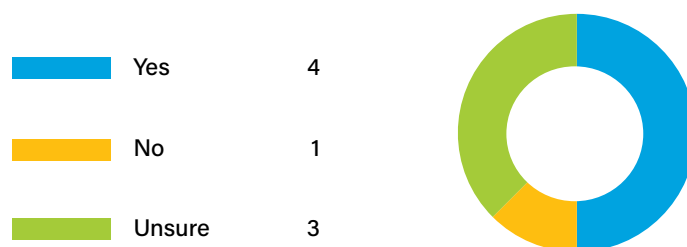


Figure 11: QQI staff survey response regarding frequency of quality reporting

There was general consensus from QQI staff that only changes to the information contained in Part A need be reported annually, whilst less frequent reporting of the information contained in Part B was suggested by a number of staff. The following comment is illustrative of views expressed:

On an annual basis, Part A could consist of reporting only any changes in the reporting year, rather than reproducing the whole description every year where changes often get lost. Part B could be submitted every 3 years, provided that it was comprehensive and had a greater focus on the findings and outcomes of activity rather than the activity itself.

The view of the project team was that annual reporting of some nature is necessary. However, the nature of that reporting should be determined by its purpose and the overall approach to monitoring that is in place, as indicated in Section 3.1.3.

A significant number of inputs to the evaluation reflected that the current submission process via the portal does not work well. Statements made typically linked this to the difficulty of marrying the portal

requirements to the collaborative process undertaken within institutions to prepare the AQR. A public HEI survey response noted that:

The most significant challenge is the portal and mechanism for submission. It is not feasible to draft the report within the portal; many stakeholders are involved in draft, review and approval and so hosting it on QQI's SharePoint, is not practical at this stage of the process. Therefore submission is a laborious process of copying and pasting, to ultimately recreate the word document on QQI's SharePoint that you started with already.

Inputs from the QQI staff survey corroborate this:

While much work has been done on the technical aspects of the report to support online submissions, QHub is still very cumbersome (for both operator and end user) and doesn't make it easy to compare the data once submitted. It would be hugely beneficial to be able to merge / make compatible different systems in QQI to further enhance AQR reports. I would like to see a system where HEIs could submit a range of data consistent with the current Parts A and B but over a longer reporting period - to incorporate the IRQ and possibly aspects of the Validation of Programmes so a clearer picture of an institutions QA and QE history can be gathered at a central point. The information would serve a number of functions in QQI and periodic reports could still be published based on an agreed template.

3.4 The Thematic Analysis

The usefulness of the synthesis/thematic analysis reports has been referenced in related discussions in several places throughout this report. In summary, it is evident that these reports could be better promoted and there is substantial appetite for these to also be supplemented by an in-person event that showcases good practice and provides opportunities for reflection and peer learning across the sector. Although these reports are noted to be useful by DFHERIS, the HEA and other stakeholders, DFHERIS in particular would value a summary from QQI that draws upon the expertise within the agency to highlight issues of particular importance or developments that may inform policy making.

Two thirds of public HEIs and 79% of independent/private HEIs reported in the surveys that the synthesis/thematic analysis reports are an effective and useful reference point for them. QQI staff were generally, though not unanimously, positive about the benefits of the thematic analysis report:

Is the annual thematic analysis (synthesis report) of the AQRs produced by QQI an effective and useful reference point for your area of work?

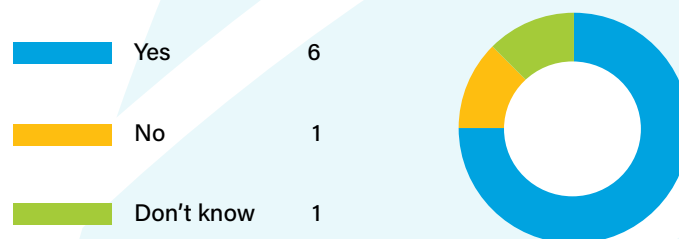


Figure 12: QQI staff survey response regarding the usefulness of the thematic analysis reports to staff areas of work

Illustrative comments from providers include:

Synthesis reports are very interesting. What strikes me is [that] what appears interesting to one person is not what someone else would choose. (Public HEI focus group contributor)

You get a window into good practice in other HEIs, even if that's through the QQI thematic analysis. You can get inspiration from that and help see gaps in your own QA or enhancements that could be emulated. (Public HEI focus group contributor)

However, the project team cautions that although the thematic analysis reports are potentially very valuable, current inconsistencies in reporting within the AQRs precludes the production of wholly trustworthy thematic analyses. Across the 44 AQRs analysed, substantial differences were evident in volume, level of detail provided and the content itself. For example, reports ranged in length from 36 to over 200 pages. As previously highlighted in this report, and reflected in inputs to the evaluation, HEIs make local choices as to what to include rather than reporting comprehensively. This makes it very difficult for QQI (or those it commissions) to produce a true thematic analysis as the source material itself does not capture the entirety of activities or facilitate comparison of like with like. The current thematic analysis reports are therefore more akin to a 'postcard' or highlights package from the Irish HE sector rather than a comprehensive overview and analysis of practices across the HE sector. The view of the project team is that this undermines the trustworthiness of these reports, as gaps or omissions in the original reports do not necessarily reflect an absence of activity within a provider or the sector as a whole.

Section 4:

Conclusions and Recommendations

This evaluation has identified that a range of divergent perspectives on the current and future purpose of the AQR are held among QQI staff and that, perhaps, the AQR model is not being utilised or valued as much as it might be. Whilst the AQR model largely or somewhat meets most of its intended objectives as confirmed in Section 3.1.1, this perceived ambivalence from QQI has a knock-on impact on the extent to which the AQR is embraced and/or fully utilised by providers and other stakeholders. It is assumed that this evaluation will serve to catalyse a process of clarifying, better integrating and further refining the role that the AQR plays within QQI's broader suite of monitoring activities to maximise its benefits for QQI, HEIs and the sector at large.

4.1 Clarity and Coherence of Purpose

It is clear from the findings of this report that all stakeholders perceive an important role for the AQR (or other QQI-led annual report). In order for the AQR to continue to be fit-for-purpose and ensure maximum benefit for effort invested (by both QQI and HEIs), clarification and agreement are required with key national stakeholders on the overall purpose and function of the AQR in the context of a changing, integrated and coherent tertiary education system. To achieve this, it is recommended that QQI:

1. As part of a review of the existing monitoring policy, commence conversations with DFHERIS and the HEA to determine future-facing, quality reporting requirements for the sector which reflect the range of new initiatives, legislation and funding streams that are currently being introduced. This will be important in ensuring that the AQR continues to be an effective means of providing accountability and transparency to external stakeholders on QA matters and of increasing its visibility and value to all stakeholders.
2. Continue the very welcome discussions with the sector on the effectiveness of the AQR in the context of ongoing review and development of the monitoring model.

4.2 Balance between Regulatory and Enhancement-Focused Role of the AQR

To ensure the ongoing effectiveness of the AQR, QQI will need to give further consideration to the current balance in emphasis on headings and questions which elicit information pertinent to meeting regulatory requirements and interests versus enhancement-focused content determined by reporting HEIs. Discussions might usefully reflect on whether both these types of information should be captured in the same report or captured and promoted via alternative mechanisms. This will in part be determined by the agreed future purpose of the AQR (see Section 4.1 above). When the purpose is agreed, the project team recommends that QQI:

3. Align the template to the clarified or newly defined purpose of the AQR. This should consider both the questions asked and the guidance information provided to ensure

that there is a high level of coherence between the information requested and the stated purpose of the report.

4. Align and integrate the AQR with other relevant monitoring and review processes and/or policies and procedures to ensure mutual compatibility and support and coherence and integration of QQI's overall approach.

The project team has deliberately refrained from including highly specific recommendations on whether the AQR should include significantly increased amounts of quantitative data or what type of data might be captured (this is discussed in detail in Section 3.2.1). The project team has also deliberately refrained from making recommendations on how to further enhance the capacity of the AQR to nurture peer learning (also discussed in Section 3.1.1.6). What is appropriate in these areas will be determined to a large extent by the future purpose of the AQR.

However, the project team suggests that in the context of monitoring and review activity more generally, the continued reporting of predominantly qualitative QA information by publicly-funded HEIs in particular is inappropriate. Given the volume of work undertaken to both compile the AQRs within institutions and to review and synthesise them annually within QQI, the AQRs (or alternative mechanisms) could be better utilised to provide valuable opportunities for meaningful insight into the effectiveness of QA in any institution and for cross-institutional benchmarking and establishing true comparability across the sector nationally and internationally.

Although the project team suggests that an increased emphasis on the reporting of quantitative data is appropriate, the project team also emphasises that the reporting and publication of quantitative data devoid of explanatory narrative will provide little value to a wider audience. Moreover, there is a risk that interpretation of data and decision making may become decontextualised or that data will be reported in the media in a reductive manner. In the longer term, it is to the advantage of both HEIs and the sector that well-defined and comparable data points be not only captured and reported regularly, but explained and contextualised in direct relation to the context, strategy and mission of the institution.

4.3 Format and Timelines for AQR Submission

In addition to these higher-level considerations, the evaluation identified a range of current challenges and weaknesses in the reporting template, timing and reporting mechanism. As well as causing frustration, these issues inhibit the extent to which providers and their staff (and, indeed, other stakeholders) engage with the report and limit its usefulness. It was generally acknowledged that the AQR in its current format is often too long, 'wordy' and repetitious and is difficult to navigate or search. The evaluation also generated feedback on how the current report format and submission model and timeline could be enhanced to mitigate these challenges. These include:

5. To better facilitate work on compiling the report by HEIs, reduce the gap between the period under report and the submission date and make the AQR more useful to external stakeholders, consider amending the current timelines for the AQR to incorporate earlier circulation of the template to HEIs over the summer period and submission of the AQR by HEIs in the December of the reporting year.
6. Consider introducing an alternative submission mechanism to the current Portal, which will allow providers to work locally and have more control of the report document.
7. Limit the overall length of the report and sections within it by:

- a. introducing word counts / page counts as appropriate.
 - b. reducing the length of Part A by requiring providers to link to (rather than restate) their published QA procedures and only identify significant changes (e.g., in governance, policy/procedure/strategy and senior staffing) since the previous reporting period.
 - c. providing clarity on the kinds of enhancement information to be contained in Part B.
8. Provide feedback to HEIs on the AQRs submitted, outlining where improvements could be made in meeting reporting expectations.
 9. Continue quality dialogue meetings with all providers. These are a valuable and valued mechanism for a range of staff to engage with QQI on their areas of work. These meetings should be informed by, and respond to, issues and objectives, identified in the preceding AQR.
 10. Highlight the AQRs and thematic analysis reports on the QQI website or otherwise ensure that they can easily be found by those external to the organisation.
 - a. Give consideration to a range of methods for promoting the AQRs and thematic analysis reports, including social media and in-person events, such as workshops and conferences centred on or informed by these documents.
 - b. Emphasise the publication of AQRs and thematic analysis reports to key stakeholders within the DFHERIS and HEA.

Section 5: Appendices

5.1 Public HEI Survey Questions

The survey items below were issued to public HEIs, which were asked to consult internally and provide a singular response to the survey that represented the institutional view.

Section I - Drafting and Approving the AQR

In this section, we would like to understand more about how the AQR is developed and approved in your institution.

1. Which role or unit was responsible for authoring and / or compiling the AQR on behalf of the institution?
2. Was input or feedback sought from other stakeholders within the institution?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
3. If, yes, which stakeholders were involved and how was their input obtained?
4. Was the AQR reviewed and / or approved by a unit of governance, for example the Academic Council, within the institution?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
5. If yes, which unit of governance?

Section 2 - The AQR as a Regulatory Instrument

In this section, we would like to understand how useful the AQR is in enabling your institution to demonstrate: compliance with external QA requirements; progress against stated QA objectives; and relevant enhancement actions and activities.

6. In your view, is the AQR useful in providing a comprehensive overview to an external audience of quality assurance activity for your institution during the reporting period?
Yes / No / Somewhat / Don't know
7. Please elaborate on your response to question 6 (making reference to Parts A and / or B of the AQR as appropriate).
8. In your view, is the AQR useful in enabling the institution to demonstrate to an external audience year-on-year progress in meeting institutional objectives and addressing recommendations made by review panels?
Yes / No / Somewhat / Don't know

9. Please elaborate on your response to question 8 (making reference to Parts A and / or B of the AQR as appropriate).
10. Does your institution provide a copy of your AQR report to any other external entity other than QQI?
Yes / No
11. If you answered yes to question 10, please specify to whom a copy of the AQR is provided.

Section 3 - Internal Uses and Benefits of the AQR and its Development Process

In this section, we would like to understand how useful the AQR and the process of developing it is to your institution and whether it supports and informs your institution's internal QA system.

12. In what way is the AQR used within your institution once it is completed (e.g., to support internal QA processes or reporting / inform decision making etc.)?
13. Does the AQR interact with, or complement, other forms of reporting or oversight of quality assurance within your institution (e.g., quality improvement plans; action plans arising from reviews etc.)?
Yes / Somewhat / No
14. Please elaborate on your response to question 13.
15. Does or did the AQR reporting process assist your institution in preparing for external CINNTE review by QQI?
Yes / No / Somewhat
16. Please elaborate on your response to question 15.
17. Does or did the AQR reporting process assist your institution demonstrate progress in following up on recommendations made as part of external CINNTE or other internal reviews?
Yes / No / Somewhat
18. Please elaborate on your response to Question 17.
19. Are there benefits to your institution of completing the AQR?
Yes / No / Don't know
20. Please elaborate on your response to Question 19.
21. Is the annual nature of the report useful/appropriate?
Yes / No
22. If you answered 'no' to Question 20, what frequency of quality reporting would you suggest be required and why?
23. Please describe the workload involved in developing the AQR?
Unreasonably burdensome / Significant but reasonable / Light, does not generate significant workload

24. Does review of the AQRs of other higher education institutions provide useful insight and / or learning for your institution?
Yes / No / Don't know
25. Is the annual thematic analysis (synthesis report) of the AQRs produced by QQI an effective and useful reference point for your institution?
Yes / No / Don't know

Section 4 - The AQR Template

In this section, we would like to understand how useful the current structure, format and content of the AQR is and any suggestions you have for improving this.

26. Are the current format and headings in Part A of the AQR adequate to demonstrate the range and nature of quality assurance activity in your institutions?
 - a. Yes, more than adequate
 - b. Generally adequate
 - c. Somewhat inadequate
 - d. Not adequate at all
27. What (if any) changes would you suggest to improve these?
28. Are the current format and headings in Part B of the AQR adequate to capture the significant changes/developments/enhancements in quality assurance activity in your institution?
 - a. Yes, more than adequate
 - b. Generally adequate
 - c. Somewhat inadequate
 - d. Not adequate at all
29. What (if any) changes would you propose?
30. Does the current AQR template require an appropriate balance of qualitative (narrative or descriptive) information and quantitative (numeric) data?
Yes / No
31. If you answered 'no' to Question 30, please elaborate.
32. What kind of data could be usefully included in the AQR to help institutions benchmark against one another in different areas of practice?
33. Are thematic prompts on topical challenges for the sector (e.g. academic integrity) helpful?

Section 5 - Concluding Comments

Final thoughts?

34. Do you have any concluding comments on the current AQR template and reporting process or suggestions for its improvement that are not already captured?

5.2 Independent and Private HEI Survey Questions

The survey items below were issued to independent/private HEIs, which were asked to consult internally and provide a singular response to the survey that represented the institutional view.

Section I - Drafting and Approving the AQR

In this section, we would like to understand more about how the AQR is developed and approved in your institution.

1. Which role or unit was responsible for authoring and / or compiling the AQR on behalf of the institution?
2. Was input or feedback sought from other stakeholders within the institution?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
3. If, yes, which stakeholders were involved and how was their input obtained?
4. Was the AQR reviewed and / or approved by a unit of governance, for example the Academic Council, within the institution?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
5. If yes, which unit of governance?

Section 2 - The AQR as a Regulatory Instrument

In this section, we would like to understand how useful the AQR is in enabling your institution to demonstrate: compliance with external QA requirements; progress against stated QA objectives; and relevant enhancement actions and activities.

6. In your view, is the AQR useful in providing a comprehensive overview to an external audience of quality assurance activity for your institution during the reporting period?
Yes / No / Somewhat / Don't know
7. Please elaborate on your response to question 6 (making reference to Parts A and / or B of the AQR as appropriate).
8. In your view, is the AQR useful in enabling the institution to demonstrate to an external audience year-on-year progress in meeting institutional objectives and addressing recommendations made by review panels?
Yes / No / Somewhat / Don't know

9. Please elaborate on your response to question 8 (making reference to Parts A and / or B of the AQR as appropriate).
10. Does your institution provide a copy of your AQR report to any other external entity other than QQI?
Yes / No
11. If you answered yes to question 10, please specify to whom a copy of the AQR is provided.

Section 3 - Internal Uses and Benefits of the AQR and its Development Process

In this section, we would like to understand how useful the AQR and the process of developing it is to your institution and whether it supports and informs your institution's internal QA system.

12. In what way is the AQR used within your institution once it is completed (e.g., to support internal QA processes or reporting / inform decision making etc.)?
13. Does the AQR interact with, or complement, other forms of reporting or oversight of quality assurance within your institution (e.g., quality improvement plans; action plans arising from reviews etc.)?
Yes / Somewhat / No
14. Please elaborate on your response to question 13.
15. Are there benefits to your institution of completing the AQR?
Yes / No / Don't know
16. Please elaborate on your response to Question 15.
17. Is the annual nature of the report useful/appropriate?
Yes / No
18. If you answered 'no' to Question 17, what frequency of quality reporting would you suggest be required and why?
19. Please describe the workload involved in developing the AQR?
Unreasonably burdensome / Significant but reasonable / Light, does not generate significant workload
20. Does review of the AQRs of other higher education institutions provide useful insight and / or learning for your institution?
Yes / No / Don't know
21. Is the annual thematic analysis (synthesis report) of the AQRs produced by QQI an effective and useful reference point for your institution?
Yes / No / Don't know

Section 4 - The AQR Template

In this section, we would like to understand how useful the current structure, format and content of the AQR is and any suggestions you have for improving this.

22. Are the current format and headings in Part A of the AQR adequate to demonstrate the range and nature of quality assurance activity in your institutions?
 - a. Yes, more than adequate
 - b. Generally adequate
 - c. Somewhat inadequate
 - d. Not adequate at all
23. What (if any) changes would you suggest to improve these?
24. Are the current format and headings in Part B of the AQR adequate to capture the significant changes/developments/enhancements in quality assurance activity in your institution?
 - a. Yes, more than adequate
 - b. Generally adequate
 - c. Somewhat inadequate
 - d. Not adequate at all
25. What (if any) changes would you propose?
26. Does the current AQR template require an appropriate balance of qualitative (narrative or descriptive) information and quantitative (numeric) data?
Yes / No
27. If you answered 'no' to Question 26, please elaborate.
28. What kind of data could be usefully included in the AQR to help institutions benchmark against one another in different areas of practice?
29. Are thematic prompts on topical challenges for the sector (e.g. academic integrity) helpful?

Section 5 - Concluding Comments

Final thoughts?

30. Do you have any concluding comments on the current AQR template and reporting process or suggestions for its improvement that are not already captured?

5.3 QQI Staff Survey Questions

The survey items below were issued to QQI senior staff, who were invited to respond individually based on their own experience with and knowledge of the AQR process.

Section 1 - The AQR as a Regulatory Instrument

In this section, we would like to understand how useful the AQR is in supporting QQI to fulfil its statutory monitoring and review functions.

1. In your view, is the AQR useful in providing a comprehensive overview of quality assurance within higher education institutions (HEIs) during the reporting period?
Yes / No / Somewhat / Don't know
2. Please elaborate on your response to question 1 (making reference to Parts A and / or B of the AQR as appropriate).
3. In your view, is the AQR useful in enabling HEIs to demonstrate year-on-year progress in meeting stated objectives and addressing recommendations made by internal and external QA review panels?
Yes / Somewhat / No / Don't know
4. Please elaborate on your response to question 3 (making reference to Parts A and / or B of the AQR as appropriate).
5. In what way do you and / or your team use the AQR (e.g., to inform policy development, decision making, monitoring activity etc.)?
6. Does the AQR interact with, or support, other forms of oversight of QA within HEIs in which you and / or your team are involved (e.g., programme validation, institutional review etc.)?
Yes / Somewhat / No
7. Please elaborate on your response to question 6.
8. Is it intended that the AQR will interact with, or support, other forms of oversight in future (e.g., delegated authority to make awards, monitoring and review of the IEM etc.)?
Yes / Somewhat / No / Don't know
9. Please elaborate on your response to question 8.
10. Is the annual nature of the report useful?
11. If you responded 'no' to Question 10, what frequency of quality reporting would you suggest be required in respect of the information currently contained in:
 - a.) Part A of the AQR and why?
 - b.) Part B of the AQR and why?
12. Is the annual thematic analysis (synthesis report) of the AQRs produced by QQI an effective and useful reference point for your area of work?
Yes / No / Don't know

Section 2 - The AQR Template

In this section, we would like to understand how useful the current structure, format and content of the AQR is and any suggestions you have for improving this.

13. Are the current format and headings in the AQR adequate to demonstrate the range and nature of quality assurance activity within HEIs?

Yes, more than adequate / Generally adequate / Somewhat adequate / Not adequate at all
14. What (if any) changes would you suggest to improve these?
15. Are the current format and headings in Part B of the AQR adequate to capture the significant changes/developments/enhancements in quality assurance procedures in HEIs?

Yes, more than adequate / Generally adequate / Somewhat adequate / Not adequate at all
16. What (if any) changes would you suggest to improve these?
17. Does the current AQR template require an appropriate balance of qualitative information and quantitative data?

Yes / No
18. If you responded 'no' to Question 17, please elaborate on your answer.
19. What kind of data could be usefully included in the AQR to help QQI benchmark HEIs in different areas of practice?
20. Are thematic prompts on topical challenges for the sector (e.g. academic integrity) helpful?

Yes / No / Don't know
21. What (if any) changes would you propose to the AQR?

Section 3 - Concluding Comments

22. Do you have any concluding comments on the current AQR template and reporting process or suggestions for its improvement that are not already captured?

5.4 Focus Group Information

The information sheet below was issued to both public and independent/private HEIs invited to attend focus groups to inform the evaluation.

A Review of QQI's Annual Quality Report

QQI is currently undertaking an evaluation of the usefulness of the Annual Quality Report (AQR). The project is being conducted by a team commissioned by QQI. The members of the project team are Dr Annie Doona, Dr Deirdre Stritch, Dr Catherine Peck & Ms Laura Devlin.

To inform this work, the project team will be gathering and analysing feedback from institutional stakeholders on the effectiveness of the AQR in meeting its intended objectives.

These are:

- to provide documentary evidence of the development and evolution of each institution's internal quality system, as well as an assurance that internal QA procedures are being implemented consistently with regulatory requirements;
- to afford institutions an opportunity to showcase good practice and enable peer learning; and
- to provide an evidence base informing external QA evaluation and review processes.

Focus Groups

Research for the project consists of surveys, focus groups and one-to-one interviews. The focus groups will be exploring the following themes with participants:

- The benefits of the AQR weighed against the time and effort required to complete it.
- The usefulness of the AQR in furthering internal conversations about QA.
- Whether the templates, guidance or feedback you receive from QQI on your AQR are helpful.
- The extent to which quality dialogue meetings with QQI are informed by/pick up on themes or issues raised in the AQR.
- Other means by which qualitative information and quantitative data on QA and related matters could usefully be collected by QQI (if the AQR instrument were not in use).
- Themes and issues emerging from survey responses.

The focus groups will take approximately one hour and take place on Zoom.

Confidentiality

It is important that you understand the following points:

All information provided by you and other participants will remain anonymous. This means that the information you provide will not be passed on in any way that could identify you or your institution. No record of your names will be noted, and all contributions or comments will be completely anonymous.

It is possible that something you say may be quoted. If this occurs it will not be in any way that will identify you or your institution.

The focus groups will not be recorded. The discussions will not be visually or audio recorded. A written record of the discussion will be made. This record will be kept in strict confidence and will be available only to those working on the project.

All focus group discussions will remain confidential. All participants agree not to discuss or share what is said in the group outside of the focus group.

Any personal data that is required to facilitate your participation in this project (for example, your contact details) will not be used in the report. Only aggregate analysis of participation by institutions by type (public or independent/private) will be included in the final report.

Consent Statement

I understand what is involved in this research and I agree to participate in the focus group. I agree not to discuss or share what is said in the group outside of the focus group.

Signature of participant

Date

5.5 Interview Information - DFHERIS and the HEA

The project team conducted semi-structured interviews with representatives of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the HEA to help ascertain the benefits of the AQRs as a reference point for the work of those organisations. In particular, the project team sought suggestions for how the AQR template and guidance could be improved by exploring the following questions:

- Do you receive a copy of the AQRs and / or the thematic analysis report directly from QQI?
- Are they a reference point for you and / or your colleagues?
- If yes, how do you use them?
- If yes, what gaps / areas of weakness do you perceive in the current AQR template?
- Do you see a role for the AQR and / or the thematic analysis report in terms of national ambitions around QA and governance for the sector?
- What information would be useful for you to receive in the AQR or thematic analysis report and in what format?
- Would an alternative format or mechanism be helpful to you?

Interviews were conducted online on 20, 23, 24 and 27 February.

5.6 Interview Information - QQI Senior Managers

Semi-structured interviews were held with three senior QQI staff, including the CEO to help ascertain the benefits of the AQRs as a reference point for the work of QQI. In particular, the project team sought suggestions for how the AQR template and guidance could be improved by exploring the following questions:

- How does the strategic purpose for the AQR relate to broader national ambitions around QA and governance for the sector?
- Do you intend for the AQR to support future monitoring and reviews functions e.g., in relation to delegated authority to make awards and / or the IEM?
- Do you feel the AQR template and reporting process is working well (serving its current and future purposes)?
 - » Does it adequately inform the quality dialogue meetings with providers?
 - » How would you like to see the AQR template and reporting process enhanced / amended to better meet its: a.) current purposes; and b.) future objectives for it?
 - » Is the synthesis report model working well?

Interviews were conducted online on 21, 22 and 24 February.

5.7 Interview Information - Provider Representative Bodies: HECA, IUA and THEA

The project team conducted semi-structured interviews with representatives of the Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA); the Irish Universities Association (IUA); and the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) to help ascertain the benefits of the AQRs as a reference point for the work of those organisations. In particular, the project team sought suggestions for how the AQR template and guidance could be improved by exploring the following questions:

- Do you receive a copy of the AQRs and / or the thematic analysis report directly from QQI?
- Are they a reference point for you and / or your colleagues?
 - » If yes, how do you use them?
 - » If yes, what gaps / areas of weakness do you perceive in the current AQR?
- Do you see a role for the AQR and / or the thematic analysis report in terms of national ambitions around QA and governance for the sector?
- What information would be useful for you to receive in the AQR or thematic analysis report and in what format?
- Would an alternative format or mechanism be helpful to you?

Interviews were conducted online on the 20 and 24 February.



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