

1 SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

1.1 Introduction

This document outlines the **Core Statutory Quality Assurance (QA) Guidelines** established by QQI for providers of higher, further and English language education and training. These guidelines are “statutory” guidelines: QQI must publish QA guidelines under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012 (referred to as the 2012 Act in the rest of the document). The 2012 Act further requires providers to “have regard to” QQI’s quality assurance (QA) guidelines when establishing their own quality assurance procedures. The principles underpinning these guidelines are set out in the QQI Policy on Quality Assurance Guidelines. These Core Guidelines should be considered in conjunction with QQI’s sector and topic-specific QA guidelines as appropriate.

1.2 What is the purpose of these guidelines?

These guidelines are to be used:

- by providers when designing, establishing, evaluating, maintaining, renewing and reviewing their quality assurance policies and procedures
- as a basis for the approval by QQI of providers’ quality assurance procedures (other than for previously established universities)

These guidelines are not intended:

- to prescribe how providers are to carry out their work or run their organisations
- as a “how to” manual for providers on the establishment of QA procedures. Rather, it is up to providers to establish an internal quality system appropriate to their individual context which incorporates both operational procedures and a system of review to monitor the effectiveness of those procedures

These guidelines should be read in conjunction with QQI’s policy on statutory QA guidelines.

1.3 To whom do these guidelines apply?

These core QA guidelines are applicable to all types of providers and the programmes of education and training, research and related services they offer. They are produced for the attention of, and use by, providers establishing quality assurance procedures under the 2012 Act. The legal context varies between providers as follows:

- Previously established universities and the National University of Ireland (NUI) are recognised as autonomous and must have regard to QA guidelines in the development of their internal QA procedures.
- Other awarding bodies, namely the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and other institutes of technology, must have regard to the QA guidelines prior to the approval of their QA procedures by QQI.

- Education and Training Boards, SOLAS and Teagasc must have regard to the QA guidelines prior to the approval of their QA procedures by QQI.
- Independent or private providers of higher, further and English language education and training come voluntarily to QQI to seek approval of their QA procedures and access to QQI awards. Such providers must have regard to the QA guidelines prior to the approval of their QA procedures by QQI.
- Linked providers must have regard to the QA guidelines prior to the approval of their QA procedures by a designated awarding body.

1.4 The national education and training system

All providers offering programmes leading to awards in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) form part of the national education and training system. This system is underpinned by quality assurance, which seeks to provide public trust and confidence in the education and training delivered and the resulting qualifications obtained by learners.

It is important for all providers offering programmes leading to awards in the NFQ to understand that they are linked to each other and to the national reputation of the qualifications system, and therefore they have an obligation to uphold the quality of the education and training offering. QQI is responsible for the external quality assurance of post-secondary further, higher and English language education and training.

1.5 Quality and quality assurance

Quality assurance (QA) is a term generally used to describe the processes that seek to ensure that the learning environment (including teaching and research) reaches an acceptable threshold of quality. QA is also used to describe the enhancement of education and training provision and the standards attained by learners.

1.6 Provider-owned quality assurance (internal QA)

Quality and its assurance is the primary responsibility of the provider. In very broad terms, provider-owned quality assurance refers to the mechanisms and procedures developed and adopted by providers to achieve and maintain a desired level of quality in educational provision, research and related services. The desired level of quality and complexity of related procedures will be influenced by a provider's context, including its scope; the NFQ level of provision and overall provider goals, as well as its external obligations to all stakeholders (e.g. to regulators and to statutory and professional bodies and other national requirements). Internal quality assurance procedures normally have an external dimension also, for example, external review panels or examiners.

A provider's quality (assurance) system refers to all of the provider's internal QA policies and procedures working in concert to form an integrated whole. For example, policies, procedures, guidelines, roles, responsibilities attached to the human resources and other resources required to govern, oversee, manage, analyse, make decisions, review and improve the quality of provision and related services. A quality system can exist in small as well as large providers. A successful quality assurance system will be efficient, well communicated and integrated into the normal activities of the provider.

1.7 External quality assurance

External quality assurance shares the same broad objectives as provider-owned quality assurance i.e. the maintenance of a desired level of quality in education, training, research and related services. These objectives are achieved through:

- Establishing guidelines setting out national expectations to inform provider-owned quality assurance
- Establishing and implementing policies and procedures for external quality assurance
- Approving or withdrawing approval of providers' QA procedures¹
- Promoting and supporting innovation and continuous improvement and enhancement in providers' quality assurance methods
- Collaboration and engagement with, and collecting feedback from, providers on policies and quality assurance guidelines
- Publishing quality review reports, including the outcomes of programme, provider, thematic and whole-of-system reviews and requiring providers to do the same

¹ *Except in the case of previously established universities.*