



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

Policy for Cyclical Review of Higher Education Institutions



QQI, an integrated agency for quality and qualifications in Ireland

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Policy for Cyclical Review of Higher Education Institutions

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1 SCOPE

This policy sets out a single flexible model for cyclical quality review at the level of the institution for relevant providers of higher education and the NUI. A single model is more transparent for a wide range of stakeholders than a variety of models tailored by institution type. Though there are similarities within sub-sectors, institutional profiles indicate significant heterogeneity in institutions in Ireland in mission, size and capacity. A flexible model can allow for differentiation, complementing the unique context of each individual institution as regards significant differentiators such as research, awarding autonomy, delegated authority and direct validation by QQI. The cyclical review model is in keeping with The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2015, Parts 2 and 3.

Review evaluates the **effectiveness** of the institution-wide quality assurance procedures for the purposes of establishing, ascertaining, maintaining and improving the quality of education, training, research and related services the institution provides. The scope of reviews in the area of research is in relation to the evaluation of the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures of the institution for research in general, including research programmes and research activities.

Review measures institution **accountability** for compliance with European standards for quality assurance, regard to the expectations set out in the QQI quality assurance guidelines or their equivalent and adherence to other relevant QQI policies and procedures as established in the lifecycle of engagement between the institution and QQI.

Review explores institution **enhancement** of quality in relation to impacts on teaching, learning and research, institutional achievements and innovations in quality assurance, alignment to the institution's mission and strategy and the quality-related performance of the institution relative to quality indicators and benchmarks identified by the institution.

QQI review functions are set out in various sections of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act (2012) (referred to henceforth as The 2012 Act). This policy relates to sections 34 and 35 of the Act. The QQI Policy on Monitoring states that QQI monitoring may initiate a separate statutory (for cause) review which may ultimately lead to withdrawal of approval of QA procedures. Accordingly, this outcome is excluded from this policy. Approval of QA is not relevant in the case of a Previously Established University.

The policy also encompasses, as appropriate, other statutory reviews of the Authority, including the mandatory, cyclical review of delegation of authority to make awards, outlined in Section 54 of The 2012 Act and review of implementation of procedures for access, transfer and progression outlined in section 57. It also incorporates, where reasonable and subject to timing, reviews of compliance with the code of practice for the International Education Mark (Section 63 of The 2012 Act).

By setting the QQI policy for cyclical review, this document also outlines the approach to be taken by Designated Awarding Bodies and the NUI for their review of linked providers, described as *effectiveness review procedures* in Section 32 of The 2012 Act.

Cyclical review is an element of the broader quality frameworks for higher education. There are two frameworks in higher education: one for awarding bodies (designated awarding bodies and bodies to whom awarding powers have been delegated) and one for voluntary providers. These are represented in Figures 1 and 2 below.

Figure 1: Quality framework for awarding bodies

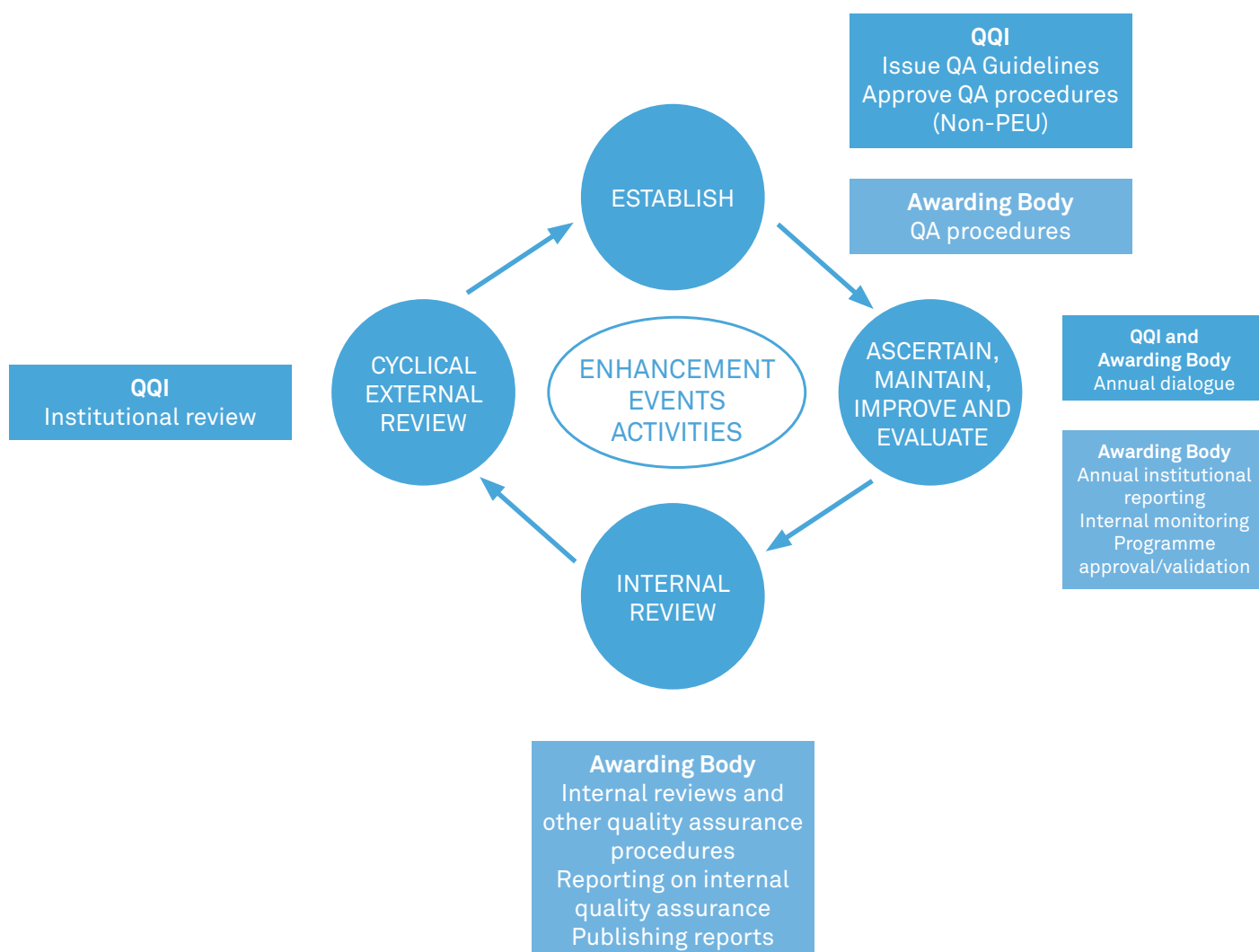
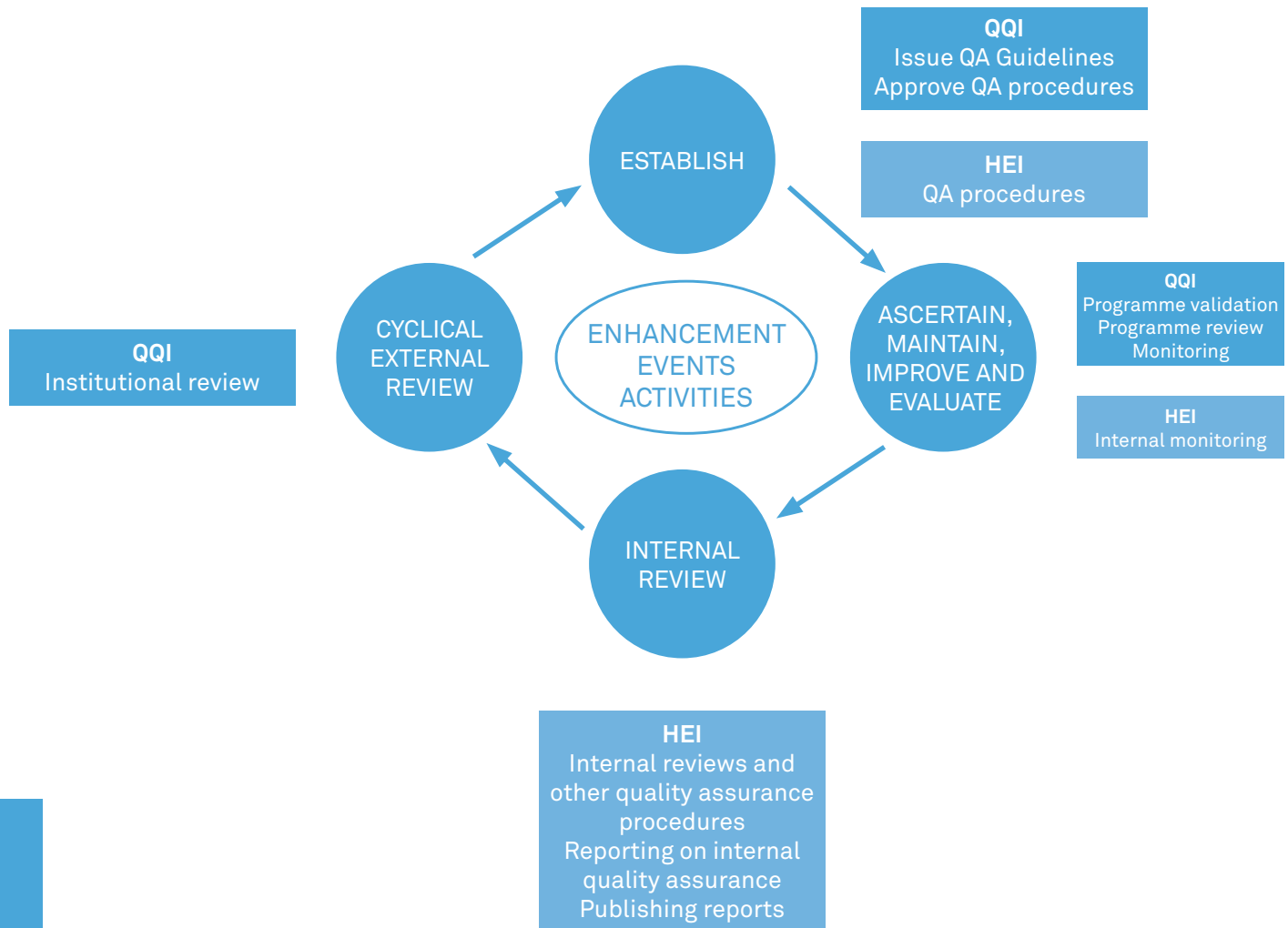


Figure 2: Quality framework for voluntary providers



2 POLICY

Aims and purposes

The aim of review is to provide an independent external review of the institution's own internal quality assurance procedures. This relationship is captured in figures 1 and 2 above.

QQI has five specific measurable purposes for its cyclical reviews which are:

- To encourage a QA culture and the enhancement of the student learning environment and experience within institutions;
- To provide feedback to institutions about institution-wide quality and the impact of mission, strategy, governance and management on quality and the overall effectiveness of their quality assurance;
- To improve public confidence in the quality of institutions by promoting transparency and public awareness;
- To support systems-level improvement of the quality of higher education; and
- To facilitate quality enhancement by using evidence-based, objective methods and advice.

These purposes are further elaborated in Appendix 1.

Criteria

The overarching standards against which review findings are compared by Teams are:

- the institution's own mission and strategy and selected quality indicators and benchmarks
- European and national standards for quality and awards
- QQI QA guidelines and other relevant QQI policies

Each institution is provided with an opportunity to identify indicators and benchmarks for quality relevant to their own mission and context. Institutions are encouraged to derive these from international sources.

The key questions and lines of enquiry to be addressed review teams are:

- How have quality assurance procedures and reviews been implemented within the institution?
- How effective are the internal quality assurance procedures and reviews of the institution?
- Are the quality assurance procedures in keeping with European Standards and Guidelines?
- Are the quality assurance procedures in keeping with QQI policy and guidelines, or their equivalent?

- Who takes responsibility for quality and quality assurance across the institution?
- How transparent and accessible is reporting on quality assurance and quality?
- How is quality promoted and enhanced?
- Are there effective innovations in quality enhancement and assurance?
- Is the student experience in keeping with the institution's own stated mission and strategy?
- Are achievements in quality and quality assurance in keeping with the institution's own stated mission and strategy?
- How do achievements in quality and quality assurance measure up against the benchmarks and quality indicators identified by the institution?

A single flexible model

QQI adopts a single model for reviews with flexible features to allow for differentiation between institutions. The adoption of a single model means that every review has the same five purposes which are set out in Appendix 1. Every review follows the same general procedure (detailed in Appendix 2). Every review has published Terms of Reference which clearly specify the objectives, criteria and broad outcomes for the review.

The single model is based on the internationally accepted procedure for reviews, i.e.:

1. the publication of Terms of Reference
2. an institutional self-evaluation report
3. an external assessment and site visit by a team of reviewers
4. the publication of a review report including findings and recommendations and
5. a follow-up procedure to review actions taken

Within the single model there is scope for differentiation between reviews in the objectives set out in the Terms of Reference, in the review team profiles and in specific methodologies (e.g. duration of site visit). The primary basis for differentiation is the profile of the institution, in particular, awarding autonomy, delegation of authority, direct validation by QQI and research profiles.

QQI publishes a 7-year review cycle for higher education. Sequence is determined by the following factors: previous review cycles; re-engagement; monitoring outcomes; system mergers and clusters.

Reviews vary significantly between institutions undergoing initial and subsequent reviews. The focus for initial review is on a thorough evaluation of the effectiveness and comprehensiveness of the quality assurance procedures established by the institution. Subsequent reviews build on the findings of previous reviews and provide

for greater degrees of focus on enhancement and innovation, tracing the maturation of the institution's quality culture. Even so, compliance with fundamental expectations remains an objective for subsequent reviews.

Institution size, scope, mission, strategy and capacity all have a bearing on the QQI methodology for a review. These factors are taken into consideration in the deployment and briefing of review teams and the focus and duration of review visits.

Some degree of standardisation within bands is necessary given the range and scale of institutions involved. QQI provides template terms of reference for reviews according to categories of similar providers to allow for ease of planning and communications. These are:

- a designated awarding body
- a body to whom awarding powers have been delegated by QQI
- a relevant provider that is not an awarding body and has previously undergone statutory review
- a relevant provider that is not an awarding body and has not previously undergone statutory review (i.e. undergoing an initial review)

Each individual institution is provided with an opportunity to identify metrics and benchmarks for quality relevant to its own mission and context.

If information is uncovered during the review process that raises significant concern about an institution it may be necessary to call a halt to the cyclical review process and commence a 'for cause' review.

In situations where common specific review objectives occur across a range of institutions, QQI may opt to take a parallel thematic approach to reviews across a range of institutions (e.g. a whole country review for transnational provision), to complement the individual institutional reviews.

An integrated model

Review is interdependent on and integrated with a wider range of QQI engagements with institutions, such as annual institutional reports, annual dialogue meetings, monitoring and programme validation.

The objectives of a review may be extended to include compliance with the code of practice for the IEM (Section 63 of The 2012 Act), delegation of authority to make awards (Section 54 of The 2012 Act) and implementation of procedures for access, transfer and progression (Section 57 of The 2012 Act).

Reviews do not duplicate objectives that have been met through other QQI engagements.

If a relevant provider offers both further and higher education and training awards a cyclical review of the entire scope of their provision takes place through the procedures described in this policy.

QQI adopts a comprehensive evidence-based approach to reviews that encompasses both the accountability and enhancement aspects of quality. The balance between accountability and enhancement is determined by the extent to which accountability can be demonstrated through existing evidence including outcomes of previous reviews and outcomes of other engagements with QQI, especially monitoring, annual dialogue meetings and annual institutional reports.

Section 34 of The 2012 Act grants a consultative role to the HEA in QQI reviews. This is achieved through a combination of consultation with the HEA on the Terms of Reference and a role for HEA in the briefing of Review Teams prior to visits. All information about an institution, shared between HEA, QQI and Review Teams, is also shared with the institution.

Outcomes and publication

A significant intended outcome of reviews is the stimulation of an intra-institutional discourse on quality through critical analysis and meaningful discussion. This is reflected in the self-evaluation report and is also carried through into discussions with the Review Team and follow-up.

Institutions are provided with guidelines on the content and length of self-evaluation reports to ensure that they are critical and analytical in focus and do not contain unnecessary information. Guidelines will also encourage institutions to consider data as well as narrative-based sources of information as a way of analysing quality. Institutions may choose whether and when to publish institutional self-evaluation reports.

The Report of the Review Team sets out its findings in relation to each of the objectives of the review. As well as specific findings, it provides a general statement regarding the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures of the institution and their implementation. These findings are approved by QQI and published in a Quality Profile.

If the Review Team identifies what it considers to be significant areas for development, particularly in relation to the institution's fulfilment of relevant statutory requirements, these are clearly identified in the report for consideration by QQI. Following consideration, QQI may set out directions to the institution. QQI consults with the institution to agree an immediate action plan with specific QQI recommendations to address the directions, including the timeframe in which the issues pertaining to the directions will be addressed. Where QQI considers that progress in implementing the action plan is inadequate, QQI may, in consultation with the institution, intervene to secure a revision or acceleration of the plan, or move to establishing a 'for cause' review.

From time to time QQI publishes meta-analyses of the outcomes of institutional reviews highlighting developments, trends and areas of good practice or persistent difficulty.

QQI evaluates at regular intervals, the effectiveness of the model in meeting its stated purposes and publishes such evaluations.

The review team

Review teams are composed of peer reviewers who are students and staff from similar institutions as well as external stakeholders. The size of the team and the duration of their visit varies depending on the size and complexity of the institution. Each review team includes a Chairperson and Coordinating Reviewer.

The composition of the review team is balanced to ensure that it includes an international reviewer, an Irish reviewer, a student representative and a representative of external stakeholders.

QQI appoints the review team, following consultation with the institution to ensure that there are no conflicts of interest. QQI has final approval over the composition of each review team.

Each member of the team receives training on the Irish higher education context, the review procedure and their role in the review.

Fees

Public higher education institutions pay an annual relationship fee to QQI. This fee incorporates the costs of the review process. Fees in relation to other higher education institutions are determined by QQI, with the consent of the Minister for Education and Skills and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Section 80 2012 Act).

3 REVIEW OF THIS POLICY

This policy and QQI's principles and approach to cyclical review of higher education institutions will be reviewed from time to time after the adoption of this policy.

APPENDIX 1 - REVIEW PURPOSES

PURPOSE	ACHIEVED AND MEASURED THROUGH:
<p>1. To encourage a QA culture and the enhancement of the student learning environment and experience within institutions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • emphasising the student and the student learning experience in reviews • providing a source of evidence of areas for improvement and areas for revision of policy and change and basing follow-up upon them • exploring innovative and effective practices and procedures • exploring quality as well as quality assurance within the institution • piloting a new thematic review methodology
<p>2. To provide feedback to institutions about institution-wide quality and the impact of mission, strategy, governance and management on quality and the overall effectiveness of their quality assurance.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • emphasising the ownership of quality and quality assurance at the level of the institution • pitching the review at a comprehensive institution-wide level • evaluating compliance with legislation, policy and standards • evaluating relative equivalence with institution-identified benchmarks and metrics • emphasising the improvement of quality assurance procedures
<p>3. To improve public confidence in the quality of institutions by promoting transparency and public awareness.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • adhering to purposes, criteria and outcomes that are clear and transparent • publishing a periodic review cycle • publishing terms of reference • publishing the reports and outcomes of reviews in accessible locations and formats for different audiences • publishing brief, easy to read institutional quality profiles • evaluating, as part of the review, institutional reporting on quality and quality assurance, to ensure that it is transparent and accessible

<p>4. To support systems-level improvement of the quality of higher education.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• publication of periodic synoptic reports• ensuring that there is sufficient consistency in approach between similar institutions to allow for comparability and shared learning• publishing institutional quality profiles
<p>5. To encourage quality by using evidence-based, objective methods and advice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• using the expertise of international, national and student peer reviewers who are independent of the institution• ensuring that findings are based on stated evidence• facilitating institutions to identify metrics and benchmarks for quality relevant to their own mission and context• promoting the identification and dissemination of examples of good practice and innovation

APPENDIX 2 - OUTLINE PROCEDURE

STEP	ACTION	OUTCOME
Terms of Reference	<p>Completion of an institutional information profile by QQI</p> <p>Confirmation of Terms of Reference with institution and HEA</p>	Published Terms of Reference
Preparation	<p>Consultation with the institution on conflict of interest</p> <p>Appointment of an expert Review Team</p>	Review Team appointed
Self-evaluation	Preparation of an institutional self-evaluation report	Published self-evaluation report
Visits	<p>A 2-part visit of the Team to the institution consisting of a planning visit and a main review visit.</p> <p>The purpose of the planning visit is to review the self-evaluation report and additional evidence, plan for the main review visit and, if possible, establish findings with respect to compliance at this stage in the process.</p> <p>The purpose of the main review visit, unless otherwise determined, is to focus on exploring quality enhancement through questioning and dialogue with the institution.</p>	A short preliminary oral report to the institution

<p>Reports</p>	<p>Preparation of a draft report by the Team</p> <p>Factual accuracy checking of the draft report by the institution</p> <p>Preparation of a final report by the Team</p> <p>Editing of the final report by QQI</p> <p>Preparation of an institutional response</p>	<p>Published:</p> <p>QQI review report</p> <p>Institutional response</p>
<p>Outcomes</p>	<p>Consideration of the review report and findings by QQI together with the institutional response and the plan for implementation</p>	<p>Formal decision about the effectiveness of QA procedures</p> <p>QQI quality profile</p> <p><i>In some cases, directions to the institution and a schedule for their implementation.</i></p>
<p>Follow-up</p>	<p>Preparation of an institutional implementation plan</p> <p>One-year follow-up report to QQI for noting. This and subsequent follow-up may be integrated into annual reports to QQI.</p> <p>Continuous reporting and dialogue on follow-up through the annual institutional reporting and dialogue process</p>	<p>Publication of the institutional implementation plan by the institution</p> <p>Publication of the follow-up report by QQI and the institution</p> <p>Annual Institutional Report</p> <p>Annual Dialogue Meeting notes</p>



www.QQI.ie

26/27 Denzille Lane,
Dublin 2,
Ireland.
t +353 (0) 1 905 8100