



HAQEF

(The HECA Academic Quality Enhancement Forum)

**Quality Assurance in HECA Colleges During the COVID-19 Pandemic:
A Mixed Methods Analysis through the lens of QQI's Core Criteria**



HECA

Higher Education
Colleges Association



NATIONAL FORUM
FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING
AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

HAQEF: Quality Assurance in HECA Colleges During the COVID-19 Pandemic:
A Mixed Methods Analysis through the lens of QQI's Core Criteria

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Foreword

Through the pandemic period, the nature of delivery of programmes for the Higher Education Colleges' Association (HECA) Colleges was significantly disrupted as programmes were adapted for delivery in an online format. Unsurprisingly, this disruption became the focal point of many discussions within meetings of HECA's Academic Quality Enhancement Forum (HAQEF) as we shared experience and sought to support each other through emerging issues in the implementation and management of quality assurance.

During many of these discussions, paramount importance was placed on having policies and procedures in place to ensure quality standards, opportunities for enhancement and equality of opportunity for students were maintained across both face-to-face delivery and online delivery. We additionally discussed the challenge of inconsistent understandings and application of mitigations for challenges in respect of blended and online learning. Consequently, we sought and received funding, under the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education's Network and Discipline fund, to conduct a project that aimed to produce useful insights and resources into the application of quality assurance of blended and online learning based on HECA College members' experiences. The resulting findings articulate specific experiences, insights and signposting to relevant resources to support providers in their navigation of quality assurance in the blended and online world.

A number of 'thank yous' are needed in respect of this project. Thank you to the National Forum for both funding the project, and for their continuous championing of enhancement projects that encourage us all to engage in, and share our experiences of, good practice in higher education. Additional thanks are owed to Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) for providing a consistent foundation of quality assurance guidelines and further facilitating spaces that contribute to enhancement in the sector also.

I would like to thank all HAQEF members, current and former, for their valuable contributions to this work, to the HECA Board for allowing HAQEF the autonomy to follow their goals as they see fit, and Patricia O'Sullivan, Executive Director of HECA, without whom this work simply would not happen. Finally, thank you to Tony Murphy and Tiernan O'Sullivan who led the research element of this project and curated their findings into practical insights of the HECA Colleges' experience of quality in blended and online learning.

Le gach dea-ghuá,



Ruth Ní Bheoláin

Chair, HAQEF (November 2019– February 2022)





Introduction

The National Forum's 2020 Network and Discipline Fund was launched in November 2020 and focuses on Shared Solutions to Common Challenges. Its overarching aim is to support networks and discipline groups to work together to respond proactively to identified challenges in teaching and learning in higher education, including those that have come to light through the sudden move to online/remote teaching and learning.

The National Forum's 2020 Network and Discipline Fund, drawing on the Higher Education Colleges' Association (HECA) members' experience, provided the HECA Academic Quality Enhancement Forum (HAQEF) with opportunities to strengthen its networks and discipline group, support their efforts to enhance teaching and learning, and produce useful insights and resources into the application of quality assurance of blended and online learning.

In the pandemic period, many colleges were forced to change from a face-to-face delivery model of education and training to an online format of delivery. This disruption meant that assumptions about and plans for how the courses were to be delivered and managed had to be rapidly reviewed. With government pronouncements advising all staff to work from home where possible, the majority of internal roles and processes of colleges were also affected. The quality assurance (QA) policies, processes and procedures that were developed by colleges had to be modified to reflect this change in circumstances.

This document reports on the results of a mixed methods study of QA developments that came about as a result of the initial changes enforced by the pandemic and the move to working from home. It also looked at what was learned about the management of quality in this sector during this time.

Data was collected by HAQEF via a survey of QA personnel from the member colleges of HECA and follow up interviews. The survey consisted of 11 questions, one for each Core Area of Quality, as set out in the QQI Core QA Guidelines (2016). The questions asked for reflections on each provider's experience of managing this aspect of QA, what resources or instances of good practice they could share with practitioners and which stakeholders were involved in this adaptation. The interviews asked about the measures that were undertaken to adapt QA processes in the pandemic period and what challenges could be reported from this adaptation.

The report is divided into 11 chapters, with each chapter centred on a discussion of one Core Area of Quality as set out in the QQI Core QA Guidelines. An overview of the core area is developed, followed by a commentary on common experiences of the group in this area. Most sections conclude with resources, volunteered by member colleges of HECA, that was rated as useful in how the cohort navigated the management of QA in this core area.



Quality Enablers

Dynamic strategic priorities within HAQEF colleges enable the effective implementation of quality standards and were particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic. These priorities and QA enablers include:



**Evidence-based
decision-making**



Inclusion and diversity



Student success



**Student engagement
and partnership**



**Excellence in teaching,
learning and assessment**



Academic integrity



Digital transformation



Student well-being



**Professional
development**



**Sectoral engagement and
peer dialogue**



**Research informed and
research active practice**

During the pandemic, the HAQEF Committee contributed to national knowledge-sharing and peer dialogue in the higher education sector pertaining to contingency arrangements and the maintenance of a high-quality, student-centred teaching and learning experience. In 2021, the HAQEF Committee organised the following national events:

- **Building Trust in Online Teaching and Learning**
October 28th, 2021
- **Managing and supporting well-being in a digital world; Context and practice for staff in higher education**
May 21st, 2021
- **The Challenge of unintentional Academic Impropriety in a Global World Series Commencing**
October 6th, 2021

HAQEF reports published during the pandemic include:

- Applying the National Professional Development Framework in Higher Education Institutions: A Case study insight from HECA's Academic Quality Enhancement Forum's Colloquium on Professional Development
- HECA Next Steps Report: Connected Conversations

CORE AREAS OF QUALITY

1

Governance and Management of Quality

Overview of Area

QA in relation to governance interrogates whether the governance structure is suitable for the college, and whether the processes in place are working well to deliver the outcomes to which the college is committed.

Core areas where college governance for evaluation are its ability to ensure that the decision-making upholds academic standards and prioritises the interests of learners, and whether the college adequately addresses risks to its ability to provide education programmes to the standards to which it is committed. The review of governance also involves reviewing whether internal and external evaluation of QA leads to progressive change and improvement.



Examples of Practice

Many respondents reported adapting existing resources, roles and processes in order to apply to a wider range of programmes. They reported that an initial consideration was how best to adapt the resources in place for the QA management of blended learning programmes to pivoting face-to-face programmes online. Decisions about change had to be balanced with a perspective of the colleges' intended direction once the external environment had changed. Were the changes going to be suitable interim measures? Or, did they conform to the colleges' strategy and positioning in the longer term?

For a number of colleges, the COVID-19 pandemic was the catalyst for implementing a strategic pivot to virtual delivery of programmes of education and training. The governance of data was reported as an issue. With many teaching and non-teaching activities taking place online, and remote workers accessing files and data from off campus, there was a need to address procedures pertaining to the electronic processing of personal data and the retention, use and ownership of recordings.

Other priorities included the development of data protection impact assessments and reviewing the cybersecurity practices of staff and learners. The pivot to an online environment led to reviews of how often and by what means committee meetings were to be run. In some cases, the membership of committees and decision-making bodies was re-evaluated to ensure that expertise in technological and other aspects of blended learning was taken into consideration.

GOOD PRACTICES IDENTIFIED:

- Ensuring the clear demarcation of roles and responsibilities.
- Identifying which processes needed to be scaled up and supported with additional resources.
- Investing in the hardware, resources and infrastructure that enabled education and training to be conducted safely.
- Matching investments and recruitment to a strategic plan concerning the use of virtual technologies – clarifying the degree to which the switch to virtual delivery and remote work is intended to be a long-term commitment.
- Recording all risks associated with the data generated through remote working and blended learning on the college risk register.
- Allocating time and resources for engagement with data protection officers and legal counsel.
- Ensuring that training in use of remote work tools is adequate for reducing the risk of data breaches.
- Expanding the governance of teaching and learning to reflect the changed conditions of the pandemic.

Case Studies

College 1:

Smaller colleges may have had a smaller number of programmes to manage, making it easier for one office to ensure that the governance for all programmes is updated or managed in the same manner in a changing environment. Additional responsibilities and oversight that are required for blended learning may be managed by extending the terms of reference for existing committees.

“ There were huge changes [in QA] the year before COVID because of my role and then all that had to take place during that year leading up to reengagement and so once they were all firmly in place, they’re working well. We did initiate a quality enhancement committee, which is a subcommittee of the academic board and again that works well in our capacity.

Resources

Examples of institutional practice e.g., published policies/procedures or non-sensitive internal support documents

- HCQF terms of references accommodate online governance e.g., Academic Board Terms of Reference
- DBS QAH (2019) Part A

Examples of external practice e.g., policies published from other institutions, reports, guidelines, reference documents

- **Legislation**
 - » Companies Act 2014
 - » Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012
- **Standards**
 - » Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines QQI (2015)
 - » Interpretation and Practical Application of the QQI Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines Section 2.1: Governance and Management of Quality
 - » Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (2015)
 - » Sector Specific Independent/Private Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines
 - » Topic Specific: Blended Learning Programmes Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Blended Learning
- **Other Resources**
 - » Enhancing Student Engagement in Decision-Making
 - » Quality Assessment for E-learning: a Benchmarking Approach (2016)

CORE AREAS OF QUALITY

2

Documented Approach to Quality

Overview of Area

A documented approach to QA requires that the roles, responsibilities, processes and functions that comprise the colleges' activities are described in written form. For transparency and clarity, it is recommended that these policies are fully available for internal and external consultation to the degree that this is feasible. A documented approach to quality is realised when the policies in place are informed by the guidance provided by QQI, reflect the goals and situation of the provider, and are supported within the college as being authoritative rules for their management of processes.



Examples of Practice

At the time of the initial pivot, colleges were at different phases of development of blended learning QA policies, and this had an effect on how they proceeded. Some colleges with significant prior experience of delivering blended learning programmes had approved blended learning policies through QQI and had to make few changes. Colleges with some QQI approved blended learning policies expanded on these to address the needs of programmes whose face-to-face delivery had been disrupted. Where interim policies and procedures had to be drafted, these were refined and largely embedded. Those colleges with less experience of blended learning found that the change in circumstances required significant investment of time and effort to ensure that QA was upheld. It was recognised that the development of a blended learning policy needed to integrate with existing QA policies and be provider specific, rather than depending on a one-size-fits-all approach. A revision of non-teaching documentation was reported. Access to additional digital communication channels and the increasing profile of QA during the pandemic led to changes in how documentation was communicated.

GOOD PRACTICES IDENTIFIED:

- Conducting full audit of QA processes to determine their applicability and suitability for an online context, considering potential alternatives, and what resource demand would be required.
- Updating health and safety protocols of all levels to reflect the novel threats of the coronavirus.
- Devising a communications strategy for QA changes to address new potential channels of communication, to identify the correct stakeholders to be communicated with and to monitor communications to avoid information overload.



Case Studies

The remote working environment shaped how validation documentation was developed in positive ways. Tools that were adopted across the college facilitated collaborative and organised approaches to drafting these documents. A supportive team environment induced by the disruption to ordinary forms of office work opened up possibilities for cooperation:

“ I was reflecting on this during the week and how the pandemic made these processes so much easier for me. It was actually very very positive because I suppose something that I’ve been trying to do in my role for a number of years was really push online collaboration for validation and to make those processes function really well using Sharepoint, you know, using kind of streamlined processes online. And when people couldn’t print things any more or couldn’t pop in with a printed version of documents, it actually really helped with that process.

Resources

Examples of institutional practice e.g., published policies/procedures or non-sensitive internal support documents

- DBS QAH Part C Section 1.4
- Policy on Policy Development
Open Training College

Examples of external practice e.g., policies published from other institutions, reports, guidelines, reference documents

- QQI Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines
- for Providers of Blended Learning Programmes
- QQI Policies and criteria for the validation of programmes of education and training Part 2
- National Forum Guide to Developing Enabling Policies for Digital and Open Teaching and Learning
- QM Emergency Remote Instruction Checklist for Higher Ed.
- Specific Review Standards from the QM Higher Education Rubric, Sixth Edition
- The Australasian Council on Open, Distance and e-learning (ACODE) - Benchmarks for Technology Enhanced Learning
- The European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) - Quality Assessment for E-learning: a Benchmarking Approach

CORE AREAS OF QUALITY

3

Programmes of Education and Training

Overview of Area

The quality of the development of programmes evaluates whether the processes involved in designing new programmes ensure that the programmes are developed in line with the National Framework of Qualifications, receive input from suitably qualified and knowledgeable experts, are compliant with professional standards and regulatory requirements, and are designed to achieve learning outcomes that are in line with the provider strategy. The quality of programme design also interrogates whether the appropriate stakeholders have been involved in the design process and whether the design is suitable for the learning environment and mode of delivery that the college can provide.



Examples of Practice

Changes in programme development and delivery were reported from almost all respondents, including those with significant experience of blended learning programmes. The experience of adapting face-to-face programmes also provided an opportunity to re-evaluate how programmes could be organised and delivered, with many new opportunities being identified for incorporating different forms of support, assessment and learning tools.

GOOD PRACTICES IDENTIFIED:

- Incorporating requirements for CPD for blended learning into policies at the programme and organisational level.
- Expanding the role of non-teaching staff in programme design to include educational technology staff, IT staff and information from learners.
- Including information from learners in the programme development process.
- Determining suitable metrics for evaluating the success of blended learning programmes.
- Prioritising engagement with learners and consistency as QA measures for programme delivery.
- Ensuring that learner inductions included asynchronous content; tracking attendance at induction; and engaging with asynchronous content.

Case Studies

College 1:

The design of programmes and the ways that MLOs can be achieved are experiencing a fruitful evaluation across a range of stakeholders. Experience in delivering online education has removed some of the barriers, in terms of skills and perceptions, that may have prevented the adoption of different tools and pedagogical approaches.

“ I mean, that is one of the huge benefits of the whole very peculiar time we have lived through. We, because everybody had to engage with the training, and had to really think about how they were going to actually deliver their courses. Because we had so many courses that were very practical in nature, and so, how could this be done and was there any way that they could change the delivery and change the assessment so it could be just as strong but maybe, different?... There is definitely something that has changed in terms of interest and staff and learners realising actually this is good. Like, these flipped classroom ways of working actually can work really nicely ... I think those have been big benefits.

College 2:

The experience of the pandemic has been positive in terms of experience in delivering online and blended learning, but the absence of guidelines for QA of online learning, and the difficulties involved in validating online learning programmes, made this aspect of QA challenging during the period:

“ There are certain programmes that blended [modes] will suit better, and there are certain programmes that online [modes] will suit better. But then there are also some where they could work in either mode. But, as I said, the big limbo piece there is that we don't have the online guidelines yet. But it's still impacting on how we think about it. And then, when we are designing the programmes, we have to think about well, if we do this fully online rather than blended, then we have to put in a second specification about how we would do that. So, it leads to two kinds of versions of everything. Two versions of how programmes are developed and approved, [and] how they are delivered. There is two versions of everything.

College 3:

The experience of blended learning demonstrated that certain programmes that were considered to be dependent on the unique elements of face-to-face learning could be successfully delivered online:

“ Our draft QA in BL [blended learning] envisaged that some areas of learning, such as theory, would lend themselves more smoothly to online teaching and learning than others, such as skills. Feedback from students and staff challenged this belief. As a result, we are looking at how our own assumptions of the limits of online teaching and learning can be challenged. Implications for our QA: we are careful to consider programme design in terms of a model of how to do, rather than what can be done. In the design process, we are more inclined to challenge our own and each other's assumptions, and to value this critique and challenge.

Resources

**Examples of institutional practice
e.g., published policies/procedures or non-sensitive internal support documents**

- DBS QAH – Part B Section 6 (External Monitoring of programmes), Part C Section 2 (Programme Development and Review)
- Policy on The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): Open Training College
- Protection of Enrolled Learners (PEL) Policy: Open Training College

**Examples of external practice
e.g., policies published from other institutions, reports, guidelines, reference documents**

- **Legislation**
 - » Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012
- **Standards**
 - » Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines
 - » Sector Specific Independent/Private Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines (2016)
- **Other**
 - » QQI Effective Practice Guidelines for External Examining (2015)
 - » Guidelines for the Approval, Monitoring and Review of Collaborative and Transnational Provision
- **Useful**
 - » QQI – The Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education
 - » Curriculum Design using ABC: University College London

CORE AREAS OF QUALITY

4

Staff Recruitment, Management and Development

Overview of Area

This aspect of QA ensures that the staff employed in the college have the experience and knowledge required to fulfil the obligations of their roles. It evaluates the transparency and fitness of recruitment processes. It also assesses whether there is a systematic approach to identifying training and development needs and whether staff are supported in their teaching, training and academic development.



Examples of Practice

The skills required to deliver online education and training rose in profile during this period. Staff were required to have the technical capabilities and the ability to effectively communicate and teach material in an online environment. For colleges with limited blended learning experience, there was an adjustment period for many staff who were less experienced in teaching in an online environment. Training in the use of tools for online delivery was prioritised and administrative support in the classroom, for instance by a staff member with skills in AV support or by an administrative assistant (roles that also underwent changes in many colleges), were crucial in managing the transition.

GOOD PRACTICES IDENTIFIED:

- Conducting an audit of staff skills, experience and competences to enable providers to identify staff development needs.
- Ensuring that there were spaces where faculty could share their experiences, difficulties and questions.
- Updating policies at programme and organisational level to include requirements for CPD related to blended learning.
- Reviewing staff contracts to reflect the responsibilities, skills and reporting structures involved in designing and delivering online content.

Case Studies

College 1:

A need for more QA staff and roles with expertise in the educational tools, design principles and pedagogies related to online learning emerged, as the quality of programmes had come to depend on the quality of delivery in an online environment. This knowledge complements the subject matter expertise of existing academic staff and collaboration and developing new skills to work well together is now a core aspect of staff development.

“ Definitely the value of people with experience of designing online courses. I mean, demonstrably out of that period what we’ve seen is a growth in our ed-tech team – not the formal academics but the scriptwriters and the teams dedicated to designing or building online content. That’s grown as a necessity as academics aren’t trained to do that necessarily. Some will have those skills but they’re not trained for it so they need help, they need guidance, they need the project management side of that.

College 2:

Many colleges reported that the initial period of transition was challenging for staff who were used to delivering courses in a face-to-face delivery format. While this difficulty is acknowledged, in this college it led to a positive outlook from staff about delivering online:

“ For staff the issue was probably more trying to adapt their teaching style to be engaging. We had one or two lecturers who were challenged by the technology aspect of it and our solution for that was basically we had them come in and deliver from classrooms on site and there was support staff here to get them set up, to make sure recordings were happening and just to give them that extra bit of guidance that they needed, but in the main staff adapted really quickly and were fine with delivering remotely and handling that side of things.

Resources

Examples of institutional practice e.g., published policies/procedures or non-sensitive internal support documents

- DBS QAH Part C Section 1.1, Part A Section 1.1–1.6
- Social Media Policy: Open Training College
- CPD Policy: Open Training College

Examples of external practice e.g., policies published from other institutions, reports, guidelines, reference documents

- **Legislation**
 - » Employment Equality Act, 1998
 - » Equal Status Act 2000
 - » Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012
- **Standards**
 - » Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines QQI (2015)
- **Other**
 - » National Professional Development Framework
 - » Digital Competence Framework for Educators DigComEU
 - » #Openteach: Professional development for open online educators.

CORE AREAS OF QUALITY

5

Teaching and Learning

Overview of Area

This core area of quality ensures that the learning environment, teaching tools, pedagogies and methods used across the college are subject to evaluation and continuous improvement. The teaching and learning strategy and approaches in place should take into account the diversity of learner needs and backgrounds.



Examples of Practice

In the pivot to remote learning, most of the QA policies that govern teaching and learning in a face-to-face delivery model had to be re-assessed to determine what changes needed to be made in order to ensure the quality of the teaching and learning environment. Video conferencing tools were now used to deliver online classes. The Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) became increasingly important platforms for directing learning. It was regularly reported that updating documentation to reflect the college policy on using these tools was time-consuming and a shared resource bank for providers on the use of these tools would be useful. Prior experience with blended learning tools and prior investment in the infrastructure that facilitated blended learning proved to be highly relevant to how each college was able to deliver programmes during this period. It was necessary to identify how teaching and learning could be conducted safely in a blended learning environment, given the public health risks and government guidance on social distancing. These restrictions evolved over time and the management of this aspect of the programmes offered by the colleges was regularly reviewed. Engagement was noted as a challenging aspect of teaching and learning. Low engagement could lead to fatigue amongst teaching staff, which also had knock-on effects on QA.

GOOD PRACTICES IDENTIFIED:

- Investing in audio visual infrastructure to enhance, as much as possible, the simultaneous delivery of in-class and online learning guided by a multifaceted team of IT, learning technologists, faculty and learners.
- Providing clear and prescriptive signage for the different types of delivery that could be available in each learning environment, where multiple delivery options were available in classrooms.
- Giving clear guidance on the transition to online or hybrid learning, and the considerable changes required for teaching and learning strategies to deliver in new modes.
- Making available technical experiential training on a small group and one-to-one basis for faculty.

GOOD PRACTICES IDENTIFIED: (CONT.)

- Giving clear guidance to learners on how learning online is different from learning in the classroom.
- Focusing on supporting engagement for learners and lecturers.
- Emphasising pre-delivery planning for a more prescriptive and organised approach to teaching.
- Providing increased opportunities for learners to interact with each other for learning purposes.
- Introducing additional quality checks on the VLEs.

Quality Assurance (QA) Practitioners' Experience

College 1:

Moving QA into unfamiliar territory: the challenges of monitoring engagement between learners and lecturers:

“The other major one that I can think of off the top of my head was the monitoring of the standards of [online teaching]. Because it's such a change of pace, where we're confident of our existing lecturers' abilities in the classroom, suddenly you'd need additional QA to have sights of that rolling out correctly on an online platform. And that's a resource issue to a degree: you'd need a team basically [that] has the time to pop in and check how our reporting is going – are things going ok? Is the audio working? And so on. You don't want to rely on learner feedback to find out that things have been going badly for a week. So, partly the QA of monitoring the teaching and delivery as intended on-site is transitioning ok – those checks and balances are ... tricky ... to manage.

College 2:

Engagement was lower than before, but new strategies for increasing participation developed over time:

“In 2020, there would have been a big drop off in engagement. Not attendance so much because, depending on your attendance policy, people have to attend. But just because they were attending didn't mean they were necessarily engaging. So, one of the things we looked at was our attendance policy and how people register for attendance. It didn't work well as just a sign in. What we ended up with was you had to have people signing in at the beginning and they also had to sign out at the end. And then, they had to engage somewhere in the middle. And that all developed over time and it was, again, a reaction to the fact of finding that the people weren't engaging because, you know, the cameras may be off, or they may not be in a situation where it is kind of quiet around them.

Resources

Examples of institutional practice e.g., published policies/procedures or non-sensitive internal support documents

- Approval, Monitoring and Review of Venues Procedure (HCQF- for the ongoing approval of external venues)
- Engaging in Online Communication Guideline (HCQF)
- DBS QAH Part C Section 1.2-1.6

Examples of external practice e.g., policies published from other institutions, reports, guidelines, reference documents

- The Australasian Council on Open, Distance and e-learning (ACODE) - Benchmarks for Technology Enhanced Learning
- Committee of the Convention on the recognition of qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, Recommendation the Recognition of Joint Degrees, Strasbourg
- European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes
- Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education
- Guidelines for the Approval, Monitoring and Review of Collaborative and Transnational Provision
- IDEAL: Impact of Distance Education on Adult Learning
- Quality Assessment for E-learning: a Benchmarking Approach
- Purdue University (2020): Community of Inquiry Approach

CORE AREAS OF QUALITY

6

Assessment of Learners

Overview of Area

QA for assessments evaluates the provider's measures to ensure the integrity of its assessment processes. It evaluates the fitness of the materials used for assessments, the processes used to manage the assessment, and the treatment of documentation involved in assessment. A strong framework for assessments will present a rationale for how the assessment is matched to the learning outcomes of the programme, how it supports the learning and teaching in the programme, and how it supports the development of the learner. Assessment design and procedures should be reviewed regularly for their suitability to the requirements of the programme and the situation of the learners: opportunities to gather this feedback should be identified, and processes for translating this feedback into changes should be documented.



Examples of Practice

Most programmes were designed with in-person assessments. As a result of the pivot online, the format of assessments was different in many instances. In terms of QA of assessments, as well as evaluating whether the learning outcomes were met, questions about time required, file types used, and accessibility had to be considered when designing the assessment format. Quality in assessment required a fine-grained analysis of what would be involved in completing and uploading a learner's assessment piece and anticipating and addressing potential issues in advance of communicating the design to students. Online proctoring services for exams were used in a number of colleges, but it was reported that these did not work as well as expected, and some guidance on the successful implementation of proctoring software would be desirable for the sector.

Introducing measures to ensure integrity was challenging. Additional support was necessary to respond to technical difficulties and other queries. Placements were disrupted and determining how to provide an alternative arrangement that would meet the needs of the programme proved to be labour-intensive. Even colleges with a strong background in blended learning reported having to adapt in this period. Group work assessment and oral examinations, traditionally conducted in person, were typical of the types of assessment that required revision.

GOOD PRACTICES IDENTIFIED:

- Providing a chat function on the VLE to allow for real-time support during online exams, manned by the Exams team and with support from other departments.
- Maintaining open communication with accrediting bodies to ensure that in-person assessments were adapted appropriately for the online and blended environment.
- Providing considerably more explicit, prescriptive assessment instruction and guidelines for students.
- Temporarily adopting "no undue disadvantage" provision guided by comparison of marking over years.
- Providing revised instructions and guidance for external examiners and markers.

GOOD PRACTICES IDENTIFIED: (CONT.)

- Reviewing assessment policies, including the placement policy and group work policy.
- Educating students in relation to academic integrity in an online context.

Case Studies

College 1:

Huge effort was involved in ensuring quality of online examinations. One college had experience of delivering open-book online exams and then closed-book proctored online exams in partnership with an external company.

“Going to online exams was, I think, our biggest challenge because we had already got very used to all sorts of means of assessing learners through formative and summative assignment. And particularly in the blended courses we like to take different approaches to assessment, to try and keep it authentic and to add elements of choice, etc. However, we were not used to online exams and so that was a huge challenge. In the first set of exams, we had them in June in 2020 instead of May, that was the one part of the timetable that we did push, and that was to give us time to set them up. We devised our own way of doing it, our own invigilation through Zoom. It was very elaborate. It was logistically hard going. We used Moodle and that was you know where the exam papers were revealed at the time the exam started. But before, even before the realities of all that, we, after much discussion, decided to go down the open exam route...in terms of feedback, the learners had a long time to get assimilated into this and they could see how we were supporting it. We were surprised and pleased that it wasn't as stressful as it might have been.

College 2:

Moving to an online assessment model was an opportunity to review how assessments supported the programme objectives. Certain aspects of assessments were more difficult to adapt than others:

“I sat with each programme director and we went down through each module on each programme...it sort of made us focus on module learning outcomes and we had a look to see where we might be over-assessing, where we might be doubling up. And so, there were adjustments. Now it was not easy, but it was productive to go through the continuous assessments and to adjust them to meet MLOs.

Resources

Examples of institutional practice e.g., published policies/procedures or non-sensitive internal support documents

- **HCQF documents:**
 - » Regulations for Online Oral Examinations
 - » Regulations for Synchronous Online Examinations
 - » DBS QAH Part B Sections 5-6
 - » <https://opentrainingcollege.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/2102-Academic-Integrity-Policy.pdf>

Examples of external practice e.g., policies published from other institutions, reports, guidelines, reference documents

- **Legislation**
 - » Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012
- **Standards**
 - » Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (2015)
 - » Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines QQI (2015)
- **Other**
 - » Policies and criteria for the validation of programmes of education and training (2017)
 - » QQI Effective Practice Guidelines for External Examining (2015)
- **Other Resources**
 - » QQI - The Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education
 - » AHEAD: Ways to Ensure Online Assessment is Accessible and Inclusive
 - » QQI Quality and Qualifications Ireland (2021). National Academic Integrity Network -

CORE AREAS OF QUALITY

7

Supports for Learners

Overview of Area

Learner supports are the services and resources available to learners that are managed by the provider, including library and information services, technical support, administrative supports, personal development resources and pastoral supports. QA evaluates whether the existing supports are fit for purpose and whether the provider opts for measures to identify how existing supports can be improved and to identify what additional supports may be needed. Quality in this area investigates whether learners are aware of the supports available to them and whether these are accessible.



Examples of Practice

The changed environment was an opportunity to deliver new learner supports or change support services that had typically been delivered in person to best function in an online environment. A number of support services, such as counselling, library services and learner academic support had operated with a blended model in some colleges, and this enabled a pivot to a fully online delivery model. The move online also enhanced the opportunity to gather feedback on learner support and to communicate more immediately with learners. Furthermore, it made it easier to include learners in any review of learner support.

GOOD PRACTICES IDENTIFIED:

- Using of online platforms to bring in guest speakers and presenters, who otherwise would not have been able to support learners in person, from industry representatives and career coaches to personal counsellors.
- Convening a dedicated Personal Mitigating Circumstances (PMC) Committee, with regular meetings and reviews, to review any PMCs arising out of the pandemic or consequent lockdowns and restrictions, to ensure consistency in extensions and deferrals across programmes and a quick response time for each case.
- Increasing the technical and administrative online support available to learners.
- Utilising the higher usage of online support as an opportunity to gather feedback on learner support.
- Including student representatives in the review of student support policies and procedures.



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Case Studies

College 1:

It was acknowledged from the start that the move to online learning delivery would be a disruption to students. Therefore, in order not to disadvantage students, communicating changes and providing support had to be developed in a comprehensive manner. The volume of engagement with student supports was very high. Potentially, there is some room for improvement by expanding the communication strategy to include social media channels:

“ It was very much on our minds, from the start, how very difficult this was likely to be for learners, and there was much discussion of how we could mitigate against the stresses of that. And I think what I could bring to that was good training for the learners in what we were doing and good communications to them: timely, regular, but pared down, pithy communication, not just wordage. We’d be talking with the student representatives on a regular basis. And then the learners can write to us directly on our email and they do. However, I think we probably could explore where the students are at more. Maybe by way of social media and WhatsApps and SMS messaging. But I’d say we’re not there yet because, and it’s for good reason, because there are concerns about data protection with WhatsApp, for instance.

College 2:

The disruption to face-to-face delivery led to the development of new offices and services to support students. The college realised that an investment in this area was necessary to ensure that adequate support was provided to learners during the programme:

“ Where our student support grew mostly over that time was, we realised that there was a need for a student support office. Now most other colleges and providers would have had that in place, but most other providers would be face-to-face providers. So, they would have people on campus or whatever. But, for us, it was the first time that we put a student support officer in place, defined that role, recruited somebody to it, and defined what the boundaries of the role were. But even on top of that, we found that we didn’t have the actual counselling expertise within the college. Or certainly we couldn’t claim to have, I mean we had people who had experience in that but that was not their professional role within the college. So, we also engaged a clinical partner for student support.

Resources

Examples of institutional practice e.g., published policies/procedures or non-sensitive internal support documents

- DBS QAH Part B Section 2
- DBS Student Services information on Wellbeing and Support
- DBS Disability Support information
- <https://opentrainingcollege.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/1807-Student-Support-Policy.pdf>
- <https://opentrainingcollege.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/1702-Equality-Policy.pdf>
- <https://opentrainingcollege.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/1703-Complaints-Policy.pdf>

Examples of external practice e.g., policies published from other institutions, reports, guidelines, reference documents

- **Legislation**
 - » Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012
- **Standards**
 - » Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (2015)
 - » QQI Policy Restatement: Policy and Criteria for Access, Transfer and Progression in Relation to Learners for Providers of Further and Higher Education and Training
- **Website Links**
 - » Charter for Inclusive Teaching and Learning
- **Other Resources**
 - » Ahead - Learning from Home 2021

CORE AREAS OF QUALITY

8

Information and Data Management

Overview of Area

QA of management of data reviews whether the provider collects information and data that support its mission, whether the processes for collecting data are reliable, transparent and compliant, and whether the information that is collected is well organised and used to improve processes. The provider should be aware of what types of outputs and data it produces as part of its activities, and who has ownership and responsibility for the management of these. Data about learners is typically collected in the form of personal data, awards, learning activity and attendance records, and interactions with support services. The management of this information can be done well in a way that identifies what processes are working well and when interventions are required. QA should aim for the continuous improvement of the handling of such information.



Examples of Practice

The pivot online brought a deluge of additional digital content that needed to be managed in an appropriate way. From learner feedback to classroom recordings to online assessments, these new forms of data posed considerable challenges. It was reported that there was a gap in information from QQI and regulators on the best approaches to data collection in the online learning environment. In particular, a comprehensive list of all QA indicators, KPIs and data types that could be required for reporting purposes would be a helpful resource for the sector and would improve the capacity of colleges for self-evaluation and ongoing monitoring.

GOOD PRACTICES IDENTIFIED:

- Digitising paper records.
- Reviewing policies on data retention to accommodate the new types of digital data being collected by the colleges.
- Training staff on the secure transfer of data and data communications, for example on using VPNs.
- Introducing additional privacy policies and informed consent procedures to cover the additional data being collected.

CORE AREAS OF QUALITY

9

Public Information and Communication

Overview of Area

Providers face statutory requirements regarding the information they must provide to the public. Additionally, guidance on what information needs to be made available is outlined in recommendations from external bodies such as QQI. This aspect of QA reviews the performance of the provider in meeting these requirements and recommendations. As part of their legal requirements, providers must supply information that includes details of their provision of programmes of education and training: whether these lead to an award, whether the award is accredited, the procedures for enrolment and progression, and the name of the awarding body.



Examples of Practice

The reduction of in-person communications led to an increased use of virtual communications. The main mechanism used was the college website, which included updates to policies on privacy and the management of data. The effort to ensure accuracy of public-facing information about college programmes was challenging in the constantly changing environment. Some communications were sent directly to relevant stakeholders by email. Virtual meetings were also utilised with external examiners or accreditors to communicate updates to strategies for teaching and assessment. It was noted that QQI COVID-19 Updates proved to be useful in developing these communications.

GOOD PRACTICES IDENTIFIED:

- Developing central portals on college websites for one-stop shops on QA.
- Making available on college websites contingency plans submitted to QQI.
- Reviewing for accuracy, on a regular basis, public information about changes to programmes of education and training, and assessment and supports.



Case Studies

College 1:

The pandemic appears to have been an opportunity to open up the communication of QA. The more collaborative atmosphere of a crisis, plus the increased reliance on QA for guidance while the environment changed, possibly led to an increased emphasis by QA officer on communication. The period also appears to have driven a requirement for QA guidelines on online communication.

“ I think actually communication kind of improved a lot because people just literally just needed the moral support more than they would have felt they needed it previously. I think that kind of, the isolation of being home on our own or whatever might have maybe prompted a greater collaborative culture. We always wanted it that way, we were always trying to do policy consultation that way, but I think it actually probably did create a bit more openness as well ... I suppose there was a few new ones like explicitly totally new documents. One was we created guidelines for online communication, which was just again, we should have had it all along, but this prompted but this made us do it. Just for generally how to conduct yourself in the online environment you know for increased online communication.

College 2:

Communications and making sure QA checks and updates to policies and processes were available were identified as being among the main challenges of the period.

“ The risk of information overload was obviously significant. So, trying to determine which group needed the correct information, and trying to pass each bit of information to the correct group, became the big kind of QA challenge: trying not to make learners who don't have exams panic about the exam contingencies you are putting in place; people who are doing practicals, and trying to figure out what that exactly means, and [wondering if they] are ... still going to be professionally eligible for professional qualifications once they leave the course; and then for people who just have an assignment or who are just totally anxious. Because we are trying to channel correct comms to the correct group but there is no single space to do that because traditionally you could have just literally gone into the classroom.



CORE AREAS OF QUALITY

10 Other Parties involved in Education and Training

Overview of Area

This aspect of QA reviews the management of college activities that are delivered in partnership with external agencies or bodies. There must be provision within the colleges' QA frameworks for the activities that involve such partnerships. QA of this core area reviews whether the arrangements that the provider has made with other parties are fully documented, within the scope of the existing QA, and whether the aspects of this relationship are sufficiently monitored to ensure the quality of the programmes in which they are a component.



Examples of Practice

External examiners and accreditors were contacted and consulted about various changes to QA processes and professional accreditation bodies had to be consulted for approval of any modification to programmes and assessments. Some colleges whose programmes involved collaboration with external providers saw further development of the use of centralised online platforms, so that the management of these elements were further integrated with other quality processes. While some placements were successfully completed in an online environment, others could not be facilitated in this way.

This aspect of QA reviews the management of college activities that are delivered in partnership with external agencies or bodies. There must be provision within the colleges' QA frameworks for the activities that involve such partnerships. QA of this core area reviews whether the arrangements that the provider has made with other parties are fully documented, within the scope of the existing QA, and whether the aspects of this relationship are sufficiently monitored to ensure the quality of the programmes in which they are a component.

GOOD PRACTICES IDENTIFIED:

- Conducting a gap analysis of resources and process for online learning for international collaborators.
- Having regular communication with the Department of Further and Higher Education and a number of public health bodies regarding safe working practices.
- Revising the guidelines regarding the supervision of placements.



Case Studies

College 1:

In a college that faced significant disruption when the majority of its programmes switched from a face-to-face delivery model to an online delivery model, the ability to address QA topics in informal networks within HAQEF and HECA proved to be instrumental in shaping the adaption of its QA:

“ I’d say there is a better understanding now and there was a bit of trial and error. There was a lot of benchmarking going on. So, a lot of people were reaching out to association groups like HECA or HAQEF that we are members of and [asking] what are you doing and how are you handling that? In that sense, those kinds of networks are brilliant. They’re great to have ... as a support for all the providers and have that kind of discussion forum, as well; sometimes formally, sometimes informally touching base with peers from other colleges.



CORE AREAS OF QUALITY

11

Self-evaluation, Monitoring and Review

Overview of Area

The processes for reviewing the quality of the activities of the provider are themselves subject to review. This responsibility is to consider the QA framework, processes, roles and procedures that support and underpin the teaching, learning, research, services and administration of the college. A formal evaluation may be conducted at regular intervals, but the actions that comprise the continuous attention to process improvement and monitoring of QA activities are also within the scope of this core area. A review of the QA framework, whether internal or external, will identify which aspects of this are functioning well and which are not. The review should offer an opportunity for the college to make changes to improve the functioning of the QA system.



Examples of Practice

Some colleges were well prepared for the changes to delivery and saw few modifications to their QA framework. Others found that the disruption led to larger changes. While some reviewed the QA manual in full, internally, others conducted a full audit and review of the QA in place, in order to progress an extension to the scope of provision to facilitate blended learning.

GOOD PRACTICES IDENTIFIED:

- Adopting a risk register to track what processes needed to be re-evaluated.
- Updating committee memberships to ensure that there was a representation of relevant expertise in blended learning.
- Having a coordination team that included QA team, IT, programme leads and registrar to guide plans for training and support.
- Using templates for internal audits on each area of QA.



Case Studies

College 1:

The period resulted in a growth of the college overall and this necessitated changes to the governance of QA.

“ The QA, the internal monitoring hasn’t changed since I’ve joined but the QA procedures and policies actually need to be revised in light of some organisational changes: not necessarily procedures, but there [have] been role changes. And we are adapting how, because the college is growing, we’re having to decentralise some of the roles. It’s not that our QA manual is wrong, but it probably isn’t precise enough in identifying the roles and responsibilities; it’s in a change process at the moment.

College 2:

“ I’d say the baseline QA checks we would have done remained in place. We would have kept those as the baseline. What we would have seen, though, was a new suite of QA checks that would have needed to be introduced for the new context of these things – things like the evaluation of exam papers was more thoroughly introduced than it would have been in advance. And then the kind of extensive outcome analysis of learners and things were done at a much greater depth than we would have done in previous years: taking the existing processes and ramping them up in key areas, where we could see that they were going to be needed.

Resources

Examples of institutional practice e.g., published policies/procedures or non-sensitive internal support documents

- HCQF
 - » Preparing for External Quality Assurance Peer-Review Panel Reviews Guidelines
 - » DBS Part C Section 2.2
 - » Risk Management Policy: Open Training College

Examples of external practice e.g., policies published from other institutions, reports, guidelines, reference documents

- Standards
 - » Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (2015)
 - » Policy for Cyclical Review of Higher Education Institutions
 - » QQI (2016) Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines, Section 2.3, ‘Programmes of Education and Training’.
 - » QQI (2017) Policies and Criteria for the Validation of Programmes of Education and Training.
 - » QQI (2018) Programme Validation Manual for Programmes of HET and Apprenticeships (Edition 3).



Conclusion

This report outlines the response of HAQEF colleges to the COVID-19 pandemic through a QA lens. The response to the pandemic by HAQEF colleges was underpinned by robust QA policies within the respective colleges; a focus on student centred pedagogies; a commitment to professional development; peer dialogue and continuous communication with all stakeholders.

The document contains qualitative feedback and reflections from experienced QA professionals on the HAQEF Committee whose insights inform recommendations and the compilation of key QA resources. The document represents a knowledge-sharing exercise with the wider sector to inform continuous enhancement, as higher education institutions emerge from the pandemic.

The HAQEF Committee continues to review and discuss new developments pertaining to microcredentials, student partnership, hybrid pedagogies, diversity and more, with the goal of contributing to the vibrant national dialogue pertaining to QA.

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