Reporting by Awarding Bodies on the Approval and Re-approval of Programmes of Higher Education in Ireland

A Thematic Approach (high level summary report)

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QQI
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1. Introduction

Programmes of education and training are central to the quality and integrity of our qualifications system and are the primary focal point for students in higher education. Each student enrols on a programme at registration and each qualification that they graduate with is determined by that programme assuming they don't transfer to another. A student is more likely to thrive when their programme is coherent and matched to their educational, professional and career needs. Programmes are critically important in the context of the quality of higher education and the trustworthiness and credibility of higher education qualifications.

In Ireland, self-validating higher education institutions (HEIs) align their qualifications with the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), and thence the EQF (European Qualifications Framework), and they have educational, professional and quality assurance processes for ensuring the accuracy and credibility of these alignments. The programme that leads to the relevant qualification is the principal determinant of the minimum level of knowledge, skill and competence that will be achieved by graduates and is, therefore, a central concern for such alignment processes. Accordingly, the credibility of alignment processes depends to a significant extent on their programme-oriented processes.

Clearly then, the quality assurance of programmes is of paramount importance for the purposes of internal and external accountability, transparency, public confidence and the international reputation of Ireland HE qualifications and institutions.

Programme-oriented quality assurances processes are generally documented as part of an HEI's quality assurance procedure and produce evidence-based outcomes (e.g., recommendations) that are supported by written reports.

Such reports inform governance systems, committees, experts, academic and support staff and help them make key decisions concerning programme and the qualifications to which they lead from genesis through implementation and review cycles to retirement.

Consideration of the criteria used in decision-making and other significant elements that contribute to programme development, design and reconsideration is particularly useful. For example, the formal approval of a new programme is typically tasked to an institution's central academic committee. Such committees do not scrutinise programmes from first principles, rather they rely on assurances that agreed processes have been undertaken often together with reports that capture the key findings of those processes. The quality of oversight is partly dependent on the transparency that those reports bring to the committee about the conduct of the relevant approval process and its findings. The transparency of reporting ensures all the main actors involved in the complex business of education are informed.

These reports are the subject of the thematic analyses that we are reporting on here. QQI commissioned a study on what could be learned from the reports arising from processes relating to the approval of new programmes and the review and updating of continuing programmes. From this research we discovered a rich diversity of practice around programme focused activities in the different contexts. Much of this practice was captured by reports and some is captured through structured programme related deliberations and the inputs and outputs required of a closely managed internal scrutiny and committee system - much of which was unique to the institution under consideration. In the study commissioned, the focus is on the reports.

However, it is important to recognise the variety of approaches to programme approval and review across the designated awarding bodies (DABs), including those that do not result in a report but rather another formal documented output. For these reasons the selection included in the thematic analysis cannot be said to be a representative sample. It should be noted that the reports included in the selection were not necessarily designed by the DABs to be understood on a standalone basis, and the design of the reports demonstrates the DABs' diversity of approach. Moreover, there are additional methods by which DABs communicate to the diverse range of relevant internal and external stakeholders across the extensive lead-in period and ensure transparency regarding the outcomes of programme approval and review processes which are not analysed here/ outside the scope of these analyses. The analysis of the DABs reports should be considered in this context.

In this brief summary and overview, we have summarised some of the more routine and common aspects of what we discovered in the reports:

- A thematic analysis of reports on the accreditation/ approval/review of programmes of higher education in the institute of technology sector in the period 2015-2018

- A thematic analysis of reports on the accreditation/ approval/review of programmes of higher education by professional and regulatory bodies in the period 2015-2018

- A thematic analysis of reports on the approval and review of programmes of higher education in the Universities, RCSI and DIT in the period 2015-2018

- A thematic analysis of reports on the accreditation/approval/review of programmes of higher education: Stage 1: QQI Validation and Revalidation

Through these analyses, we also discovered that the reports included do not hold all the key decision-making information as much of this is also embedded in other deliberative outputs and

structures internally within institutions and organisations. We believe the diversity of practice discovered is worthy of a much closer focus.

1.1 Background to the report

This report is an independent high-level summary, commissioned by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), of a set of four thematic analyses previously commissioned by QQI.

QQI is the independent state agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services in Ireland. It was established in 2012 under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 and had its powers extended under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019.

Nationally, QQI has, as one of its functions, the responsibility to "review and monitor the effectiveness of providers' quality assurance procedures".

QQI publishes a comprehensive suite of quality assurance guidelines for providers to use when establishing QA their procedures.

Internationally, QQI is a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA1).

ENQA publishes Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)2 that apply to Higher Education Institutions and quality assurance agencies.

The European Standards and Guidelines have the following purposes: -

- They set a common framework for quality assurance systems for learning and teaching at European, national and institutional level;
- They enable the assurance and improvement of quality of higher education in the European higher education area;
- They support mutual trust, thus facilitating recognition and mobility within and across national borders;
- They provide information on quality assurance in the EHEA

In discharging this remit the ESG, as well as publishing standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance of higher education, also publishes standards and guidelines for quality assurance agencies.

One of the standards (namely 3.4) for quality assurance agencies concerns Thematic Analysis. It requires QA agencies to regularly publish reports that '*describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities'*. To this end, QQI commissioned a series of thematic

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1 Http://enqa.eu/

2 Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). (2015). Brussels, Belgium.

analyses of programme approval and review reports published in the period June 2015 to July 2018 by the following organisations:

- ➢ Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)
- ➢ HEIs that were Institutes of Technologies in 2014-2018 (IoTs)[3]
- ➢ HEIs that were Designated Awarding Bodies in 2014-2018 (DABs)[4]
- ➢ Professional and Regulatory Bodies (PRBs)

As stated by ENQA in its guidelines on this topic 'In the course of their work, agencies gain information on programmes and institutions that can be useful beyond the scope of a single process, providing material for structured analyses across the higher education system.'

The basis for the thematic analyses summarised here comprised panel[5] reports on:

- ➢ new programme approvals;
- ➢ the reviews of academic units (faculties, schools or departments); and
- ➢ the periodic review of programmes.

These reports were either available on the institutions' websites or provided to QQI for the purpose of the thematic analyses.

1.2 Limitations to the analyses

- Information was not available in a consistent form across all providers and DABs.
- Individual sectoral thematic analysis reports were constrained somewhat by the methodological framework outlined above, which left a number of questions unanswered or, in some cases, unanswerable
- As each awarding body, and each autonomous institution, has ownership of the design and operation of its quality assurance policies and procedures, it was not unexpected that there would be considerable differences in structure and operation between them. This analysis, therefore, does not extend to the efficacy of the institutions' processes for the approval and reapproval or review of programmes but attempts to determine the consonance of the content of the reports with the European Standards and Guidelines and discover, where possible, difficulties, trends, recurring themes, enhancement needs and areas of good practice.

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[3] Institutes of Technology (excluding DIT). During the period of the review there were 13 IoTs: Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT), Cork Institute of technology (CIT), Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT), Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology

[4] During the period of the analyses, there were 9 Designated Awarding Bodies (DABs) – these included seven universities Dublin City University [DCU], Maynooth University [MU], National University of Ireland Galway [NUIG], Trinity College Dublin [TCD], University College Cork [UCC], University College Dublin [UCD}, University of Limerick [UL], Dublin Institute of Technology [DIT] and Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland [RCSI].

[5] Panel here refers to a peer review group of academic and industry experts tasked by the institution with reviewing programmes or academic units.

- As a consequence, this high level summary is supplemented by some additional and readily available published information that, because of methodological constraints, could not be addressed in the individual thematic reports, and which has the advantage of providing clarity in illustrating how each of the awarding bodies addresses the European Standards and Guidelines in the areas of programme design, approval and re-approval.

- Reports of validation panels to QQI differed in a significant way, as the policy and criteria for validation changed significantly in April 2016 and was slightly modified again in 2017. Prior to 2016, policy and criteria published in 2010 by HETAC and slightly modified in 2013 applied. The thematic analyses covered reports issued between 2015 and 2018 so they crossed these two periods thus limiting direct comparison. The policy, criteria and reporting structures adopted in 2016/17 addressed a number of the limitations and deficiencies identified by QQI in its review of policy. The analysis, therefore, must be considered in this context.

Despite these limitations, the differences in approval processes and reporting structures provided a rich source of information that highlights how common goals can be met even though approaches to achieving them may differ considerably.

Four thematic reports, one on each of the three sectors of the higher education system and one of the professional recognition bodies were compiled and are available on QQI's website The reports are entitled:

- A thematic analysis of reports on the accreditation/ approval/review of programmes of higher education in the institute of technology sector in the period 2015-2018

- A thematic analysis of reports on the accreditation/ approval/review of programmes of higher education by professional and regulatory bodies in the period 2015-2018

- A thematic analysis of reports on the approval and review of programmes of higher education in the Universities, RCSI and DIT in the period 2015-2018

- A thematic analysis of reports on the accreditation/approval/review of programmes of higher education: Stage 1: QQI Validation and Revalidation

The thematic analyses dealt with the output reports from the following QA processes:

1. The approval of new programmes from Higher Certificate to Master's Degree level, excluding research degree programmes.
2. Review of academic units i.e. colleges, faculties, schools or departments. In some cases, programmes are re-approved as part of the review of an academic unit).

3. Periodic review of an individual programme or group of related programmes.
4. The approval/accreditation of programmes by Professional Recognition bodies. The panel reports analysed in this group were for programmes delivered by either DABs or IoTs.

1.3 Scope of the analyses

1.3.1 Independent Providers

This sector consists of independent providers (IPs) who have their programmes validated by QQI. Those programmes are validated against published criteria and lead to awards that conform to national standards enabling them to be included in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ[6]). Under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 – Section 30, Independent Providers must have their QA approved by QQI[7] in advance of submitting a programme for validation to QQI.

1.3.2 Institutes of Technology with Delegated Authority

This sector comprised thirteen Institutes of Technology (IoTs). IoTs when establishing their QA procedures must have regard to Core and Sector Specific QA guidelines published by QQI. IoTs are responsible for validating their own programmes using their own criteria, but during the period under study the awards to which they lead must conform to national broad-field awards standards in order to be included the NFQ. IoTs report annually to QQI (AQR) on how the QA arrangements are being implemented.

1.3.3 Designated Awarding Bodies (DABs)

DABs, at the time of this study, comprised seven universities, the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI). All are autonomous institutions that design and offer programmes leading to higher education awards that are included in the National Framework of Qualifications. When establishing their QA procedures, they are required to have regard to the statutory QA guidelines issued by QQI. DABs submit an annual institutional quality report (AQR)[8] to QQI on how the QA arrangements are being implemented.

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6 www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/National-Framework-of-Qualifications-(NFQ).aspx

7 Initial validation and re-validation reports are available on the QQI website https://www.qqi.ie.

8 QQI publishes all AIQRs on its website; they are available at https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/Annual-Institutional-Quality-Report.aspx.

1.3.4 Professional Recognition Bodies[9]

Professional Recognition Bodies (PRB) set their own professional accreditation criteria. Several have statutory power and responsibilities e.g. Medical Council, CORU, and PSI. They are required to cooperate with QQI in so far as is practicable (Section 13 of the 2012 Act) but their operations are independent of QQI.

As the PRBs are not members of ENQA they are not bound by the provisions of the ESG. Institutions providing programmes that lead to awards in the NFQ must ensure that the minimum intended learning outcomes are consistent with any relevant awards standards and the NFQ. They may also seek accreditation from a relevant PRB and, to achieve that, the programme and its outcomes must also satisfy its requirements. This may be achieved in parallel with the academic accreditation process or after academic accreditation has been achieved.

2. Overarching findings

The number of institutions and reports reviewed is given in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Number of institutions and reports involved in the analyses

Type of Institution	Number	Reviews/ Accreditations reports	New programme reports approvals/ validation
Independent Providers	17	19	55
Institutes of Technology	13	18	52
Designated Awarding Bodies (including DIT)	9	28	31
Professional Recognition Bodies	11	20	n/a
Total	50	85	138

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (2015) provides a reference document for both internal and external quality assurance systems in higher education. However, it does not prescribe how the quality assurance processes are implemented, but provides guidance, covering the areas which are vital for

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[9] Defined as "a body (including a professional association, professional institute or any other professional organisation) required or authorised by or under a law of the State to supervise or regulate the conduct of persons engaged in a profession. It should be noted that since 2020, QQI has used the term PSRB 'Professional Regulatory and Statutory Body' rather than 'PRB'.

successful quality provision and learning environments in higher education. In the context of the thematic study, two standards (and their associated guidelines) are relevant:

1. **ESG Standard 1.2 - for the design and approval of programmes states**

Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes. The programmes should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes. The qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.

2. **ESG Standard 1.9 - for on-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes**

Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society. These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned.

3. New programme approval

Independent Providers and IOTs follow broadly similar procedures for programme approval (variously called accreditation or validation), although the language used to describe them may be different. Individual DABs follow the same pattern, to a greater or lesser extent, to achieve programme approval. In every case the accreditation/validation/approval process involves escalation through the QA structures in the institution to finally achieve authorisation from the highest level.

3.1 Externality in the programme approval/validation process

In the case of IPs and IOTs programme validation processes involve predominantly external input. In the case of 4 of the DABs there was external as well as internal input, and in the remaining DABs the approval processes were entirely internal.

What is interesting from this analysis is that faculty members from IPs were not represented on panels in either IOTs or DABs, even though they were involved in both the design and delivery of programmes that have equal accreditation on the NFQ as those of the DABs. Only three panel members represented institutions within the state as external experts in approving new DAB programmes, with one from an institute of technology and the other two from universities, but this

may not be surprising considering the fact that these processes are more internalised in the DABs.

IOTs relied heavily on faculty from other IOTs to act on panels, as did QQI and with the exception of the DABs there was limited use of external experts from outside the state – particularly in the case of QQI validation of Independent Provider new programmes. An increase in this type of representation would enhance benchmarking and underpin international acceptance of the quality of these programmes.

3.2 Gender balance

The composition of panels for IPs, IoTs and DABs for the approval or validation of new programmes shows that considerations of gender balance in some instances need to be addressed. 45% of panel members on Designated Awarding Bodies programme approvals were female, however, only a small sample of reports for new programmes were considered in the report, with six of the nine DABs not included. While the percentage of female membership in QQI validations for IPs was at 44%, it was noted that in IOT validations, representation of female membership on external panels or in the total membership of panels including internal members fell below 40%.

3.3 Learner representation in programme approval/validation

- ESG 1.2 advises that students are involved in the design of programmes. It does not specify how this should be achieved. Both QQI and some of the IOTs do this by including learner representation on validation panels, while HEIs may also seek input from current learners and graduates, in the design of programmes.

- During the period of the study – 2015 to 2018, learners were poorly represented on panels. Only 17% of panels had learners as members of the panel. A change in QQI policy during the latter part of the study resulted in an increase in learner participation. Similar changes in policy in some IOTs also resulted in increased learner participation.

3.4 Reports of programme approval/validation

- All validation reports from IPs are published on the QQI website.[10]
- All IOTs and DIT published their programme validation reports on their websites.

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[10] https://qsearch.qqi.ie/WebPart/Search?searchtype=validationreports

- As autonomous institutions with long and well-established programme and review processes, unique contexts and diverse programmes, individual DABs employ different approaches to programme approval and review, as evidenced in Chapter 2 of 'A thematic analysis of reports on the approval and review of programmes of higher education in the universities, RCSI and DIT in the period 2015-2018[11]. These are documented in annual quality reports submitted to QQI and published as the Annual Quality Review (AQR) series on the QQI website.[12]
- 11 PRBs provided panel reports to QQI. 9 PRBs provided two panel reports each, and two supplied one report each.

3.5 Publication of validation/approval reports

- All validation reports from IPs are published on the QQI website[13].
- All IOTs (including DIT) published their programme validation reports on their websites.
- As autonomous institutions with long and well-established traditions, unique contexts and diverse programmes, individual DABs employ different approaches to programme approval and review, as evidenced in Chapter 2 of 'A thematic analysis of reports on the approval and review of programmes of higher education in the universities, RCSI and DIT in the period 2015-2018'[14]. These are documented in annual quality reports submitted to QQI and published as the Annual Quality Review (AQR) series on the QQI website.[15]
- 11 PRBs provided panel reports to QQI. 9 PRBs provided two panel reports each, and two supplied only one report each.

4. Programme review

The ESG does not include an explicit statement about the format of programme review, nor the outputs. The only publication requirement stated is that of revised programme specifications, which are published by the participating IPs, the IOTs and DABs' Academic Calendars/ Books of Modules, Prospectuses and websites.

IPs conduct their own programmatic reviews on foot of which QQI may revalidate the programmes involved while IOTs (and DIT) had responsibility to undertake their own Programmatic Reviews. These usually took the form of Unit or Department self-study and a

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[11] a-thematic-analysis-of-reports-on-the-approval-and-review-of-programmes-of-higher-education-in-the-universities-rcsi-and-dit-in-the-period-2015-2018.pdf (qqi.ie)

[12] www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/Annual-Institutional-Quality-Report.aspx

[13] https://qsearch.qqi.ie/WebPart/Search?searchtype=validationreports

[14] a-thematic-analysis-of-reports-on-the-approval-and-review-of-programmes-of-higher-education-in-the-universities-rcsi-and-dit-in-the-period-2015-2018.pdf (qqi.ie)

[15] www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/Annual-Institutional-Quality-Report.aspx

revised programme submission document. Programmatic reviews in these instances were usually undertaken in accordance with published QA policy and procedure and evaluated by panels of external peers.

The panel reports have the function of ensuring that the programmes are performing as expected and have been updated based on experience and in order to meet changing demands.

Such individual programmatic reviews were not a common part of the procedures in all DABs as revealed by the sample of reports considered. However, some DABs published panel reports on the review of collaborative programmes and interdisciplinary programme.

A number of DABs provided QQI with panel reports, which were otherwise unpublished, for the purpose of the thematic analyses. However, it is worth remembering that when interpreting results of analyses in this area, that as previously stated, a limited sample of reports were analysed.

4.1 Review reports

All IP and IOT Programmatic review panel reports were published, either by QQI or the relevant IOT.
Many of the DAB academic unit and programme review reports were published on the relevant institution's website and where this was not the case, the reports were made available to QQI to assist in producing this report.

4.2 Professional Recognition Bodies

Most PRBs whose panel reports were analysed had adopted guidelines and standards for the evaluation of programmes that would lead to **registration** with, or **membership** of, the PRB **for graduates** of programmes deemed to have been consistent with these guidelines and standards. These guidelines resulted in a structured approach to the accreditation/ approval processes with panel reports, typically covering programme mission, objectives and learning outcomes, governance and administration, curriculum model (including professional placement), students, assessment, staff profile and staff development, educational resources, and issues arising from the panel visit.
Several of the PRB panel reports covered programmes that were delivered by academic units which had been subject to recent internal periodic reviews. This allowed for a comparison of the external accreditation/ approval PRB panel report and the panel periodic review report.

5. Recurring themes in approval/validation reports

5.1 Commendations

Commendations are intended to be reflective of good practice and included *inter alia*

- Programme concept

    a) the development process for the programme,
    b) the positive impact of external stakeholders (employers and industry) on the development of the programme,
    c) strong rationale for the programme
    d) addressing a clear demand from learners and employers.

- Engagement of staff with the review process

- Quality of submitted documentation.

- Curriculum development

    a) range of topics covered,
    b) elective modules,
    c) content of modules,
    d) research
    e) industry informing the curriculum,
    f) interdisciplinary curriculum, and
    g) embedding work placement in the curriculum.

- Teaching, learning and assessment

    a) teaching and learning strategies
    b) research informing teaching and learning
    c) technology enhanced teaching and learning.

5.2 Recommendations

Recommendations are intended to either provide a new lens through which programme developers can review their proposals or proposals posited by a panel that may help improve one or more elements of a programme, often based on the experience of an external reviewer. Recommendations are non-binding and intended to promote discussion and programme development. Recurring themes include:

- Curriculum:

a) The timing of or sequencing of some modules

   b) credit (ECTS) distribution

   c) learner work load

   d) module titles

   e) strengthening of work placement

- Assessment

   a) Coherent assessment of work placement

   b) use of reflective journals

   c) provision of assessment schedules

   d) detail on repeat assessments,

   e) assessment of dissertations

   f) greater innovation in assessment techniques

   g) variety of assessments techniques

- Learner resources

   a) type and availability of equipment

   b) specialist equipment

   c) updating library acquisitions

   d) currency of reading lists,

   e) on-line subscriptions

   f) alternative learning resources.

- Programme objectives and outcomes

   a) aims and objectives of the programme

   b) clear expression of learning outcomes to include both minimum intended programme learning outcomes (MIPLOs) and minimum intended module learning outcomes (MIMLOs).

- Concept and development

   a) development process

   b) input from stakeholders

   c) programme rationale.

5.3 Conditions

Conditions are set in those instances where a panel see considerable merit in a new programme proposal but are of the opinion that there are some fundamental flaws that need to be addressed **before** the proposal can be validated. Conditions were imposed by panels in similar areas to those listed above for recommendations but required more fundamental revision. However, the difference was often in relation to the number of curriculum changes required e.g. changes in a

specific area to one or more modules or major changes to the scheduling of modules in a programme. Common themes included:

- Objectives and outcomes: the most common problems related to the number of outcomes that required addressing (either too few or too many) or the outcomes as described did not align with the NFQ level identified.
- Assessment: frequently it was absence of information in relation to assessment that necessitated a condition.
- Structure: changing a programme title to reflect the objectives of the programme or a module title to better reflect its content.

It was not always clear in the reports why one panel would propose a recommendation while another would make the same issue a condition. In some cases, there was clarity: e.g., a condition in relation to or providing more information in relation to assessment. Interestingly, the analyses suggested that large panels tended to impose more conditions and recommendations than those made by panels that comprised fewer members.

6. Analyses of reports on periodic reviews of academic units and existing programmes

6.1 Evaluation reports for Independent Providers where QQI makes the award

In respect of programmes – for which QQI is the awarding body – that are submitted to QQI by IPs, validation is for a maximum period of five years, Thereafter the programme needs to be reviewed and revalidated. There are two distinct, but closely related, review processes.

(1) Programme review is the provider-owned quality assurance procedure that addresses a single programme or group of related programmes. QQI published a Programme Review Manual in 2018 for pilot implementation. The manual provided templates that are used when preparing a programme review report.

(2) Revalidation confirms (or otherwise) that the reviewed and revised programme has been updated and continues to meet QQI's validation criteria. Revalidation decisions are made by QQI on the basis of the recommendation of the panel. The same panel and site visit are generally used for (1) and (2).

Twenty-five programme review panel reports, involving 78 programmes from Higher Certificate (Level 6) to Master's Degree (Level 9), were analysed to identify recurring

strengths, opportunities for improvement, and weaknesses within programmes. All but one of the programmes were re-validated.

6.2 Evaluation reports for periodic review of programmes in IOTs with delegated awarding powers

Two processes take place during the 'programmatic review' process in IoTs.

(i)   Strategic review of the academic unit and planning for its future development (Stage 1)

(ii)   The revision of programmes for the purpose of revalidation within the academic unit (Stage 2)

There was no standard format for the panel report for programmatic reviews throughout the IOT sector. Approaches to reporting took a variety of forms that included:

- Abridged reports;
- Note of the meetings that took place;
- Summary of topics discussed;
- Some reports provided information on the programme; and
- Some reports provided information on the department/academic unit.

6.3 Evaluation reports for the review of academic units in DABs

Very few DABs publish evaluation reports on the periodic review of programmes. Six periodic programme review evaluation reports were included in the thematic analyses. This limited the level of analysis that could be undertaken. Six evaluation reports of the periodic programme reviews were analysed that were not part of an academic unit review.

- Half of the reports analysed did not record whether any meetings between the panel and the programme development team, relevant stakeholders etc. took place as part of the review process.
- Half of the reports recorded that meetings took place with academic staff.
- One third of the reports recorded that meetings took place with learners.

Academic units of DABs undergo external quality assurance in line with ESG 1.10 viz. *Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis.*

a) This involves a multi-stage process whereby the DAB undertakes i) a self-assessment by the academic unit ii) this results in a report which is sent to an external panel iii) a site visit by the panel, iv) a panel report. Consequent to the panel report, the academic unit develops

vi) a quality improvement plan (QIP). The panel report and the QIP are considered by the institution (AC or Governing Authority or a subcommittee of the AC) which approves publication of the report on the institution's website. The follow-up plans or responses to the panel reports may also be published.

b) Twenty-two panel reports for academic units were analysed. Reports from all DABs were included in the analyses. The reports selected represented a broad range of disciplines and academic units.

c) The level of detail provided in the reports varied substantially between individual panels. Some panel reports only provided information on panel membership with lists of commendations and recommendations. Others documented the outcomes of the meetings with students, staff and other stakeholders and presented detailed commendations and recommendations that were linked to the comprehensive findings of the panel.

During the site visits to IPs, IOTs and DABs, external panels met with a range of both external and internal stakeholders. The personnel who met with each panel is summarised in Table 4.

Table 2. Personnel who met with panels during site visits

Who the panel met with during the site visit IPs	Who the panel met with during the site visit IOTs	Who the panel met with during the site visit DABs
Management, academic staff (100% of site visits)	Management, academic staff (100% of site visits)	Management, academic staff (86% of site visits; 14% did not record meetings with these cohorts of site visits)
Learners (100% of site visits)	Learners (67% of site visits)	Learners (75% of site visits; 25% did not record meetings with this cohort
Graduates (50% of site visits)	Graduates or employers or both (61% of site visits)	Graduates (50% of site visits; 50% did not record meetings with this cohort)
Employers (25% of site visits)		Employers (46% of site visits; 54% did not record meetings with this cohort)
		Other units e.g. administrative, technical, etc.

		(71% of site visits; 29% did not record meetings with other units)

6.4 Evaluation reports for Professional Recognition Bodies

A significant number of Irish higher education programmes are linked to professional or regulatory body requirements. While there appears to be overlap between some of the PRB accreditation processes and the institutions' programmatic review processes, institutions may be required to follow two separate quality assurance processes. In these cases, realignment and/or amalgamation of the processes could reduce the cumbersome administrative overhead, while achieving the desired outcomes.

6.4.1 Recurring themes in programme review reports

Commendations

- Engagement of staff with the review process
- culture of team working
- quality of documentation
- PRB accreditation panels in 26% of reviews commended the programme
- curriculum development and balance
- content of modules
- research informing the curriculum development and design
- interdisciplinary design
- engagement with industry
- work placement.
- teaching and learning strategies
- range of assessments
- research informed teaching and learning
- technology enhanced teaching, learning and assessment.

Recommendations

- the inclusion of additional/alternative electives,
- re-balancing credit allocation,
- adding or restructuring work placement,
- strategies to develop graduate attributes within the curriculum,
- improving feedback to students,
- rebalancing student workload,

- further enhancing integration of curriculum and assessment,
- expanding teaching and learning strategies,
- addressing, where possible, the high student to staff ratio
- reviewing academic unit structures to achieve economies of scale and efficiency

PRB reports focused more on

- greater provision of information to students,
- ensuring appropriate programme resourcing
- succession planning, where possible
- establishment of structures for dissemination of good practice.

Conditions

The issues in areas to be addressed by academic units and programme development teams were similar to those identified in the frequently recurring recommendations. And centred around improvements to the curriculum, programme management and clarity of programme and module learning outcomes.

It is noteworthy that DAB panels generally did not impose conditions in relation to their own programmes. This is most likely a reflection of the rules under which they operate when reviewing and revising programmes. Interestingly, the analysis showed that this did not extend to programmes that were the subject of joint awards, in three such reports conditions were imposed.

6.5 Examples of good practice in programme approval/validation and programme review

6.5.1 The following examples of good practice were identified in QQI reports:
- The 12 validation criteria for new programme validation (approval) and revalidation are explicitly stated, and the evaluation template ensures a consistent approach to validation. The criteria for validation must be addressed and evidence provided in the panel report.
- Recommendations and conditions for validation were linked to the validation criteria.
- Schedules of the meetings that took place as part of the site visit were provided in the panel report.
- External stakeholders who are not familiar with the provider of the programme were provided with some information on the provider.
- All validation and programme review reports are published
- The panels for new programme approvals included experienced practitioners with the necessary knowledge and expertise from industry, services, or the professions.

- Learners or learner representatives are included as part of the panel
- All panels met with academic staff as part of the site visit for the review of academic units and the periodic review of programmes.

6.5.2 The following examples of good practice were identified in IoT reports:
- All IOTs published panel evaluation reports in respect of the approval of new programmes.
- All IoTs used an institutional standard template for the initial validation reports. All reports contained details of the programme, the panel, and the commendations, recommendations and conditions as stated by the panel.
- The panels for new programme approvals included an experienced practitioner with the necessary knowledge and expertise from industry, services, or the professions.
- All IoTs published evaluation reports for the review of academic units and the periodic review of programmes
- All panels met with academic staff as part of the site visit for the review of academic units and the periodic review of programmes.
- All institutes used an institutional standard template for the panel reports.

6.5.3 The following examples of good practice were identified in DAB reports:
- All DABs published panel reports on the review of academic units.
- DABs had the greatest proportion of external members from outside the state.
- All panels met with academic staff as part of the site visit for the review of academic units.
- All DABs either published the follow-up report or commented on the findings of the panels.
- Some DABs published panel reports on linked provision.
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6.5.4 Summary
The analyses showed that recurring strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for improvement in programme approval/validation and programme review were as identified in panel reports. There were similarities in the findings across the sectors, both for the initial approval/validation of programmes and the review of academic unit/periodic programme review.

7. The changing landscape

Irish higher education has undergone significant change over the past two years. In 2019, the three Dublin Institutes of Technology (viz. DIT, IT Tallaght and IT Blanchardstown) amalgamated and under new legislation became the Technological University of Dublin (TU Dublin). In January 2020, the Institutes of Technology became autonomous awarding bodies (except for the awarding of Doctoral degrees). In January 2021, Cork IT and IT Tralee amalgamated to become Munster Technological University (MTU) and Athlone and Limerick Institutes of Technology amalgamated and became the Technological University of the Shannon (TUS) in Autumn 2021. Two further consortia will see five of the remaining IOTs form two new technological universities – thus the thirteen IOTs and DIT will reduce to 5 new TUs with two institutions remaining as IOTs. Policies and procedures that existed in the precursor institutions to the TUs are being reshaped and developed to account for amalgamations and the new responsibilities inherent in the change in their designation.