



NEXT STEPS

for Teaching and Learning:
Moving Forward Together



QQI Insight on Higher Education Quality and Qualifications 2021



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cálíochta agus Cálíochtaí Éireann

Introduction

The higher education quality assurance system helps to ensure that education, research, qualifications and related services are of a quality that is acceptable nationally and internationally and supports confidence in the integrity of the qualifications system.

The quality assurance system in Ireland emerges from the actions and interactions of agents such as higher education institutions, their representative bodies, the Union of Students in Ireland, Professional, Statutory or Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs), state agencies and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

Each higher education institution has its own institutional quality assurance system that is embedded within the national system and determines the quality of education, research and related services that it is willing and able to maintain subject to national norms.

In this paper we reflect on how this quality and qualifications system responded to the Covid-19 crisis, what can be learned from that, and how it may assist us in the future.

Reflections on the Quality Assurance System

Quality assurance is integral to the culture and workings of the qualifications system and individual higher education institutions. Rather than abandon quality assurance during the Covid-19 crisis, autonomous providers not only continued to operate and improve their institutional quality systems including their engagement with external quality assurance but, as revealed in QQI's 2020 analysis¹, their institutional quality systems worked effectively to support and maintain standards in a time of crisis.

The Covid-19 experience demonstrated that higher education quality assurance systems can be flexible and agile. This did not surprise people who recognise that the quality assurance system is not only about processes and procedures but also encompasses all the individuals and groups working in the system who have any role that impacts on educational quality.

The quality assurance system was able to demonstrate confidence in the reasonableness of the adaptations made to arrangements for teaching, learning and assessment to maintain essential standards during the COVID-19 crisis. Moreover, institutional quality assurance systems helped identify opportunities for sustainable change to teaching, learning and assessment and supporting systems.

Covid-19 impacted heavily on the viability of traditional approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. The crisis demonstrated the importance of innovation and the importance of balance between innovation and regular quality assurance processes including mechanisms for maintaining academic and professional qualifications standards.

The Covid-19 crisis also reminded us that approaches to internal and external quality assurance should not be fixed. Innovative approaches to teaching, learning, assessment and curriculum design, and new challenges to academic integrity are examples of change requiring new responses from quality assurance.

Interaction between quality assurance system agents can help achieve a reasonable level of consistency and cohesion across higher education. Collaboration and sharing of effective practices are especially useful modes of interaction. Recent examples of productive collaboration include:

- New resources developed by providers and students from the [National Academic Integrity Network](#) supported by QQI, namely [Academic Integrity: National Principles and Lexicon of Common Terms](#) and [Academic Integrity Guidelines](#), that were developed and published speedily to support providers in fostering a culture of academic integrity and benchmarking of their policies and procedures.
- The importance of a closer working relationship between the PSRBs and higher education institutions highlighted in the issues that arose during the Covid-19 crisis around student placements in the regulated professions.
- Student partnership and engagement becoming embedded in the national and institutional quality systems.
- The work of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education bringing people together to share insights on effective practices.

A quality assurance system is not an end, rather its value derives from the role it plays in the qualifications system and its service to the needs of society. Ideally, its effectiveness needs to be judged by its impact in those terms.

Reflections on Teaching, Learning and Assessment

The Covid-19 experience has stimulated many to question long-held assumptions. Greater flexibility may be required in how students are taught and assessed, in the curricula they follow, as well as in how, when and where they accumulate higher education qualifications.

There is already growing interest in providing more choice in how students are taught and assessed. The massification of education over recent decades has increased the diversity of the student population. However, it is not clear that there has been an expansion of comparable magnitude in the diversity of approaches to teaching, learning, assessment, programme design, and qualification formats.

¹ [The Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education.pdf](#) (qqi.ie) A QQI Evaluation, QQI 2020.



Employers in some fields are questioning the value of primary degrees in preparing people for employment². It is important therefore, that higher education gives people the opportunity to develop and demonstrate not only their disciplinary knowledge and skills but also the attitudes and soft competence that will enable them to thrive in employment.³

Reflecting on the future we would like to think that some of the following might become mainstream in higher education:

- Pedagogy and assessment will become more sophisticated and more valued.
- Technology will be more prominent, enabling more adaptable educational experiences tailored to individual needs.
- Traditional practices such as large in-person lectures could be replaced by asynchronous online material in all but niche areas.
- Blended learning will become the norm with appropriate resources and investment.
- Teachers will spend a greater proportion of their contact time on formative activity with small groups of students than on the delivery of content.
- Authentic problem-based learning will become much more prominent.
- Higher education institutions will frequently partner with industry⁴ to provide collaborative programmes leading to qualifications that combine the best of what both can offer.

Not all higher education institutions have the same ability and capacity to change, and this might create tensions between more and less agile providers.

Reflections on the Qualifications System

One lesson learned from the way higher education responded to the Covid-19 crisis was the value of the learning outcomes approach. The principle of the conservation of essential learning outcomes helped focus minds on what needed to be done rather than what could no longer be done. Time invested by the institutions in the elaboration of intended programme and module learning outcomes over the past 20 years stood them in good stead during this emergency. This enabled institutions to guide staff on alternative teaching and assessment arrangements while maintaining essential learning outcomes and the value of qualifications. High-level national guiding principles on assessment developed speedily, agreed with stakeholders, were found to be helpful⁵.

Beyond the learning outcomes approach, our qualifications system needs to evolve to match society's lifelong learning and qualification recognition needs. It is timely to reflect on:

- the continuing suitability of the established distribution of learning pathways to qualifications;

- how our system engages learners, employers, occupational associations, practitioners, and other users of qualifications so that they can better understand and contribute to the design of learning pathways and qualifications;
- how our system facilitates the efficient and reliable recognition of non-formal and informal learning;
- the National Framework of Qualifications and its influence on the qualifications system and how to ensure that it continues to be adequately supported and invested with meaning by its communities of practice.

This reflection is timely because of:

- the pace of change, be it technological, scientific, economic, cultural, environmental, learner demographic or social, which can be alarmingly quick;
- the need to ensure that teaching, learning and assessment practices contribute to widening the diversity of learning pathways and the enhancement of the permeability of the qualifications system;
- the need to explore opportunities for further and higher education qualifications that articulate with each other;
- the need to explore the transparency of qualifications standards in higher education with stakeholders, in the context of the emergence of multiple new public and private sector higher education awarding bodies;
- the need to reflect on the qualifications-related infrastructure and teaching, learning and assessment approaches required to support employment-oriented initial and continuing vocational education and training that may include work-based learning;
- the need to support new qualifications thinking such as micro-credentials and new ways of issuing qualifications and maintaining broad/diverse portfolios including digital qualifications;
- the need to ensure that our quality assurance system continues to be optimised for supporting our evolving qualifications system;
- the need to be vigilant in safeguarding the integrity and reputation of Irish qualifications;
- the need to adapt quality assurance to new approaches to teaching, learning and assessment.

Closing Remark

It is important not to forget or lose the advances that were made during the period of remote working. It is even more important to start thinking earnestly about the future.

2 See for example [Does Higher Education Still Prepare People for Jobs? \(hbr.org\)](https://hbr.org/);

3 See for example [AAC&U survey finds employers want candidates with liberal arts skills but cite 'preparedness gap' \(insidehighered.com\)](https://insidehighered.com/)

4 See for example [This College Degree Is Brought to You by Amazon - WSJ](https://www.wsj.com/).

5 [Guiding Principles for Alternative Assessment \(COVID-19\) 18-11-20.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](https://www.qqi.ie/) QQI, 18/11/2020