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Taking stock and looking forward

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Author(s)

Name: Orla Lynch

Position: Head of Cyclical Reviews

Organisation: QQI

Country: Ireland

Short bio:

Orla Lynch is the Head of Cyclical Reviews for Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). Orla has been involved in the quality assurance (QA) of education and training in Ireland for fifteen years. She was involved in the establishment and implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), the development of award systems and standards for further education and the development of national policy and guidelines for quality assurance including accreditation, monitoring and review. Following her appointment to QQI, Orla has managed: the institutional review of diverse higher education institutions from Universities to small independent providers; a system level review of QA in higher education; the development of QQI policy on re-engagement; and policy on review. Orla has also been involved in work with other quality assurance agencies across Europe, in particular the EQArep Project led by the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

Proposal

Title: A new model for external review of quality in a diverse higher education area

Abstract:

In 2013 QQI commissioned the 'Review of Reviews' to take stock of Irish legacy review models and make proposals for the features of a new QQI model. QQI has now published (June, 2015) a White Paper presenting a comprehensive model for reviews. The key innovative features of the new model for review are: multiple objectives (including effectiveness, accountability and enhancement) and multiple dimensions (institution, system and thematic); differentiation between cyclical and 'for cause' reviews and initial and subsequent reviews; the close integration of continuous and periodic engagements for reviews; the use of data (metrics) as well as narrative sources of evidence; the development of a Quality Profile for institutions.

This paper outlines the features of the review model and the rationale for their development.

Text of paper:



1 Background

QQI emerged in 2012 from an amalgamation of four Irish bodies that collectively had a range of awarding and quality assurance responsibilities in the education sector. Three of the legacy agencies were responsible, *inter alia*, for review of higher education institutions. Through the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012¹, QQI is responsible for the review of the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures of all public higher education institutions, and for those private institutions who voluntarily seek to offer programmes leading to QQI awards.

Since the creation in 2012 of QQI as a unitary agency spanning a broad spectrum of education provision, a significant challenge has been to accommodate the diversity of the providers for which QQI acts as the external quality assurance agency. On the one hand, there is a gatekeeper or threshold quality function to examine new entrants into the system. On the other hand, there is a risk of imposing repetitive, bureaucratic, accountability processes on well-functioning institutions, which divert resources away from activities either within or outside the institutions that could be better devoted to actually improving quality. Some of the institutions that engage with QQI have never undertaken external review by any agency, whilst other institutions (the Universities) are facing their third external review cycle. Following the inception of QQI, in preparation for the development of QQI quality assurance and review policies, and as a direct response to a call from the HE sector, QQI decided to undertake a review of the legacy agency review models – the ‘Review of Reviews’². A review team (the Team), consisting of three high-profile HE international experts was appointed in July 2013. The Team was encouraged by QQI to conduct an independent objective analysis of the approaches to reviews of its’ relevant former agencies.

The ‘Review of Reviews’ was a unique system review, setting national and international precedents in this domain, both in terms of good practice in agency amalgamation and in applying the same high standards of transparency, accountability and self-evaluation to the agency as to the sector that it regulates. External contributions were a key feature of the review: terms of reference were modified following sector consultation; the Team met with a wide range of external stakeholders, including students; and an online consultation form was made available to stakeholders who could not meet the Team.

The ‘Review of Reviews’ report evaluated approaches to review across the entire higher education system, analysing their strengths and weaknesses. It also examined the impacts of reviews and the system implications of the findings of previous reviews. The report also signaled directions with regards to future QQI reviews, including twelve key desirable review characteristics.

The report further identified some challenges for QQI in developing a coherent future review model for higher education. These were:

- The need to establish an equilibrium between the dual roles of QA as a regulatory force and its equal (or possibly greater) importance as an agent for improving and developing the core teaching, learning and research activities of higher education institutions.

¹ Acts of the Oireachtas (2012). *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012*. Stationery Office. Dublin

² Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), 2014. *Review of Reviews: Report of the Independent Review Team, March 2014*. Dublin.



- The necessity to clarify QQI's own distinct mission and approach in the higher education QA space. To approach with care potential links between QQI reviews and the funding of institutions and programmes by the funding authority (HEA) to ensure that QQI's endeavours remained focused on improvement in a culture of quality.
- The potential for QQI to benefit from learning from the achievements and shortcomings of earlier experiences in reviews.
- The need for both review teams and institutions to place more emphasis on the effectiveness of the quality assurance processes and structures in place within institutions, rather than simply asserting or demonstrating their existence. This suggested that future reviews should focus more on analysis and evidenced judgments and recommendations and commendations, than on description.
- To balance carefully the amount of effort required both from QQI and from the HEIs, and identify more clearly the intended benefits of the reviews for both parties.

The 'Review of Reviews' also posited some key questions for institutions and QQI relating to the purposes, models and forms of future reviews. In order to elicit the opinions of the institutions and other stakeholders about these matters, QQI conducted a survey in the latter part of 2014. These questions had been posed but not answered by the 'Review of Reviews' Report. QQI published the Results of the QQI Survey on Reviews³ and conducted a follow-up seminar in December 2014. A comprehensive enhancement-focused review model with elements of accountability was the most preferred option. Respondents also indicated a desire for a somewhat differentiated approach to review forms for different types of institutions. Five core purposes for all reviews emerged.

2 Five common purposes

QQI has adopted and stated five key purposes for its reviews, which are:

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

All reviews of higher education institutions share these common purposes. The findings of all reviews are measured against them to ensure consistency and also to verify that the review format and procedures are effective. The purposes broaden the intention of reviews beyond solely the examination of quality assurance procedures to extend to matters of

³ Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), 2014. *Review of Reviews: Results of the QQI Survey on Reviews*, December 2014. Dublin.



quality and enhancement in the institution. They also encompass the broader system-level and public impacts of reviews.

3 A (New) QQI Review Model

In June 2015, QQI published a White Paper⁴, setting out a new review model for higher education. The review model is a logical progression of the process that commenced with the 'Review of Reviews' and it is significantly based upon the findings of the Team. It has proven a significant challenge to find a model and approach that can provide a relevant and meaningful review system for heterogeneous institutions with quality assurance systems that are at different stages of development.

The QQI review model provides for reviews that can differ in the extent to which they balance accountability and enhancement, on an evidential basis. This is achieved because reviews integrate with other, ongoing, aspects of QQI engagements with institutions and are more closely aligned to the actual (rather than aspirational) lifecycle of engagement between the agency and the institution. It is also intended that the overt separation of cyclical and 'for cause' reviews further strengthens the focus and finesse of this model.

Accordingly, QQI has adopted a comprehensive review model with adaptable forms for its individual reviews. The model comprises both continuous and periodical elements. All reviews will be underpinned by five common specific and measurable purposes, as referenced earlier, and eight key principles (indicated later).

3.1 Continuous Review Elements

The continuous elements of review are: internal reviews and monitoring within the institution; annual reporting by the institution to the agency; dialogue meetings between the agency and the institution.

3.1.1 Internal Reviews and Monitoring

Institutions are ultimately responsible for the quality of their provision, the implementation and evaluation of their own QA procedures and on-going enhancement. Internal reviews and monitoring are the ongoing work that institutions undertake to QA their education provision. Statutory engagements between an institution and QQI may also generate conditions, recommendations and other actions for follow-up. Institutions must internally review and follow-up on these (self-monitor), and then report their findings to QQI.

3.1.2 Annual Report

Institutions provide QQI with an extensive annual report. The purpose of the report is to provide institutions with an opportunity to document in a single concise report the implementation, effectiveness and impact of their QA procedures and related quality enhancement initiatives.

The annual report is a statement on the institution's approach to embedding a quality culture, embracing both QA and enhancement, and provides an evidence base on the constant commitment to quality within Irish higher education institutions. It reflects one part of ensuring public confidence, nationally and internationally, regarding the robust nature of the on-going internal QA systems of Irish institutions.

⁴ Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), 2015. *White Paper: Review of Higher Education Institutions*. Dublin.



3.1.3 Dialogue Meetings

Dialogue meetings take place regularly (usually annually) between institutions and QQI. They allow for a mutual communication exchange relating to institutional and sectoral quality.

3.2 Periodical Review Elements

The periodical elements of a review continue to be a periodic self-evaluation piece by the institution and a visit and report by a peer review team, commissioned by QQI. The Review of Reviews report highlighted the strengths of the legacy review systems that QQI inherited. It also emphasised areas of challenge and the need to build a new fit for purpose model. QQI, in developing policy, has taken this opportunity to use and improve on legacy review procedures and to innovate. QQI has taken an open and deliberate approach to addressing the challenges as well as specific requirements for an Irish reviews system building on inputs derived from the findings of the 'Review of Reviews' Report, the ENQA External Review Report of QQI⁵ and direct feedback from institutions, stakeholders and review teams through the review follow-up feedback and the survey conducted in 2014. QQI reviews will take on a number of complementary dimensions: individual institutional reviews; reviews in common thematic areas (e.g. country reports); synoptic reviews of individual review findings, outcomes and impacts; reviews of cross institutional indicators and benchmarks.

To enable comparability, QQI will publish common Terms of Reference (TOR) for periodic reviews for homologous higher education institutions. In devising and agreeing TOR for reviews QQI will allow for their adaptation and the provision for inclusion of other statutory reviews. Long descriptive institutional pieces, that used to make up a significant element of the TOR, will be eliminated through the use of institutional profile data generated by the funding authority (the HEA)⁶.

In the new review model, where possible, deliberations relating to matters of accountability will be completed early on in the review process at the planning stage, on the basis of evidence generated by continuous engagement between the agency and institutions, thus allowing greater time for deliberation on matters relating to enhancement and innovation. In order to make periodic reviews a reliable source of relevant information and feedback for institutions, QQI is innovating by introducing quality indicators and benchmarks in the review process. It is intended that these will also increase the evidential basis for reviews to prevent an over-reliance on narrative sources of information as well as encouraging institutions to reflect on matters pertaining to quality as well as quality assurance. Initially, in order to develop a relevant set of indicators, institutions are being encouraged to identify their own indicators and benchmarks in keeping with their own mission and context. Through synoptic analyses by the agency of individual review reports, it is intended that, over time, a valid and relevant set of metrics and benchmarks will emerge.

Improvements in reporting, particularly the length and relevance of information contained in reports, are being proposed based on feedback from institutions and review teams, the

⁵ European Association for Quality in Higher Education (2014). *External Review Report of QQI*. ENQA, Brussels

⁶ Higher Education Authority (2014). *Higher Education System Performance: First report 2014-2016, Volume II: Institutional and Sectoral Profiles 2011-12*. HEA, Dublin.



findings of the EQArep project⁷ and recent changes to the reporting approach of the funding authority in Ireland. Where available, funding agency profiles will be used to describe the institution. Non-state funded institutions will be required to construct a similar profile document for inclusion in their reports.

A significant innovation is the introduction of a smaller focused report, called the Quality Profile. This will be devised by the agency, using the review findings and other reports based on other QQI/institution engagements, such as annual reports. The Quality Profile will consist of a single, easy to digest page, summarising the status of quality at the institution. The Profile will be aimed at a wide range of audiences and the purpose of the document will be to increase public understanding of quality accountability and enhancement at the level of the institution.

3.3 Eight principles

The new review model centres around eight key principles for reviews:

- clarity, depth and quality performance;
- economy and efficiency;
- effectiveness;
- consistency and diversity;
- international perspective;
- inclusivity;
- professionalism; and
- multi-dimensional

These are explained below:

3.3.1 Clarity, depth and quality performance means that the model is specific about its intended (multi-dimensional) purposes and is checked regularly against them. Reviews are about measuring effectiveness, accountability and enhancement. The standards against which findings are compared now include the institution's own mission and objectives, as well as ESG and QQI guidelines (SOPs). The criteria for reviews centre upon eleven key questions which will be asked by each review team.

3.3.2 Economy and efficiency mean that reviews are now more closely integrated with internal monitoring, institutional reporting arrangements and other QQI engagements. Review is proportionate to the lifecycle of engagement of the institution. Objectives for reviews can be extended to include other QQI statutory requirements. To make self-evaluation more efficient, guidance will be provided to institutions to maximise the analytical (and quantifiable) over the descriptive.

3.3.3 Effectiveness means that the balance between accountability and enhancement in reviews is determined by an evidence basis, formed from the findings of previous reviews and other, more frequent, QQI engagements.

⁷ Bach, T., Dragojevic, D., Findlay, P., Hering, S., Lauri, L., Lynch, O., Olcen, Z. and Udam, M. (2014). *Transparency of European Higher Education Through Public Quality Assurance Reports (EQArep): Final Report of the Project*. Occasional Papers No. 21, ENQA, Brussels



3.3.4 Consistency and diversity mean that the review model has some consistent features across all reviews, whilst allowing for some variable features depending on the type of institution and the stage of development of quality assurance systems. In order to be consistent reviews share the same purposes, procedures and enhancement themes. To accommodate diversity, the Terms of Reference for reviews can be different, depending on the type of institution. Institutions can identify standards and benchmarks compatible with their own mission and context. Homologous institutions have similar Terms of Reference to allow for comparability. Initial reviews of institutions are more intensive and focus more on accountability purposes, subsequent reviews focus increasingly on enhancement. QQI has entirely separated 'for cause' and cyclical reviews.

3.3.5 An international perspective means that the standards and guidelines for reviews set out in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (revised edition), 2015⁸ (ESG) parts 1, 2 and 3 are incorporated into the model. For institutions, ESG Part 1 is already the main element of the review criteria. Institutions will be encouraged to look internationally for indicators and benchmarks in their own self evaluations. Each review team will comprise at least one member with international expertise.

3.3.6 Inclusivity is reflected in a process that is engaging and consultative with institutions and review teams that balance international, student and stakeholder perspectives.

3.3.7 Professionalism means that review teams are carefully selected and trained and roles within teams are clearly assigned.

3.3.8 Multi-dimensionality means that the outcomes of reviews will not only be relevant to the institutions concerned but are also be used to generate system-based biennial analyses of the sector. The multiple purposes of reviews ensure enhancement as well as accountability perspectives and these are underpinned by enhancement themes. The model allows for the use of a thematic approach to reviews, where common persistent cross-institutional themes emerge (e.g. country reviews).

4 Conclusion

The 'Review of Reviews' Report looked back to prescribe the parameters for QQI in devising a fit for purpose model for review of higher education institutions. The most significant challenge that QQI has faced is devising a model that is appropriate for the wide range of diverse higher education institutions for which it acts as the external quality assurance agency on a statutory and non-statutory basis.

QQI has used the 'Review of Reviews', along with other key sources of information (ENQA review, feedback, EQArep Project) to deliberately address these challenges by devising a comprehensive model for reviews that retains the successful features of antecedent models, supplementing these with innovations designed to address their shortcomings and the evolution of QA systems in general. The intention is that the model, while providing a firm

⁸ European Association for Quality in Higher Education (2015) *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (revised edition)*. ENQA, Brussels.



foundation, will also, in itself, be adaptive and responsive to developments in QA. This review model has been published for consultation. The intention is that it will be rolled out in the next reviews cycle which will commence in 2016.

This review model will be successful if all institutions receive proportionate external oversight by QQI. For some, this will be a predominant focus on the effectiveness of their QA procedures, for others it will be through significant support and validation of their forays into the area of quality enhancement. For all institutions there should be an equal sense of providing public accountability for the quality and QA of the institution.

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