



QFI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

MID-CYCLE ANALYSIS

CINNTE Review Reports



QFI REVIEW

CINNTE 

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Executive Summary

In its capacity as the independent state agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services in Ireland, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), coordinates the cyclical review of Irish publicly regulated higher education institutions (HEIs). As part of this activity QQI conducts cyclical reviews in order to evaluate the effectiveness of institution-wide quality assurance procedures for the purposes of establishing, ascertaining and maintaining the quality of education, research and related services the institution provides. The current cycle of cyclical reviews is called the 'CINNTE' cycle.

QQI commissioned this thematic analysis primarily to identify and analyse the key themes and topics arising within the CINNTE institutional review reports. The sample consists of the review reports arising from the first seven CINNTE reviews, which took place between 2018 and 2020.

The analysis reveals that the reviewed institutions

- made good use of the cyclical review process to facilitate sound self-evaluations, which involved a broad range of internal and external stakeholders
- have implemented effective quality assurance arrangements that comply with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) and have regard to QQI Guidelines
- have established and implemented quality assurance arrangements based on governance structures that are effective and – on the whole – efficient in assuring the quality of the institutions' activities.

At the same time, the analysis has revealed three topics that are highlighted throughout the review reports as challenges:

- Ensuring the efficiency of governance structures, particularly the cascades of committees below the governing authority, the management committee and the academic council;
- maintaining sets of policies or – at times – maintaining the overall quality assurance system;
- ensuring that quality assurance policies are implemented consistently across the institution.

Although the CINNTE review approach encompasses teaching and learning/the learning experience as well as research and other activities, the author has found that the review reports focus primarily on teaching and learning – in particular, the learning experience.

It is important to acknowledge that the number of institutional review reports considered for this analysis is low and, consequently, that caution must be exercised when attempting to draw conclusions that apply to the sector as a whole.

A more detailed comparative analysis of the stage of development of the quality assurance arrangements in Irish higher education institutions could be conducted by including in the analysis the institutional self-evaluation reports (ISERs) and by taking account of the annual institutional quality reports (AIQRs).

I. Introduction

In its capacity as the independent state agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services in Ireland, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), coordinates the cyclical review of Irish publicly regulated higher education institutions. Cyclical review is one component of its wider range of quality assurance activities, which also includes, inter alia, the monitoring of institutions' internal quality assurance by means of an annual quality report and periodic dialogue meetings. The current cycle of reviews is the CINNTE cycle.

CINNTE reviews aim to evaluate the effectiveness of institution-wide quality assurance procedures for the purposes of establishing, ascertaining and maintaining the quality of education, research and related services that the institution provides.

CINNTE reviews are underpinned by the relevant sections of the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012*¹ and are in keeping with Parts 2 and 3 of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in European Higher Education Topic (ESG)*.²

One of QQI's strategic priorities in its *Statement of Strategy 2019-2019* is 'Analysis and Impact' – the strategy elaborates under this priority that the agency aims to analyse and demonstrate the impact of measures taken to improve the quality of education and training for the benefit of learners.³ In its *Policy on the Cyclical Review of Higher Education Institutions*, QQI states that it will, at intervals, evaluate the effectiveness of the review model.⁴

Consequently, in March 2020, QQI commissioned a thematic analysis with the main purpose of identifying and analysing the key themes and topics arising within the CINNTE institutional review reports published by April 2020.

The outcome of this evaluation is intended to provide information about the stage of development of internal quality arrangements at Irish higher education institutions and may lead to enhancements and improvements to the review process.

The analysis was commissioned by QQI and conducted by an external expert in April and May 2020. When the analysis commenced, the CINNTE review cycle 2017-2023⁵ was a third of the way through, and seven institutional review reports arising from this process had been published.

1 <https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Qualifications%20and%20Quality%20Assurance%20%28Education%20and%20Training%29%20Act%202012%20-%20Revised%20November%202014.pdf>

2 https://enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf

3 <https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/Mission,-Values-and-Goals.aspx>

4 <https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Cyclical%20Review%20of%20Higher%20Education%20Institutions.pdf>

5 <https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/Institutional-Reviews07.aspx>

II. Methodology

1. The Sample

The sample comprises the review reports emanating from the first seven CINNTE reviews, which took place between 2018 and 2020. Two reviews were conducted in 2018 (IT Sligo, Letterkenny IT); four reviews were conducted in 2019 (Dublin City University, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Maynooth University, NUI Galway); and one review concluded in 2020 (University College Dublin)

2. The Review Reports

STRUCTURE OF THE REVIEW REPORTS

In general, the structure of the review reports aligns with the structure outline presented in the relevant QQI CINNTE Review Handbooks (one for universities and other designated awarding bodies, and one for institutes of technology)⁶ – at least as far as the review objectives are concerned. There is only one difference between the review report structure proposed for the universities and that proposed for institutes of technology: there is one review objective, ‘Procedures for Awarding’, which applies only to institutes of technology.⁷

It is, however, notable, that, at the level of topics (i.e. the discrete areas dealt with under the level of the review objectives), the structures of the review reports differ – in some cases substantially. Each review report is specific to the individual institution’s context, and no two review reports have precisely the same structure.

6 *Cyclical Review Handbook. Universities and other Designated Awarding Bodies*; <https://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/CINNTE%20Review%20Handbook%20DAB%20website.pdf> (referred to as ‘QQI CINNTE Review Handbook DAB’ in this report); *Cyclical Review Handbook. Institutes of Technology*; <https://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/CINNTE%20Review%20Handbook%20IoT%20website.pdf> (referred to as ‘QQI CINNTE Review Handbook IoT’ in this report)

7 For pragmatic reasons, the numbering of the review objectives in this report will follow the numbering in the *QQI CINNTE Review Handbook DAB*. For institutes of technology, there is one additional review objective, i.e. ‘Procedures for Awarding’, which, in that process, is objective 2. Consequently, review objectives 2 to 4 are numbers 3 to 5 in the IoT review reports. The chapter on the IoT-specific review objective is added after review objective 4 as chapter 7.

3. Methodological Approach

For this comparative analysis, the review reports were analysed using the standard structure of the CINNTE terms of reference as the criteria for analysis:

Section A	Introduction and Context
Section B	Methodology used to prepare the ISER
Section C	<p>Review Objectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Objective 1 To review the effectiveness and implementation of the QA procedures of the institution through consideration of the procedures set out, primarily, in the AIQR. – Objective 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – To review the enhancement of quality by the institution through governance, policy, and procedures. – To review the congruency of quality assurance procedures and enhancements with the institution’s own mission and goals or targets for quality. – To identify innovative and effective practices for quality enhancement. – Objective 3 To review the effectiveness and implementation of procedures for access, transfer and progression. – Objective 4 To determine compliance with the Code of Practice for the Provision of Programmes to International Learners. – Specific Objective for Institutes of Technology Procedures for Awarding, which applies only to institutes of technology.
Section D	Conclusions
Section E	Institutional Response

In general, the analysis focusses on the following questions:

- What are the key themes and topics addressed in the review reports?
- What are the key findings presented in the review reports?

As far as sections A to D are concerned the analysis is oriented towards the expectations set out in the handbooks, a number of guiding questions from the handbooks, and the subject matter of topics, sub-topics and items. As far as section E is concerned the guiding questions will be:

- How do the institutions respond to the findings of the review process?
- What do the responses reveal about institutions’ understanding of the review model?

The structure of this analysis is based on a combination of the structures of the *QQI Review Handbook DAB* and *QQI Review Handbook IoT* and the *Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by QQI for use by all Providers*⁸. Whereas the handbooks contain the review objectives and the criteria, the guidelines contain the statutory requirements for providers' internal quality assurance and form the structure of the chapter on review objective no. 1.

The interpretation and contextualisation of the results will take two directions. First, it will assess whether the findings can be generalised and whether conclusions on the nature, specific features, or stage of development of internal quality assurance at Irish higher education institutions are possible. Second, it will assess whether the review reports meet the agency's expectations as regards nature and content and will consider what conclusions can be drawn in relation to the design and conduct of the reviews. However, it is to be emphasised that this thematic analysis is not an analysis of the CINNTE review process or approach. Such an analysis would require a different methodology, which would include a systematic analysis of, inter alia, the relevant regulations and ISERs, and discussions with all parties involved.

When considering the conclusions arising from this thematic analysis, the reader must keep in mind that the number of institutions considered by the analysis is seven (four universities and three institutes of technology); the total number of higher education institutions for review is 21 (10 universities and other designated awarding bodies and 11 institutes of technology). The proportionately small size of the sample analysed calls for caution in any interpretation.

8 See [Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#). These guidelines will be referred to as QQI Guidelines throughout this report.

III. Analysis

1. Section A: Introduction and Context

There are three items to be addressed by review teams under section A of the review report: information on the profile of the institutions, a statement on contextual factors, and a statement on the institutions' approaches to quality assurance in the wider sense.

The review reports provide brief summaries of the institutions' profiles (which will not be considered as part of this exercise). In one review report, the review team includes only a brief account of the institution's profile that includes only core data. On the whole, in section A of the report, review teams tend to take as their focus the main contextual factors.

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

Across the reports, two external conditions are highlighted as having had a major impact on institutions' development during the period prior to the review as well as at the time of the review.

The first of these is the **economic downturn following the financial crisis** that began in 2008. This recession led to severe budget cuts that had a major negative impact on the Irish higher education system and this is highlighted explicitly in five review reports as a significant constraint on those institutions' development in the years prior to the review.

One area where the consequences of reduced funding had a direct impact on quality assurance activities is staffing (e.g. an increase in the ratio of students to staff, or a reduction in the number of staff members available for planned quality assurance measures – in the area of student supports, for example). Further, the public sector employment control framework is highlighted across reports as having negative effects not only on salary scales, but also on other areas.

The second external condition noted across the reports to have had a substantial impact is the dynamic development that many of the institutions were undergoing before and at the time of the review. This dynamism arose from a number of different sources: in two cases, the institutions were drafting new strategic plans; one institution had recently integrated three previously independent teacher education colleges; and two were planning to submit applications to become technological universities⁹. This last source is related to another feature of the reviews: the increasing importance of research in the missions of the three institutes of technology.

It is also worth noting that the majority of the reports list as a characteristic feature of the institution under review its important role as a provider in its regions. This is not always expressly stated, but it is implicit in all almost all of the review reports.

Finally, beyond the common factors mentioned above, certain external conditions are mentioned as having had substantial impact on individual institutions: for example, Brexit was noted to be a challenge for one institution that has a particular regional focus as a cross-border institution.

⁹ This development is explicitly mentioned in only one of the review reports.

THE INSTITUTIONS' APPROACHES TO QUALITY ASSURANCE

Five review reports contain short general statements on those institutions' approaches to quality assurance which are, to a large extent, similar: these note that the institutions have an official quality policy statement (or similar) underpinned by a quality handbook (or similar) that contains all relevant information on structures, responsibilities, processes and tools relating to internal quality assurance. One review report mentions explicitly that this system also includes research, while the remaining four do not address the scope of the institutions' QA systems. The universities are noted to have implemented a dedicated quality office or similar. Some review reports briefly highlight further details such as, inter alia, annual programme reviews and periodic programme reviews, the orientation towards the ESG, reviews of central services, and holistic and distributed approaches. One review report refers to the institution's commitment to quality culture and confirms that the institution's provision with collaborative partners is included in this statement.

These short statements provide the impression that institutions' internal quality assurance arrangements are by and large homogeneous in their design.

2. Section B: Methodology used to prepare the ISER

The review reports provide information about how the preparation of the ISERs was managed as well as the methodologies used, while also assessing both the drafting process and the content of the ISERs.

The reports reveal that the institutions used similar structures to manage the drafting of their ISERs. Generally, the institution set up a responsible steering group chaired by a member of senior management, usually the registrar. However, the reports differ in the level of detail they provide in respect of the size and composition of the groups, which ranged from 6 to 26 members. Two of the reports set out in detail the size of the groups involved. The composition of the steering groups is similar; they comprise representatives from academia, generally heads of school or similar, professional staff and students. This meets QQI's expectations as stipulated in the review handbooks.¹⁰ One institution did not involve students in the core steering group, but the report implies that it may have done so in non-permanent sub-groups; one institution chose the structure of a core group with additional non-permanent members.

The way in which each institution organised the work of its ISER steering group differed, as did the drafting process.

In all institutions but one the steering group drafted the ISER; in the divergent case, a specific sub-group was set up to draft the report. However, in one case the steering group collected contributions to the draft from non-members, who included members of university management and students. There was an interesting divergence with respect to one fundamental aspect of the drafting process: Although most of the institutions chose an integrative approach, with the whole group drafting the entire review report, two institutions chose to either have each review objective addressed separately by a specific sub-group, or to have the different perspectives on quality procedures addressed by specific sub-groups of students, staff and external stakeholders.

Common to all institutions is the substantial involvement of internal and external stakeholders in the drafting process. The way in which stakeholders were involved, however, and the point of time at which they were involved differs. Most institutions involved stakeholders in two ways: at an early stage by gathering feedback through surveys and focus group meetings and later in the process by presenting drafts of the ISER to the stakeholders for their comments. However, the nature and content of the surveys and the guiding questions provided during focus group meetings are not known.

¹⁰ QQI CINNTE Review Handbook DAB, p. 15, QQI CINNTE Review Handbook IoT, p. 15; NB: The QQI CINNTE Review Handbook IoT is only referred to in the report if it deviates from the QQI CINNTE Review Handbook DAB.

Neither the empirical sources of information nor the ways in which information was gathered in the ISER's preparation is systematically addressed. One institution refers to the use of internal documents such as department reports, while others made use of a large number of results from recent internal reviews or asked academic councils and other governance committees to reflect on the effectiveness of their activities. Three institutions highlighted that it was useful to have conducted their self-evaluations almost in parallel with the revision of their strategies. One institution conducted a follow-up survey on a previous survey on quality culture, which was commended by the review team in that case.

The Annual Institutional Quality Reports (AIQR) are mentioned only twice in reports as a source of information during the preparation of the ISER. This might come as a surprise because AIQRs are noted by QQI in its Cyclical Review Handbooks as playing a core role in the national quality assurance system and, in particular, forming a bridge between internal quality assurance and external reviews and as basis for the ISER.

“The AIQR is intended to articulate with external periodic review. On a basic level, it is intended that the AIQR, particularly part one, will assist with documentation management for institutions in review and lessen the burden on institutions to provide the Review Team with a significant amount of documentation in advance of their visit.”¹¹

The important role played by the AIQRs in the cyclical review process is also clear from their explicit inclusion in the handbooks as one of the sources to be taken into account by review teams during all phases of the reviews.¹² AIQRs may even form the evidence base for “a Review Team to satisfy itself that an institution is compliant with ESG 2015”¹³.

Review teams did indeed make use of the reports and refer to them as a source of information at various points. In one case the AIQR is reported to make reference to the relevant national and international standards and guidelines, and in another the review team makes the explicit statement, having reviewed the AIQR supplied, that the institution is in compliance with the ESG.

The review teams' assessments in respect of the ISER and ISER drafting process refer mainly to (a) representation of internal and external stakeholders in the process of preparing the ISER and (b) the ISER's content. In terms of representation, all review teams highlight that this was broad. As to content of the ISERs, the assessments are mainly positive, with only slight reservation regarding certain chapters in some cases, leading to the conclusion that the reports were considered to provide good bases for the site visits and the review processes in general. Only one review team noted that some of the chapters of the ISER contained insufficient information, which necessitated numerous requests for additional information. As to review teams' findings in respect of the nature of the descriptive or evaluative nature of the self-evaluation reports, three institutions were found to have provided analytical and evaluative information, while, in the remaining four cases, the teams concluded that institutions had placed too great a focus on the provision of descriptive information. Interestingly, the decision by some institutions to link the self-evaluation process closely with the revision of their strategies was considered to positive in some processes, and negative in others. Finally, both of the institutions that used case studies in their ISERs were commended for doing so.

In conclusion: The institutions were found to have employed sound processes for the preparation of their ISERs. While the analytical component of the ISERs was not always as strong as review teams would have wished, they nonetheless assessed the overall quality of the ISERs to be good. However, it is also worth noting that the AIQRs played an important role as a source of information in review teams' evaluations.

11 QQI CINNTE Review Handbook DAB, p. 6

12 QQI CINNTE Review Handbook DAB, pp. 20, 21, 49

13 QQI CINNTE Review Handbook DAB, p. 6

3. Section C: Review Objective No. 1

To review the effectiveness and implementation of QA procedures of the institution through consideration of the procedures primarily set out in the AIQR.

- a) The scope of this includes the procedures for reporting, governance and publication.
- b) This also incorporates an analysis of the ways in which the institution applies evidence based approaches to support quality assurance processes, including quantitative analysis, evidence gathering and comparison.
- c) Progress on the development of quality assurance since the last review of the institution will be evaluated.
- d) Consideration will also be given to the effectiveness of the AIQR and ISER procedures within the institution.
- e) The scope of this objective also extends to the overarching procedures of the institution for assuring itself of the quality of its research degree programmes and research activities.
- f) This objective also encompasses the effectiveness of the procedures established by the institution for the assurance of the quality of collaborations, partnerships and overseas provision, including the procedures for the approval and review of linked providers, joint awarding arrangements, joint provision and other collaborative arrangements such as clusters and mergers.

This review objective refers to internal quality assurance in a comprehensive sense that comprises “processes that seek to ensure that the learning environment (including teaching and research) reaches an acceptable threshold of quality.”¹⁴ At the core of this review objective is the review of the institution’s internal quality assurance system against the QQI Guidelines and accompanied by further guidelines on specific topics.¹⁵ The *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012* requires providers to “have regard to” the QQI Guidelines when establishing their own quality assurance procedures. The objective’s scope covers all types of programmes of education and training, research and related services. The relevance of the stipulations made in the QQI Guidelines cannot be overestimated. Although, as stated in the document, the QQI Guidelines are not intended:

- “to prescribe how providers are to carry out their work or run their organisations
- as a “how to” manual for providers on the establishment of QA procedures. Rather, it is up to providers to establish an internal quality system appropriate to their individual context which incorporates both operational procedures and a system of review to monitor the effectiveness of those procedures”.

However, they are used “as a basis for the approval by QQI of providers’ quality assurance procedures (other than for previously established universities)”¹⁶, and this clearly hints at the expectation of compliance.

14 *Core Statutory Quality Assurance (QA) Guidelines*, p. 2

15 *Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by QQI for Designated Awarding Bodies; Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by QQI for Institutes of Technology (other than DIT); Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by QQI for Providers of Research Degree Programmes; Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by QQI for Providers of Statutory Apprenticeship Programmes; Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Blended Learning Programmes*

16 *Core Statutory Quality Assurance (QA) Guidelines*, p. 1

Consequently, eleven topics will be addressed under this review objective, which encompasses governance, quality assurance processes and information. Research, although within the scope of CINNTE review approach, is not addressed by a specific topic.

In general, the review reports follow the structure of the QQI Guidelines and address the eleven core topics individually. There is one exception, where the report in question omits explicit chapters on three topics. A common feature of the review reports is that they start with the additional chapter 'Overall assessment of quality assurance procedures', omit a chapter on topic 2 'Documented approach to Quality Assurance', and add a chapter on research. One review report takes a different approach to structuring objective 1 by integrating all topics into one comprehensive chapter. Three review reports contain additional chapters on topics such as risk management, strategic planning or alignment of the QA system with strategy or apprenticeship programmes.

The following analysis is aligned with the structure followed by most of the review reports.

3.1 OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCEDURES

All review reports but one¹⁷ contain a chapter 'Overall Assessment of Quality Assurance Procedures' as the first chapter under review objective no. 1. The nature of these chapters varies slightly. Common to the majority of review reports is a short overall assessment stating that the institutions have implemented effective quality assurance systems that are in keeping with the QQI Guidelines and that comply with the ESG. In one report, this chapter does not contain any further information or assessment and can be considered as an introductory remark that sets the scene for subsequent chapters under review objective no. 1; other reports highlight various topics that demonstrate how the institution is in compliance with the ESG. Two review reports depart from this structure and focus on core features of the institution's internal quality assurance system or provide an introduction to the principles of that system. Two review reports contain commendations and recommendations at this point, which are taken from the subsequent chapters.

Apart from the general assessment of institutions' internal quality assurance, two recurrent topics emerge. First, it would seem that the majority of institutions face challenges in maintaining an efficient system of policies because of a) the absence of systematic review (which is exacerbated by huge numbers of policies) or the unsystematic supplementation of the existing set of policies with new ones. Second, it would appear that the inconsistent implementation of policies across the institutions is a common issue. This finding, which is replicated in subsequent chapters, appears to contradict the overall assessment that appears in most reports that there are effective systems and policies in place.

Only one institution is reported as having a robust system for reviewing and updating its QA system and policies; in two review reports, inconsistent implementation, along with the absence of a systematic approach, is a recurrent theme.

3.2 TOPIC 1: GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT OF QUALITY

The subjects addressed under this heading vary and range from the institution's governance structure to student representation in the institution's governance or certain core processes related to governance. Two review reports address the alignment of the institution's QA system with its strategy and mission or risk management, as mentioned above in separate chapters.

The structure of the relevant bodies and organisational entities is similar across the institutions with the governing authority bearing responsibility for governance of the institutions in accordance with the Universities

¹⁷ One report contains a chapter 'Current Quality Assurance Procedures' which sounds similar, but which replaces most of the chapters on the subsequent topics.

Act 1997.¹⁸ Usually the governing authority is supported by two core bodies: the executive committee and the academic council. Below this level, the institutions have a variety of cascades of further committees, which in some cases mirror specific features or priorities of the institutions; these might include a specific committee for postgraduate education that plays a significant role in PhD education. Each of the seven institutions was found to have a committee with responsibility for internal quality assurance.

The review reports do not present very detailed information about the institutional infrastructure supporting the committees. In two cases, review teams devoted more attention to this area, where they highlighted that the position of a QA manager was missing or that the establishment by the institution of a quality promotion office was an important step.

The effectiveness and efficiency of the QA governance and committee structure and communication between the committees (or in general within the institutions) is a recurrent theme. One interesting aspect is the link between quality assurance and institutional management, or, more precisely, how quality assurance and its outputs inform institutional management. Three institutions were found by review teams to strengthen this link by placing an obligation on the committee responsible for quality assurance to report to both the governing authority and the academic council or by implementing a joint responsibility on senior management and the academic council.

All of the institutions but one had already begun to review their governance structures due to issues that they had already identified or received corresponding allusions or formal recommendations from the review teams to do so. Review teams consider in the reports how quality assurance and its results inform general management of the institution and, in general, if there is a proliferation of committees, which might impact on another recurring theme – i.e. insufficient communication between committees and, in general, between institutes/ faculties.

On the whole, review teams' assessments of the roles and activities of the institutions' management are generally positive, with one institution receiving a formal commendation under this heading.

The concept of **quality culture** is prominent under this heading. An indicator of the importance of quality culture can be seen in the fact that "To encourage a QA culture..." are the initial words of the first purpose of external review set out in the *QQI CINNTE Review Handbook DAB* and that this purpose is mentioned numerous times in the handbook.¹⁹

The topic is explicitly mentioned in four review reports, with one institution receiving a commendation for having made good progress towards establishing a quality culture. If one takes a broader view and considers each of the reports in its entirety, the concept of quality culture is addressed in all review reports but one; however, in six cases, it is not mentioned under this topic, where it would be expected, but under other topics.²⁰

As the topic of 'quality culture' is scattered throughout the reports, and because it is generally dealt with in a rather general manner, this theme will be presented in an integrated way in this chapter.

Four institutions receive positive evaluations of their implementation of a quality culture, and one of these is referred to as an example of good practice in the *2017 QQI Summary Report on Quality within Higher Education*.²¹; in the relevant case study, the institution outlined its success in embedding quality in governance structures and aligning quality with strategic objectives. Across the review reports, only one institution is

18 One report refers only to the 'management' of the institution; the structure, however, is the same.

19 *QQI CINNTE Review Handbook DAB*, p. 9

20 Mentions in the concluding chapters are not counted as they are repetitions of previous mentions. Although in two cases divergent terminology is used such as "continual enhancement culture" and "culture of rigorous self-evaluation", these cases have been taken into account, as – from the context – it is obvious that the concept of quality culture was intended.

21 <https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Quality%20within%20Higher%20Education%202017%20Summary%20report.pdf>

criticised for not focusing on approaches that support the development of a quality culture and an overreliance on external reviews.²² As noted above, most of the references to quality culture remain at a rather general level and do not refer to specific policies, processes, or tools; however, two do single out specific features, such as the important contribution of the quality office to implementing quality culture, and the area of student support. The level of information provided within the review reports does not assist the reader in discerning what the individual institutions understand quality culture to be.

Conclusion: The topic of governance and management of quality plays a core role in the review reports, as can be seen when considering the other chapters where it is also mentioned. Its importance and relevance are indicated by the fact that this is the topic that attracts the highest numbers of commendations (17 across six review reports) and recommendations (22 across all seven review reports)

The majority of commendations (12 in six review reports) refer to the institutions' governance, with one at a very general level, commending the "robust governing structure", while others refer to the leading role of the governing authority or to the quality of the work of committees or units. Two institutions are commended for their strong strategic orientation, a topic which is also included under governance, and one institution is commended for its quality culture.

Of the 22 recommendations made under this topic, seven refer to the institutions' governance structures – and four of these seven address at a general level the need to ensure that the governance structure is fit for purpose. Three of the recommendations address more specifically the need to reconsider the roles and responsibilities of certain committees or units. Closely linked to the governance, the role of the institution's strategy and its development are addressed by three recommendations in one review report. Eight recommendations (arising from three review reports) address shortcomings in communications by management, the reasons for which range from a failure to close the loop due to a lack of internal collaboration.

Although the information provided in the reports remains at a more general level, one can conclude that within the existing legal framework, the institutions use similar comprehensive governance structures with the governing authority, the executive committee and the academic council at the top, and a dedicated committee with responsibility for quality assurance forming part of a varying cascade of committees or sub-committees. Responsibility for quality assurance is located at the senior management level of the institutions.

On the one hand, the institutions reviewed are characterised by the considerable commitment of their senior management teams to quality assurance; on the other, the effectiveness and – in particular – the efficiency of the organisational structure, as well as the assignment of responsibilities for QA at some institutions, are queried in some of the review reports. This recurrent topic may be linked to the aforementioned dynamic development of many of the institutions in terms of their growth and profile. Evaluations of institutional governance and management, which are, on the whole, positive, crystallise when the reader considers the review teams' findings in respect of the other review report topics.

Interestingly, the information and assessments included under this heading seldom refer to subjects specific to quality assurance, but rather to governance in general. When comparing this topic with the specific IoT review objective that considers governance in general, it is difficult to discern any real difference.

22 It is to be noted that, in spite of its critical remarks, the review team comes to the inconsistent conclusion "As a hitherto relatively modest-sized institution, [the institution] has developed a quality culture that has been able to depend on personal interactions and individuals talking to one another."

3.3 TOPIC 2: DOCUMENTED APPROACH TO QUALITY ASSURANCE

Topic no. 2 addresses the key features of an internal quality assurance system, such as the implementation of robust policies and procedures, providers' commitment to quality, features of policies and procedures such as their reference to QQI policies, the role of learners in the quality assurance system, inclusion of any of the institutions' provision or other activity subcontracted to other parties and such like. In setting out this topic as one of the areas to be considered by teams during the review process, QQI introduces what may be interpreted as core requirements for an internal quality assurance system. Notwithstanding this, none of the review reports consider this area. Some of the information that one might expect to see under this heading may often be found in the additional chapter on overall findings or under review objective no. 2.

3.4 TOPIC 3: PROGRAMMES OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Topic no. 3 is the first of four topics that address the learner experience, both indirectly through programme development and approval, monitoring and review and directly through admission, progression and recognition; assessment is addressed separately as topic no. 6.

The presentation of information and review team findings across the reports differs. Two review reports do not contain specific chapters on this topic and information is either scattered throughout the other chapters under review objective no. 1, or very briefly summarised as part of a generally positive assessment that there is a comprehensive and effective policy on programme development, approval, and review. Only one review report presents detailed information under this heading.

However, almost all review reports provide some information about the institution's teaching profile or highlight specific aspects of provision.

Most review reports refer mainly to programme reviews followed by processes for the development and approval of programmes; in three cases, compliance with the QQI Guidelines or the ESG is mentioned explicitly; the other review reports refer at a more general level to the programme life cycle or the correct implementation of the QQI Guidelines or the ESG.

The provision of apprenticeship programmes is mentioned in all three of the review reports in respect of institutes of technology; in each case, the institute in question receives a recommendation to align their arrangements for quality assuring apprenticeship programmes with the *Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by QQI for Providers of Statutory Apprenticeship Programmes*. Apart from this general recommendation, the guidelines are not addressed in detail in the reports.

Conclusion: On the whole, review teams' evaluations under this heading are positive. The reports note that institutions have effective processes for the development, approval and review of programmes. Institutions' programme review schemes are assessed to be particularly good. In three cases, review teams allude to the need for the use of appropriate and correct programme development processes that comply with the QQI Guidelines.

3.5 TOPIC 4: STAFF RECRUITMENT, MANAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

The level of detail provided in the review reports in respect of this topic ranges from very little to an extensive amount of information and analysis based on a case study provided by the institution in its ISER. The review reports do not contain detailed information in respect of staff recruitment. Three institutions are reported to apply academic, professional, technical, and pedagogical standards in their recruitment procedures. In one case, the absence of detail in respect of recruitment might be balanced somewhat by the review team's general assessment that the recruitment process is aligned with the QQI Guidelines and the ESG.

Some specific topics are mentioned under this heading; these include the excessive duration of recruitment procedures or the positive results of an effective gender equality policy.

As referenced in the introduction, two topics are recurrent: constraints imposed by the Employment Control Framework and financial constraints.

Performance management is mentioned explicitly in two review reports. In the first case, although the institution had revised the relevant policies some years prior to the review, the policies were not being implemented systematically by the institution at the time of review – where parts of the policies were being implemented, this depended on the initiative of individual heads of schools. In the second case, a bespoke policy on performance management had been introduced shortly before the review occurred, and the review team was not yet able to observe its impact.

Apart from general positive evaluations, two institutions receive explicit positive assessments of their implementation of formal qualification and/or skills profiles.

The importance of systematic staff development is highlighted in all seven review reports, along with the limitations imposed by the external framework conditions or challenges specific to the institution. One example of a policy widely implemented across the seven institutions is the development of didactic skills among academic staff, which is supported by a variety of measures, such as short certificate courses and even master's programmes. This policy is highlighted as being important and effective; in one review report, it is noted that almost every new member of staff has upskilled by participating in these programmes. In another case the programmes are reported as being oversubscribed.

The role of research departments in developing staff competence in the field of research skills is highlighted in two reports. Although the majority of review reports noted with approval institutions' engagement in this area in general, and found that the institutions have implemented effective staff development policies, financial constraints – and the consequent shortage of personnel – are mentioned as a limiting factor that hinders a more systematic approach. At the same time, however, institutions are found to be responsive to specific issues such as training staff to provide support for international students, research methods, and innovative teaching.

In one case, the review team's assessment under this heading was positive with a reservation, as there had been no review of the processes in recent years, and the review team was unsure of their effectiveness. In two cases the assessments are underpinned by statements that the processes comply with the QQI Guidelines or legal stipulations. In only one report is there a slightly negative comment under this heading; in that case, the review team found that only certain policies in respect of the recruitment, management and development of staff had been formalised.

In conclusion: The topic of staff was of significance across the reviews. According to the review teams' general evaluations, which were, on the whole, positive, one can conclude that the institutions apply comprehensive and generally robust and effective recruitment policies and invest much time and energy in the development of their staff.

3.6 TOPIC 5: TEACHING AND LEARNING

Across the review reports the review teams focus on structures, policies and responsibility for teaching and learning, while procedures, tools, and specific standards are addressed far less often. In addition, the teams highlight aspects that are considered relevant or particularly interesting, but which do not necessarily relate to the core topic. One review report does not contain a dedicated chapter on this topic, which is surprising, because of its importance as part of a review approach that focuses mainly upon the quality assurance of teaching and learning.

The implementation of institution-wide policies at the level of faculties is a recurrent topic. This topic is of particular relevance because the responsibility for teaching and learning lies primarily at faculty level. While one institution is reported as having implemented consistently a large number of teaching and learning policies as well as IT solutions aimed at supporting all aspects of teaching and learning, others seem to struggle in linking the faculty level with the institutional level or assuring consistency in policy implementation.

Obviously, the institutions consider providing learners with a high-quality teaching and learning experience as a core element of their mission. Depending on their individual profiles and contexts, the institutions tend to have as their focus a strong teaching-research nexus or the integration of work-based learning features into their programmes.

Under the heading of learning environment, the review reports address the following areas among others:

- capital development plans for the future,
- challenges arising for institutions with more than one campus, and
- work placements.

This list can be supplemented by areas addressed in other parts of the chapter, such as:

- training needs for postgraduate students involved in teaching,
- the link between research and teaching and entrepreneurship in the curriculum,
- unusually ambitious review and evaluation plans,
- new curricula and the role of courses on critical skills,
- centres of excellence in learning and teaching.

There is a wider variety of themes addressed under this heading in 'bespoke' chapters than there is under other topics across the reports, although this finding does not mean that these bespoke chapters do not contain relevant information.

The commendations and recommendations also tend to be either at a general policy level or to address the individual topics dealt with in the chapter, which – as previously stated – do not always align with the criteria to be considered. The comparably low number of four commendations and two recommendations under this heading across the review reports may come as a surprise given the core relevance of this topic.

The review teams' evaluations of this area are positive on the whole, with one exception: in that report, the review team encourages the institution in question to consider more systematic approaches to quality assuring the student learning experience.

In conclusion: In spite of the generally positive evaluations of the quality assurance of teaching and learning at institutions discernible across the review reports, the information provided under this heading is often fragmented, meaning that it would be imprudent to draw a conclusion on this topic.

3.7 TOPIC 6: ASSESSMENT OF LEARNERS

Two review reports do not contain dedicated chapters on this topic. Of the remaining five reports, two present some detailed information, whereas three remain at a rather general level by stating that, in general, the institution has comprehensive processes in place that are in accordance with the QQI Guidelines. The review teams highlight various topics, which they consider relevant in the individual cases. These are:

- regular and effective monitoring,
- continuous review of assessment processes as a result of growing diversity within the institution,
- the important role of external examiners,
- specific features of assessment for non-traditional students,
- inconsistent implementation of requirements in respect of assessment and lack of feedback to students on their performance.

Conclusion: Institutions' arrangements under this heading are found by review teams to be good, with the exception of one institution.

3.8 TOPIC 7: SUPPORT FOR LEARNERS

All review reports but one address this topic explicitly or in dedicated chapters. The level of detail provided varies. One review report refers at a more general level to a case study on learner supports, while others provide more detailed specific information.

All institutions are found to have implemented comprehensive support policies and structures. In most institutions, a dean or a central unit oversees the provision of supports for learners. The institutions are also found to have in place procedures in respect of student supports that require that students be informed of their availability, that student feedback be collected, and the activities of student support services reviewed. In two cases, financial constraints are mentioned: In one case, these are found to have put the adequate funding of student supports at risk; in the other, they have already caused significant underfunding. Although the information provided is not systematically presented, the review reports highlight various activities as having – or having had – a considerable impact on the learning experience. These include:

- a focus on targeted learner groups such as first-year learners, international students, mature learners and learners with disabilities,
- maths learning centres,
- the strengthening of entrepreneurial thinking.

The majority of institutions have implemented initiatives, which are comprehensive and rigorous to varying degrees, to collect feedback through surveys or focus group meetings and to review the activities of student support services. In this context, it is also relevant that all institutions were found to have effective collaboration between management and/or responsible units on the one hand, and students on the other; student representatives were found to play an active and relevant role in the provision of student supports.

It is not easy to conclude whether the activities of the institutions constitute an integrative approach to support for learners. However, two institutions have in place sound conceptual bases for these activities (which include research, evaluation and benchmarking against national and international examples), at different levels of implementation. In one instance, the review team commented somewhat negatively on that institution's approach, which was deemed to be insufficiently systematic and integrated. Similar to the chapters on the topic 'Teaching and Learning', not all aspects related to the student support infrastructure are reported in the reports. Where IT facilities/support and libraries are addressed in the reports, they receive positive evaluations.

A total of 20 commendations and recommendations is made under this heading across the review reports. This might be considered to be inversely proportionate to the volume of information provided and the depth of analysis conducted. On reflection, however, the number of commendations and recommendations may not be surprising but may rather give an indication of the broad approach taken by review teams, which places a strong emphasis on very positive or very negative aspects of the topic rather than addressing all relevant aspects. A comparison of the subject matter dealt with in the body of text within the reports and the subject matter of the commendations and recommendations reveals a high correlation between the two.

On the whole, institutions received positive evaluations in this area. The review teams' findings are primarily on the level of policies and do not address individual processes or activities.

3.9 TOPIC 8: INFORMATION AND DATA MANAGEMENT

The aspects addressed under this topic cover information systems for management and for learners, specific data such as completion rates, and policies dealing with areas such as data protection and freedom of information.

The information provided in the review reports remains at a general level, but nonetheless provides a clear picture for the reader. Two institutions are found by review teams to apply comprehensive and fit-for-purpose policies and IT solutions, and – in these two instances – the teams provide some further information in respect of the data that is collected and used by the institutions, such as retention data. The level of information provided in two further cases is significantly lower. In both of these cases, the review teams arrive at a negative evaluation based on an insufficiency of policies and IT solutions, which seem to affect negatively data management within those institutions. However, in those cases where review teams arrive at a positive assessment, the review teams query whether the institutions' IT solutions are adequate to accommodate future plans for growth or report significant developments and suggest that the institutions may wish to consider ensuring that they remain abreast of ICT innovations.

Information about structural underpinning of data management by a dedicated unit is given only in two cases – which does not necessarily mean that the other institutions do not have such units.

What seems obvious is the significance of the StudentSurvey.ie, formerly the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE), as source of data and information. Three of the review reports note that the data emanating from the survey is made use of widely within those institutions.

The use of data for strategic or management purposes as well as for monitoring the student lifecycle is a recurrent topic. Whereas two institutions (or, with some reservations, three) were found to have implemented appropriate systems to make ample use of the data they produced, it may be inferred from the reports that the other institutions did not make systematic use of data. The significance of this topic is reflected in the fact that three of the four commendations and recommendations awarded under this heading refer to the link between data collection and the use of data for management purposes.

In conclusion: Overall, the review reports convey a clear message: the institutions have data management systems in place, but the use of the data could be more systematic and the IT solutions underpinning data collection are frequently outdated, or may soon become obsolete, because of the institutions' significant growth or their engagement in research.

3.10 TOPIC 9: PUBLIC INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

The majority of the institutions base their publication activities on specific policies. Across the review reports, review teams note the quality and comprehensiveness of information provided about programmes for prospective students. Three institutions are reported to have implemented comprehensive strategies for communication with external stakeholders. Two review reports do not provide any information about this; however, this may be due to the brevity of the chapters in those reports. Across the reports, too, review teams note the significance of institutions' websites in their external communication, which is not surprising. In only one case is the website deemed to be in need of review; those of the remaining six institutions are found to be informative and comprehensive. Three institutions are found to publish quality assurance results.

In conclusion: Review teams found that institutions have effective policies and strategies for their publication activities and provide sufficient information for learners about programmes. The information provided about the publication of the outcomes of quality assurance processes is too selective to draw any conclusions.

3.11 TOPIC 10: OTHER PARTIES INVOLVED IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING

All institutions maintain numerous relationships with other organisations and institutions across the education and training sector. The level of information varies substantially from report to report. Two institutions were found by review teams to place a strong focus on relationships with industry (which included the incorporation of industry representatives on to advisory boards for various programmes) and with the region, whereas the other review reports provided no detailed information on those institutions' activities in this area. However, throughout the review reports, the institutions' engagement at local and regional levels is mentioned frequently.

The number of partners in the provision of programmes shows a great variety ranging from one up to 18. However, not all of the reports state expressly the number of partners for provision of its programmes the institution in question has, and international collaborative partners are mentioned only in one case.

All institutions were found by review teams to have implemented specific policies and agreements for the governance of collaborative provision, which may take the form of protocols, memoranda of understanding, bilateral agreements (which include recognition arrangements), articulation agreements, or other documents that define the nature of the collaboration and the partners' responsibilities. One institution is highlighted in the relevant review report as the first institution in Ireland to have published a handbook for collaborative provision that covers all relevant aspects.

All institutions have implemented specific quality assurance processes in respect of collaborative provision, and some have also established specific bodies that oversee quality assurance. One solution that is employed by two institutions is mutual representation on relevant boards and committees. However, detailed information about these processes is not provided in the reports; in one case, the institution is noted to apply the same processes to its collaborative provision as it does to its 'regular' QA arrangements.

Although the reports do not provide very much detail on this area, the arrangements are generally considered by review teams as being effective, which is reflected in the review teams' references positive feedback given by institutional partners during the site visits. In only one report does the review team comment that the institution takes an insufficiently strategic approach to collaborative provision, has collaborative arrangements that are insufficiently formalised and provides insufficient protection for students on collaborative programmes. However, in some of the other review reports, review teams have reservations in arriving at an assessment in this area, citing institutions' lack of strategic vision and insufficient formalisation of processes for collaborative provision with international partners.

Three institutions are reported to have implemented policies and criteria in respect of the engagement of external examiners; the information provided is generally accepted to be of relevance – in one case, the work of the external examiners is highlighted as being best practice and one reason for this was that the institution also produced a synthesis of the external examiners' reports.

In conclusion: The institutions receive slightly more negative commentary from review teams on this topic than on others, particularly in relation to the design and management of collaborative provision.

3.12 TOPIC 11: SELF-EVALUATION, MONITORING AND REVIEW

Under this heading, in its QA Guidelines, QQI sets out the core features of the internal quality assurance arrangements in general:

- Sustainable effectiveness: Consideration of results of internal quality assurance and follow-up in subsequent review cycles
- Formalisation: Distinction between ongoing internal self-monitoring and formalised self-evaluation
- Ensuring that quality measures are adequate
- The use of evidence as the basis for results
- Ensuring that internal quality assurance processes are meaningful by prioritising their objectives
- Ensuring effectiveness by following up on the findings

It also defines a clear focus of internal quality assurance by highlighting that activities should be oriented towards the “quality of, or impact on, the learner’s experience, achievements, contributions and on findings from the many stakeholders engaging in the quality system” directly as opposed to its impact on processes.

The final feature of internal quality assurance outlined by QQI in its QA Guidelines refers to the use by providers of a systematic approach that should connect their internal quality assurance arrangements with providers’ external quality assurance obligations. Consequently, an implicit definition of internal quality assurance arrangements is provided.

Because of content and structure of this topic it is difficult to distinguish it from topic no. 2, which is concerned with the current quality assurance procedures, and review objective no. 2, ‘Quality Enhancement’.

The information presented in the review reports stays at a very general level, summarising information about the quality assurance activities conducted by the institutions; references to other chapters are made frequently.

In general, all institutions implement various forms of internal and external reviews, mainly of programmes, but more recently many have also commenced the review of their central support units. Where detailed information is provided in the review reports, it becomes clear that comprehensive systems are in place that contain processes intended to ensure that these reviews are followed up on – for example, quality implementation plans etc. In only one review report does the review team comment that the institution does not conduct systematic follow-up to its review processes.

In conclusion: The information provided in this chapter is very general and it overlaps significantly with more detailed information given in other parts of the review reports. Nevertheless, all of the review teams find that, on the whole, there are comprehensive internal quality assurance systems in place within the institutions.

3.13 RESEARCH

The *Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by QQI for use by all Providers* are comprehensive and provide the bulk of the criteria against which review teams should assess institutions; they also include research. In spite of this, it is clear that the focus of the CINNTE review cycle is on learning and teaching and the learners' experience; there are significantly less comprehensive and detailed stipulations of QQI's expectations regarding quality assurance in research.

QQI's Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by QQI for Institutes of Technology (other than DIT) stipulate that:

"The institute of technology is responsible for organising an integrated system of quality assurance in relation to its research activities. These should build upon the peer review mechanisms widely employed in research funding and publication and incorporate relevant metrics. These should complement the specific procedures put in place to quality assure research education and training and national policy relating to the accreditation of doctoral research degrees under delegated authority."²³

This statement is complemented by the *Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by QQI for Providers of Research Degree Programmes*.

This analysis of review reports' findings in respect of research is integrated into the chapter on review objective no. 1 because "the scope of this objective also extends to the overarching procedures of the institution to assuring itself of the quality of its research degree programmes and research activities."²⁴

Research is the only topic where one can discern clear differences between the review reports that relate to the universities and those that relate to the institutes of technology. All review reports but one contain dedicated chapters on research. The review reports on universities contain information in respect of the institutions' research profiles and research outcomes on the one hand, and information about, and assessments of, quality assurance arrangements in a broad sense on the other. It is typical for the review reports in respect of institutes of technology to focus on legal framework conditions, which in some cases replace or at least outweigh the information provided in these reports about research profile and outcomes.

Unsurprisingly, review teams frequently name as impediments the absence of core funding for research activities of the institutes of technology, as well as the substantial teaching loads shouldered by academic staff, both of which are seen as hindering the further development of research in those institutions. Lack of sufficient funding in the aftermath of the financial crisis is also a recurrent topic in the review reports in respect of the universities, which is noted as the reason why Irish institutions have strengthened their efforts to secure funding from EU programmes by establishing dedicated support schemes and structures for applying to EU funding programmes.

With regard to quality assurance procedures, it is notable that the institutional and organisational underpinning of research and quality assurance is mentioned only in the reports in respect of the three universities that have established research institutes, support units and relevant positions and bodies within their governance structures (these are all assessed positively). Among the institutes of technology, only one institution is reported as having support structures in place; however, these are not considered to be very strong.

Unlike the institutional backbone of governance committees, the quality assurance procedures in respect of research do not vary significantly between the two types of institution, at least insofar as the information provided can be assessed. Specific quality assurance activities based on peer review, as mentioned in the QQI

23 *Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by QQI for Institutes of Technology (other than DIT)*, p. 3; the same statement (apart from the comment on the accreditation of doctoral programmes) is made in respect of Designated Awarding Bodies in the *Statutory QA Guidelines developed by QQI for Designated Awarding Bodies*.

24 *QQI CINNTE Review Handbook DAB*, p. 32

Guidelines, are not reported for any of the institutions; however, peer review in general is widespread. Four institutions are found in the reports to conduct regular reviews of departments and schools which incorporate external experts, and which cover research activities as well as teaching and learning. One institution is commended for conducting a REF-like exercise.²⁵ The review reports do not provide information about the design of these institutional reviews; in one case, however, the review team states explicitly that the reviews conducted by the institute under consideration are not specific enough to capture research activities. As to the extent to which metrics are used, as stipulated by the QQI Guidelines, this cannot be assessed based on the information provided in the reports. In only two review reports is research performance management mentioned (both institutions involved are commended for this); however, in neither case is a detailed explanation of the processes involved provided.

Quality assurance of research-oriented degree programmes is an important area under this topic. Support provided by institutions to PhD students is considered across reports to be very good. While one institution is commended in a general way for having embedded a new structured PhD programme, and another for complying with the *Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by QQI for Providers of Research Degree Programmes*, specific details are provided in respect of the supports made available by other institutions to PhD students. These include a policy to ensure that each student is allocated two supervisors, the positive role of the graduate student office, workshops for supervisor training and individual research committees for each research student. In only one case is there a negative comment in this area; in that instance, the review team found that a structured PhD programme was implemented inconsistently, which also required a cultural shift for the institution.

Conclusions: Overall, review teams' evaluations under this heading are positive. However, it should be noted that the content of the chapters on research is of a different kind to that of the other topics. The difficult framework/contextual conditions, and institutions' success in spite of these, seem to play a bigger role under this heading than they do in other chapters. This is reflected in the commendations and recommendations, of which about half refer to external framework conditions and to questions about profile and strategy, but not to quality or topics related to quality assurance in the narrow sense.

3.14 REVIEW OBJECTIVE NO. 1: CONCLUSIONS

In the review reports, the institutions are found to have implemented effective quality assurance systems that are in keeping with the QQI Guidelines and which also comply with the ESG. The institutions' regard to the QQI Guidelines in respect of their roles as awarding bodies and bodies with delegated authority to make awards is explicitly highlighted in the reports as guaranteeing a high-quality learner experience.

Review teams' analyses and, consequently, their findings place a clear focus on policies and responsibilities, while processes and tools are scarcely addressed – or, where they are addressed, this is done unsystematically.

The review reports confirm that institutional quality assurance policies cover teaching, learning and assessment in a comprehensive way and are effective and appropriate. Effective and appropriate governance and structural underpinnings of quality assurance are important features of these quality assurance arrangements. Three recurring topics are either flagged as being challenging or subject to limitations:

- Efficiency of governance structures, particularly the cascades of committees below the governing authority, the management committee and the academic council;
- Maintenance of the sets of policies or the whole internal quality assurance system;
- Consistent implementation of quality assurance policies across the institution.

²⁵ Research Excellence Framework, <https://www.ref.ac.uk/about/what-is-the-ref/>

With regard to the generally positive commentary in respect of the learner experience, little detail is given in the reports with regard to specific features of policies, processes and tools. Programme management and programme review are deemed to be effective and part of robust institutional systems; however, little information or analysis is provided. This applies also to other topics such as teaching and learning, student assessments, and student support. The publication of relevant information for students and, in particular, for prospective students is noted by review teams and is assessed very positively.

It should be noted that there are deficits that are frequently highlighted relating to the implementation of the policies as well as their consistency.

It is worth mentioning that online learning (and the institutions' efforts in this area) is not a topic that is addressed widely in the review reports, but from the fact that institutions had moved to providing programmes online one can infer that they considered it an enhancement to quality that would make an important contribution to innovative and high-quality teaching.

Interestingly, the outcomes of review across the seven institutions are very similar: similar commentary is to be found regarding 9 of the 11 topics (1, 3, 5, 7 to 11).²⁶ However, two institutions receive a general positive assessment in respect of topic no. 1 (Governance and Management), though, in both instances, shortcomings were identified by the review team. As to topic no. 4, "Staff Recruitment, Management and Development", one institution receives a less positive evaluation than the others, and, regarding topic no. 6, "assessment of learners", only one of the seven institutions receives a (somewhat) negative evaluation, while the remaining six institutions receive positive evaluations.

QUALITY ASSURANCE OF RESEARCH AND OF RESEARCH PROGRAMMES

The focus of CINNTE reviews is placed very firmly on learner experience, and on teaching and learning. Even though the eleven topics addressed under objective 1 provide a number of obvious points that are linked with research or could integrate research activities into the review, and although research is addressed in a separate chapter under objective 1, the volume of information provided, the depth of analysis and the number of assessments made by review teams in respect of research cannot be compared with those in relation to teaching and learning. This observation is reinforced by a closer look at the chapters on research.

The chapters on research contain some information, analysis and evaluation of quality assurance arrangements in research, but the information primarily relates to the institution's research profile and relevant external framework/contextual conditions, both of which are of rather indirect relevance to the review of institutional quality assurance arrangements. This may reflect information provided in the related ISERs, but weakens the focus of the information provided about, and the analysis of, quality assurance arrangements for research activity.

The analysis of the quality assurance of research in the review reports is more detailed in respect of PhD programmes and, in particular, PhD students, who provide a bridge between research and the prevalent topic of the review reports – learning and teaching and learner experience.

As is also the case in respect of learning and teaching, the quality assurance arrangements for research is found to be good on the whole.

The significant similarities between the content and the outcomes of the evaluations conducted in respect of the topics included under review objective no. 1 may well be based on the fact that the reviewed institutions perform similarly in the field of quality assurance. However, it is also worth considering whether the design of the CINNTE reviews, and – in particular – the design of the topics and sub-topics under review objective no. 1 could lead to an homogeneous impression of the generally positive assessment of the institutions.

26 Topic 2 is disregarded due to its omission in the reports, whereas the additional chapter in the reports 'Overall Assessment of Quality Assurance Procedures' is taken into account; the additional chapter 'Research' is addressed separately.

A significant structural element of the CINNTE design is the difference between topics that address policies and topics that address processes and tools. Review objective no. 1 starts with a focus on institutional overall policies, particularly responsibilities and underpinning governance structures, followed by specific policies, processes and tools. This structure is not a feature unique to CINNTE but is common to many quality assurance measures that address internal quality assurance systems.

Across all review reports one can see clearly that, in their analyses, the review teams focus on policies, structures and responsibilities, which are discussed in far greater detail than quality assurance processes and tools. This is also visible in the additional chapter on the review team's overall evaluation, which refers primarily to governance and policies. This focus is also clear from the obvious core importance of topic no. 1, which addresses governance and attracts by far more commendations and recommendations than any other topic addressed in the review reports. Further, it is clear that, when considering those topics that relate to policies, and processes and tools, the review teams focus on those aspects that are directly related to policies rather than analysing individual processes. The two most important exceptions for this finding are programme reviews, and staff, particularly recruitment and staff development.

The presentation and structure of the review reports may be in part attributed to the CINNTE cycle's approach, which primarily addresses 'institutional' aspects, such as policies, responsibilities and governance as well as the large number of topics dealt with under review objective no. 1.

Mindful of the fact that the CINNTE cycle of reviews applies an institutional approach, which aims to support and strengthen institutions' responsibility for the design of their internal quality assurance arrangements, the level of detail and focus applied to these areas is not entirely surprising.

4. Review Objective No. 2

- a) To review the enhancement of quality by the institution through governance, policy, and procedures.
- b) To review the congruency of quality assurance procedures and enhancements with the institution's own mission and goals or targets for quality.
- c) To identify innovative and effective practices for quality enhancement.

The analysis of information and review team evaluations presented under this heading must take into account the relationship between this chapter and topics considered under objective no. 1. Two review reports focus explicitly on the enhancement of quality, as distinct to its assurance, and thus introduce a new perspective in addition to the analyses presented under review objective no. 1. In the five reports, no clear differentiation is discernible. In one case, a relatively detailed description of quality assurance policies is presented, which might be better placed under review objective no. 1.

4.1 “ENHANCEMENT OF QUALITY BY THE INSTITUTION THROUGH GOVERNANCE, POLICY, AND PROCEDURES”

The subject matter addressed by the review reports under this heading shows slight variations. Three review reports address current quality enhancements, one directly and two indirectly, as examples of the positive impact of effective processes. The other review reports address the effectiveness of policies, governance and procedures.

The majority of institutions have implemented “effective policies”, but exactly what this constitutes remains rather vague. While reference is made to examples of effective policies or tools (such as quality reviews of all academic and support units, the role of programme boards in monitoring and follow-up, quality improvement plans as core instruments, or ‘quality enhancement takes place through continuous quality improvement’), it is not always clear why exactly these examples were chosen - i.e. whether they have been particularly important to, or successful for, the institution.

While review teams are positive in their evaluations of two institutions, a further three institutions receive positive evaluations, but with some reservations. These institutions are found to have demonstrated substantial improvements, but the review teams are not convinced that these improvements are the result of the systematic application of the relevant policies.

4.2 “CONGRUENCY OF QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCEDURES AND ENHANCEMENTS WITH THE INSTITUTION’S OWN MISSION AND GOALS OR TARGETS FOR QUALITY”

The evaluations on this topic are diverse: Three institutions receive positive evaluations. One institution, however, receives a positive evaluation based on the alignment of student experience with its strategy and its aspirations for quality enhancement.

One review report refers to the institution’s ambitious targets many – though not all – of which have been achieved and concludes that the “strategic plan and its aspirations for improvements to quality and the student experience were in close alignment with each other.”

Two institutions receive negative assessments. One review team states that the many (perhaps too many) enhancement processes do not constitute a system that is aligned with the strategy. In that instance, the review team issues five recommendations, which indicates the gravity of this shortcoming from the review team’s point of view. The second institution to receive a negative assessment is found to lack specific performance measures to review progress towards meeting three chosen objectives.

In conclusion: Not all of the review reports present a clear picture of the congruency of quality assurance procedures and enhancements with the institution’s own mission and goals or targets for quality.

It is also worth noting that, although placed under review objective no. 2, which is intended to address explicitly quality enhancement and not quality assurance, this topic also addresses the congruency of quality assurance procedures with mission or targets of quality

4.3 “INNOVATIVE AND EFFECTIVE PRACTICES FOR QUALITY ENHANCEMENT”

All review reports but one present lists of between two and 15 items, with 32²⁷ items altogether across the reports. While five of the reports contain lists that range between 2 and 5 items, one report lists 15 items under this heading.

Classification/Topic	Total no.	Institutions concerned
External engagement and feedback	10	all ²⁸
Organisational units or committees	9	3 (one institution with 6 items)
Planning or QA processes	5	1
Online provision	4	3
Programme features	4	3

External engagement is considered to have a significant impact on the field of quality enhancement. Online provision of programmes is also deemed to impact the quality enhancement of the student experience in as significant a way as certain specific features of the programmes, such as work placements, etc.

The commendations and recommendations under review objective no. 2 confirm these findings. They do not specifically address quality enhancement or innovative procedures, but refer to quality assurance processes and their effectiveness, and might therefore have been better placed under review objective no. 1. Five institutions receive between one and four commendations, with a total of 12 distributed among that group. The commendations address various aspects ranging from the roles and effectiveness of institutional units or bodies (4), specific features of degree programmes (2), dialogue with stakeholders (2), staff development opportunities (1), and feedback mechanisms (1). Five institutions receive between one and five recommendations, with a total of 13 distributed among that group. Six recommendations made in respect of four institutions refer to the need to review governance structures and policies in order to align them more effectively, or to guarantee a more systematic approach. It is worth noting that these recommendations do not address individual bodies or individual policies but relate generally all policies. One could infer from this that the development of comprehensive and consistent internal quality assurance systems is at a rather early stage. Other recommendations refer to specific policies such as guaranteeing consistency in assessment, reviewing support structures for staff involved in transnational education, and reviewing HR policies with a view to adapting to future challenges.

4.4 REVIEW OBJECTIVE NO. 2: CONCLUSIONS

The review teams' evaluations are made against the criteria set out in the CINNTE terms of reference and QQI Review Handbook (i.e. the institution's own mission and vision; the goals or targets for quality identified by the institution; additional sources of reference identified by the institution). Understandably the link between topic 2 and the criteria is more readily apparent than the link between the criteria and the other topics, because topic no. 2 explicitly names the first two criteria. The review reports do not refer to any additional sources of reference used by the institutions (criterion 3).

27 NB: Two reports do not contain specific chapters, but some paragraphs in the chapter under Objective 3 that obviously relate to this part c). The items mentioned in those reports were taken into account.

28 NB: One report does not contain any information on this topic.

5. Review Objective No. 3

To review the effectiveness and implementation of procedures for access, transfer and progression.

The information provided in the chapters on the third review objective place a clear focus on the institutions' policies for widening access, which is also addressed in the first two sub-topics of topic no. 3 under review objective no. 1.

As regards widening access, the institutions are reported to be applying lists of specific target groups as well as specific policies and tools. The number of target groups ranges from one to five with most institutions addressing three target groups, while one is found not to address any. In total, 11 target groups are named across the reports. The most common target group is mature students, which is explicitly mentioned in five review reports; the next most common group referred to in the review reports is prospective learners from the region. Among the other target groups are first-generation higher education learners; the unemployed returning to education (or those engaging with the Springboard initiative²⁹, and the Travelling community.

The information supplied in the reports about the relevant policies and tools established in the institutions is diverse. While one institution is commended for the support it provides on an individual basis to students at risk, which the review team views as crucial for the success of those students, other institutions are reported to apply specific policies, such as pathways with access courses, open learning opportunities, lifelong learning structures or foundation studies. Furthermore, the implementation of two national programmes is also referred to: the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE).

In most of the review reports, it seems obvious that the target groups and policies mentioned do not constitute exhaustive lists, but rather are chosen to exemplify the policies or highlight particularly relevant or successful initiatives.

Review teams' assessments of the institutions under this objective are positive. There is only one explicit negative assessment, which is in respect of an institution that does not have a collective oversight of retention-related data. The assessments are, for the most part, at a rather general level – for example, review teams note with approval that an institution has “a pervasive culture of widening access to third level education” – and do not stray very far beyond the general remark that the institutions are in keeping with the QQI Policy and Criteria for Access, Transfer and Progression. The effectiveness of individual policies is not assessed explicitly. Instead, the institutions' contributions to widening access, along with occasional mentions of the diversity of the student population, are provided as examples of effectiveness. All in all, however, the assessments are unanimously positive.

As regards transfer and progression, the reader receives a similar impression, although they are provided with less information. Recognition of prior learning is mentioned explicitly in four cases, and the support provided to students at risk of non-retention in two cases. Overall, where transfer and progression are mentioned explicitly and not subsumed under the section dealing with access, review team's assessments are positive.

These findings are mirrored in the commendations and recommendations. All institutions receive between one and two commendations under this objective – with 13 in total allocated among the seven institutions. Three commendations are at a general level and address all three aspects of this objective without giving any further details; three commendations refer to access, in particular, to widening participation. One commendation is made in relation to transfer, and one in relation to progression. Finally, two commendations address rather general topics without specific links to access, transfer and progression, such as commitment to online

²⁹ <https://springboardcourses.ie/search>

progression, or ensuring that students feeling integrated. Only two institutions receive recommendations – in each case, one recommendation is made by the review team. In the first instance, the review team encourages the institution to engage students from Northern Ireland to serve as ambassadors, in the other, the institution is encouraged to establish a committee to ensure that its success in widening participation is sustained. Neither of the two recommendations addresses deficiencies in the narrow sense.

In conclusion: The chapters on review objective no. 3 are characterised by very positive assessments of the institutions' activities with regard to the institutions' policies and activities in respect of access, transfer and progression being aligned with QQI's *Policy and Criteria for Access, Transfer and Progression*, and thus their compliance with the criterion. However, the review reports also display a clear focus on widening participation in higher education. This focus is clearly a key item on political reform agendas and is assessed positively by review teams.

6. Review Objective No. 4

Following the introduction of a statutory international education quality assurance scheme, to determine compliance with the Code of Practice for the Provision of Programmes to International Learners.

From a review of all seven reports, it is clear, that all institutions place great importance on attracting international students.³⁰ The reader notes that numbers of international students in the institutions had been growing in advance of the review, or that they were growing at the time of the review, and most institutions are found to have implemented specific strategies to attract foreign students. The implementation of these strategies and policies have certain structural underpinnings, such as a vice-president that has been allocated specific responsibility, or an international office. Explicit information about the implementation of the various parts of the *Code of Practice for the Provision of Programmes to International Learners*³¹ is rarely provided in the reports.

Review teams' assessments in respect of this objective are partly positive and partly negative. The assessments stay at a rather general level and do not go into much detail; in four cases, the review teams state explicitly that the institutions are in keeping with the Code of Practice. The assessment of how well supported academically international students are is unanimously positive. At the same time, integration of international students into campus life is also noted in all seven reports as not functioning very well. One institution was noted by the review team to have addressed this problem with various social and cultural activities; however, the team noted that the institution had not had very much success in doing so.

In conclusion: Review teams' assessments under this heading are partly positive and partly negative. In most cases, teams refer explicitly to the criterion, which is compliance with the *Code of Practice for the Provision of Programmes to International Learners*. It is noteworthy though that the eleven guiding questions in respect of the criterion imply that there is an expectation that there will be a comprehensive review of the institutions' activities in this field. Such a review is not presented in the review reports.

30 Only six institutions are covered in this chapter because – for one institution – this review objective was not applicable.

31 <https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Code%20of%20Practice.pdf>

7. Review Objective “Procedures for Awarding” (applies only to IoTs)

“To review the procedures established by the institution for the governance and management of its functions that comprise its role as an awarding body. The Team will focus on evidence of a governance system to oversee the education and training, research and related activity of the institution and evidence of a culture that supports quality within the institution. Considerations will centre upon the effectiveness of decision making across and within the institution.”³²

This review objective, which applies only to institutes of technology, refers to their role as awarding bodies. There is a partial overlap between this objective and review objective no. 1, topic no. 1 ‘Governance and Management of Quality’; however, this sector-specific review objective widens the perspective to governance from a broader perspective, rather than simply considering governance as it relates to internal quality assurance.

The three review reports in respect of institutes of technology contain chapters on this review objective; however, two name the chapter ‘Procedures for Awarding’ while one names it ‘Governance and Management (Delegated Authority)’. The different titles translate into varying foci for this chapter among the reports. While the first two reports contain sub-chapters on ‘Overall Assessment of Procedures for Awarding’ and on governance, the latter, without any further sub-chapters, addresses governance without placing any specific focus on procedures for awarding.

All institutions are found to have robust procedures for establishing, maintaining and reviewing programmes and awards in place, as is also noted under review objective no. 1. The first two review reports make explicit reference to the relevant specific QQI policies and one review report also highlights the role of the responsible boards and the external examiners, which those review teams feel it is necessary to consider in the interests of reviewing their efficiency and consistency, respectively.

With regard to governance, one review report does not give much further information beyond that which is provided in the chapter on governance with regard to quality assurance (objective 1), while the other two institutions are reported to have established and implemented comprehensive and effective governance structures. However, large numbers of relevant boards and units, as well as a lack of clarity in respect of responsibilities in this area, is an issue in two institutions. In these two cases, the review teams issue the same recommendations to review governance that they have already issued under review objective no. 1. In one case, however, the review team highlights as a positive feature that the institution has tried to involve more staff in governance activities by not assigning all relevant responsibilities to heads of schools or departments, but rather decentralising responsibilities to some extent.

The review teams’ assessments are positive in all three reports.

8. Section D: Conclusions

In this chapter, the concluding remarks, the top five commendations and recommendations, and the overarching statements on quality assurance will be analysed jointly in order to analyse the overall assessment of the institutions.

The subject matter addressed in the concluding remarks differ. Some review teams present a broad overview of some of the institution's characteristics, which might not be linked directly to the findings in relation to quality assurance arrangements, but refer rather to external framework conditions that have proved to be of significance for the institutions in the past, and the institutions' current development, such as mergers or highly dynamic periods of growth. Other review teams make short summary statements on their findings in respect of the four review objectives; some provide concluding remarks that go beyond the top five commendations and recommendations.

All review reports but one contain the required lists of top five commendations and recommendations.

The overarching statements on the quality assurance system about quality assurance demonstrate similar review outcomes for all seven institutions. The institutions are found to have implemented effective quality assurance arrangements that comply with the ESG and have regard to the QQI Guidelines. Regard to the QQI Guidelines is explicitly highlighted in respect of the institutions' roles as awarding bodies and institutions with delegated authority.

The same results may be observed in relation to review objectives no. 3 and 4. The institutions' arrangements are in line with the *QQI Policy Restatement: Policy and Criteria for Access, Transfer and Progression in Relation to Learners for Providers of Further and Higher Education and Training* and meet the requirements of the *Code of Practice for the Provision of Programmes to International Learners*.³³

The top five commendations and recommendations draw a picture that is consistent with the review teams' assessments throughout the review reports. The distribution of commendations and recommendations across the review objectives and topics is largely consistent with the distribution of commendations and recommendations throughout the review reports. 11 of 48 refer to 'Governance and Management of Quality' (topic no. 1 of the review objective no. 1), which is by far the highest number of top five commendations and recommendations allotted to any one topic; this area also receives the highest number of commendations and recommendations throughout the review reports (39 out of 137). 'Enhancement of quality' ranks second in this respect, receiving seven of the top five commendations and recommendations across the seven review reports.

Less than half of the top five commendations and recommendations concern 'Staff Recruitment, Management and Development' (topic no. 4 of review objective no. 1), 'Teaching and Learning' (topic no. 5 of review objective no. 1), 'Other Parties involved in Education and Training' (topic no. 10 of review objective no. 1), 'Research' and "effectiveness and implementation of procedures for access, transfer and progression" (review objective no. 3). As far as 'Staff Recruitment, Management and Development', 'Other Parties involved in Education and Training' and 'Research' are concerned, this is consistent with the average frequency throughout the review reports; 'Teaching and Learning' plays (at least quantitatively) a significantly larger role in the top five commendations and recommendations than it does throughout the review reports, and 'Effectiveness and Implementation of Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression' a significantly smaller role. Inversely, 'Support for Learners' (topic no. 7 of review objective no. 1) and quality enhancement (review objective no. 2) have the second highest number of recommendations and commendations across the review reports but play a minor role in the top five.³⁴

³³ This objective was found not to be applicable to one of the IoTs.

³⁴ NB: One report does not contain a top five list. The top five commendations and recommendations in another report were disregarded because they did not constitute a choice from among the other commendations and recommendations but are formulated by taking a different, more holistic approach. This also applies to three other commendations and recommendations.

Common to all of the review reports, interestingly, is the fact that most of the review teams refer to specific evidence for their assessments, often to the AIQRs. This is worth mentioning because this conclusion refers back to review teams' comments in the introductory chapters and in the chapters relating to the ISERs regarding the evidential value of the ISERs.

The concluding chapters are consistent with the chapters related to the review objectives and draw a positive picture of the quality arrangements in place in the reviewed institutions. As is often the case in such concluding chapters of review reports that are on the whole positive in their evaluations, less attention is paid to those aspects of the evaluations that were partially negative.

9. Section E: Institutional Response

The institutional responses are all very similar. The content can be summarized as follows: The institutions:

- thank the review team for their thorough review, which was helpful and provided important insights into the current developments and future challenges (institutions note that the self-evaluation exercise was also valuable in this regard);
- thank the review team for their acknowledgement of the institution's strengths and highlight the team's positive assessments;
- thank the review team for relevant recommendations;
- give examples of actions planned as follow-up, or as part of a follow-up plan;
- report that various recommendations are already in the process of being implemented.

The institutions do not reject any of the review teams' analyses or assessments, neither do they provide any further explanation that might contradict findings. Only one institution included any critique of the review team in its institutional response; however, this related in the main to the lack of information available to the review team and not to the review team's conclusions per se. One interesting response relates to the review team's assessment of the ISER as not being sufficiently evaluative; the institution states in response to this assessment that "a revised template and/or supporting guidance would be helpful in addressing this". The major difference between the institutional responses lies in the level of detail provided, i.e. whether they address recommendations individually or not. However, no patterns in the choice of recommendations addressed can be identified.

IV. Conclusions

Within QQI's policies the CINNTE review serves at least three explicit purposes:

- It provides an opportunity for each institution to evaluate the quality of its provision of education, training and research, the fulfilment of its third mission and the effectiveness of its ongoing monitoring and review activities, to ensure they are fit for purpose.
- It provides an opportunity for an external team to reflect on the effectiveness of the procedures and to provide external advice on their enhancement where necessary.
- It offers assurance to learners that their experience is being monitored for good practice, and assurances to the public that the institution is offering a valuable service.³⁵

The first purpose will not be discussed in detail here. It should, however, be noted that information provided in respect of the ISERs, and review teams' assessments of these documents, reveal that institutions availed of this opportunity and conducted comprehensive internal self-evaluation processes.

The second purpose, to reflect on the effectiveness of the procedures and to provide external advice on their enhancement, is the focus of this thematic analysis and will be discussed in more detail below.

The third purpose is to contribute to public confidence and to assure learners that their experience is being monitored by promoting transparency. Review teams' assessments of this area are on the whole positive, and any recommendations made are not severe or critical. It is however debatable whether this aim can be achieved by means of the CINNTE reviews and the publication of their results. The reason for this assertion is not the review reports themselves or their content, but rather the small likelihood that students or even members of the wider public will engage with them. Although the chapters entitled 'Conclusions' are on the whole relatively short, they are written in such a way that may not be appropriate to address and engage a wider audience. Further, learners and the wider public may not be interested in assessments of the effectiveness of governance, policies and even procedures, but in specific information about degree programmes and such like. This is, to be clear, is not a specific feature or defect of the CINNTE review reports but applies to many, if not the vast majority, of review reports. Other types of documents are more relevant to that audience.

In summarising the results of this thematic analysis for the seven CINNTE review reports, one could say that:

The reviewed institutions

- made good use of the opportunity of the CINNTE reviews for a sound self-evaluation based on a broad participation of internal and external stakeholders,
- have implemented effective quality assurance arrangements that comply with the ESG and have regard to QQI Guidelines,
- have established quality assurance arrangements that are based on effective and (on the whole) efficient governance structures that are effective in assuring the quality of the institutions' activities.

As vague as this summary might be, it could serve as the shortest possible summary of the results of the seven CINNTE reviews.

35 QQI CINNTE Review Handbook DAB p. 7

REVIEW OBJECTIVE NO. 1:

The institutional quality assurance policies cover teaching, learning and assessment in a comprehensive way and are effective and appropriate. Effective and appropriate governance and structural underpinnings of quality assurance are important features of these quality assurance arrangements. Furthermore, the institutions are characterised by the substantial commitment of their senior management to quality assurance. However, three recurring topics are either flagged as being challenging or limiting to overall positive assessments:

- The efficiency of governance structures, particularly the cascades of committees below the governing authority, the management committee and the academic council;
- Maintenance of the sets of policies, or, indeed, the whole system;
- Consistent implementation of quality assurance policies across the institution.

With regard to review teams' generally positive assessments of the learner experience, little detail is provided regarding specific features of policies, processes and tools.

The topics relating to learning and teaching and the quality assurance of arrangements in the field of research are assessed by review teams to be good overall. There is a significant focus on the learner experience, and on teaching and learning, in the CINNTE reviews. Even though the eleven topics provide a number of obvious points through which review teams could consider research or integrate activities into the review, and although research is addressed in a separate chapter, the volume of information, the depth of analysis and the number of assessments regarding research are hardly comparable to those in respect of teaching and learning.

REVIEW OBJECTIVE NO. 2:

In the view of the author, the information and assessments presented in respect of this objective do not constitute a comprehensive evaluation of quality improvements. Nor do they present explicit information about quality assurance practices that are aligned with the institutions' missions or which can be deemed innovative. It is difficult to identify significant distinctions between the topics considered in these chapters and the information and assessments presented under review objective no. 1, let alone clear conceptual differences.

REVIEW OBJECTIVE 3

The institutions' activities with regard to access, transfer and progression are assessed as good, and there is a clear focus on widening participation in higher education.

REVIEW OBJECTIVE 4

From a review of all seven reports, it is clear that all institutions place great importance on attracting international students. The implementation of these strategies and policies have certain structural underpinnings, such as a vice-president that has been allocated specific responsibility for international education, or an international office. Explicit information about the implementation of the various parts of the *Code of Practice for the Provision of Programmes to International Learners*³⁶ is rarely provided in the reports.

Review teams' assessments in respect of this objective are partly positive and partly negative.

IoT OBJECTIVE

Although, at least in two of the three reports, it seems that the review teams' assessments are more closely aligned with the wording of the relevant QQI policy, this does not mean that the analyses are more comprehensive than those that appear in other chapters. It is nonetheless interesting. The lack of comprehensive analysis may be related to the overlap between this objective and the topic 'Governance and Management' under review objective no. 1. Although, in theory, the overlap is not significant, because the foci

36 <https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Code%20of%20Practice.pdf>

of these chapters differ, in practice, no clear distinction is made between governance with regard to quality assurance and governance in general. This might have been reinforced by the tendency of review teams to refer back to what other review teams had written in previous review reports.

In general, it is notable that the assessments with regard to the review objectives that are not positive cannot, in many cases, be deemed negative in the true sense, but rather not as positive as the others.

However, three limitations are to be highlighted that apply to all following remarks:

- Although the CINNTE review approach covers teaching and learning/the learning experience and also research and other activities, the review reports clearly focus on the topic of teaching and learning – in particular, the learning experience. This must be borne in mind when making general statements on the effectiveness of institutions' internal quality assurance arrangements.
- The analyses – and consequently the findings – contained within the review reports have a clear focus on policies and responsibilities. Consequently, the core findings are on the whole based on the chapters under review objective no. 1, and, within this objective, particularly on 'Overall Assessment of Quality Assurance Procedures' and 'Governance and Management of Quality'. Processes and tools are seldom addressed or are addressed unsystematically.
- In connection with this, the review reports appear to be oriented towards to the *Core Statutory Quality Assurance (QA) Guidelines* and generally do not refer to specific QQI policies such as
 - *QQI Policy Restatement: Policy and Criteria for Access, Transfer and Progression in Relation to Learners for Providers of Further and Higher Education and Training*;
 - *Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by QQI for Providers of Research Degree Programmes*;
 - *Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by QQI for Providers of Statutory Apprenticeship Programmes*;
 - *Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Blended Learning Programmes*.

References to legal regulations such as Section 28 of the 2012 Act are not made explicitly.

Many of the other chapters, in one way or another, refer to objective 1. This is especially the case in relation to the findings under review objective no. 2. With regard to objectives no. 3 and no. 5, this leads to an incomplete and sometimes even a fragmented approach.

Finally, it is important to reiterate the caveat concerning the small number of reports, which calls for cautious interpretation of the outcomes of this thematic analysis as being indicative of the stage of development of the sector as a whole.

In general, the review reports contain assessments which are often not linked to the comprehensive descriptions and analyses explicitly presented. In this context, it is important to highlight that this is merely a problem with presentation. The sometimes limited or unsatisfactory reference to analysis by the review teams should not be understood as meaning that subject matter has been omitted, or that analysis has not been conducted. The review teams analysed not only the ISERs but also AIQRs, which provided them with a sound basis for their review.

Further, a widespread phenomenon of peer review may also have an impact: this is the general inclination of review teams to provide a comprehensive justification and presentation of underlying analyses where a negative assessment is made; conversely, where review teams reach a positive assessment in relation to a particular topic, they tend to provide justifications that are comparably shorter, with even less focus on aspects that are deemed very important. In various review reports, this even leads to a focus on framework conditions, such as the consequences of the financial crisis, or research funding schemes.

In a comparative perspective this leads to an impression of incompleteness. It is important to contrast this with the impression that the individual review reports give a good overview of the effectiveness of the quality assurance arrangements in place in the institutions.

For a more detailed comparative analysis of the stage of development of the quality assurance arrangements in Irish higher education institutions, it would be advisable to widen the evidence base by including the ISERs and the AIQRs in the analysis.