Provider Access to Initial Validation of Programmes leading to QQI Awards
Report of the Quality and Capacity Evaluation Panel

Stage 1
Assessment of Capacity and Approval of QA Procedures

Part 1   Details of applicant provider and its proposed education and training provision

1.1   Applicant Provider

Registered Business/Trading Name:	Digital Skills Academy Limited
Address:	Digital Exchange, The Digital Hub, Dublin 8
Date of Application:	30th November 2016
Date of resubmission of application:	28th August 2017
Date of evaluation:	22nd September 2017
Date of site visit (if applicable):	Site visit took place as part of evaluation visit in January 2017
Date of recommendation to the Approvals and Reviews Committee:	8th March 2018

1.2   Profile of applicant provider

Digital Skills Academy, referred to as DSA below, is a limited company, with one beneficial owner; the Chief Executive Officer. Since 2011, it has developed and delivered higher education programmes as a linked provider of Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), i.e., DIT acts as the external quality assurance body for DSA, it validates its programmes and makes awards to learners who have successfully completed its programmes. The programmes themselves are designed, developed and delivered by DSA. Via this arrangement, DSA currently offers a Level 6 Higher Certificate, a Level 7 add-on degree, a Level 8 add-on degree, and three continuous professional development programmes. DSA specialises in programmes in the professional domain of digital technology, computing, digital business, business management, digital marketing, and digital design and innovation.

1.3   Proposed education and training provision

NFQ Level	Award Class	QQI Award / Proposed Programme Title
8	Higher Diploma	Higher Diploma in Science in Digital Technology
8	Honours Bachelor Degree	Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Digital Technology, Business & Innovation[1]
7	Ordinary Bachelor Degree	Bachelor of Science in Digital Technology, Business & Design[2]

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[1] 60-ECTS 'Add-on degree' taken part-time either in 12-months over three semesters or in 18-months over four semesters. Delivered in a blended mode, combining academic and practice-based learning.
[2] 60-ECTS 'Add-on degree' taken part-time either in 12-months over three semesters or in 18-months over four semesters. Delivered in a blended mode, combining academic and practice-based learning.

Part 2   The Quality and Capacity Panel Membership

Name	Role of panel member	Organisation
Mr Jack O'Herlihy	Chair	Retired Head of Development, Letterkenny Institute of Technology: areas of expertise QA and Expert Panel Evaluation
Ms Naomi Jackson	QA Expert and Secretary	Dean of Academic Affairs, CCT College Dublin
Dr Marion Palmer	QA Expert	Former Head of Department of Technology & Psychology in Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology
Mr Tom O'Mara	QA Expert	Online Learning Project Manager, University College Cork
Other attendees		
Name	**Role**	**Organisation**
Mr Walter Balfe	Observer	Head of Provider Approval, QQI

Part 3   Findings of the Panel

3.1   Summary Findings

While recognising the significant efforts and progress of the Digital Skills Academy (DSA) in response to the recommendations of the evaluation panel visit in January, the panel has found DSA is not in a position to advance to the second stage of the initial access process i.e., an application for programme validation. This is largely due to the ongoing concerns in relation to its governance structure and system not being fit for purpose and the impact this then has on the suitability of a number of the quality assurance procedures outlined by the DSA in its application.

3.2 Conditions

N/A

3.3 Recommendations

N/A

3.4 Recommendation of the panel to the Approvals and Reviews Committee of QQI

The Quality and Capacity Panel recommends to the Approval and Review Committee that it does not approve the quality assurance procedures of Digital Skills Academy.

Part 4   Evaluation of the capacity of the applicant to provide quality education and training to learners

4.1   Legal and compliance requirements:

4.1.1(a)   **Criterion***: Is the applicant an established Legal Entity who has Education and/or Training as a Principal Function?*

4.1.2(a)   **Criterion***: Is the legal entity established in the European Union and does it have a substantial presence in Ireland?*

4.1.3(a)   **Criterion:** *Are any dependencies, collaborations, obligations, parent organisations, and subsidiaries clearly specified?*

4.1.4(a)   **Criterion***: Are any third-party relationships and partnerships compatible with the scope of access sought?*

4.1.5(a)   **Criterion:** *Are the applicable regulations and legislation complied with in all jurisdictions where it operates?*

4.1.6(a)   **Criterion:** *Is the applicant in good standing in the qualifications systems and education and training systems in any countries where it operates (or where its parents or subsidiaries operate) or enrols learners, or where it has arrangements with awarding bodies, quality assurance agencies, qualifications authorities, ministries of education and training, professional bodies and regulators.*

Findings:

> **Does the provider's application provide evidence that these criteria have been met?**
>
> DSA has addressed the criteria above in its application form, providing evidence of its legal status as a registered limited company based in Ireland without subsidiaries. It has confirmed its compliance with applicable legislation and regulations. There is no evidence to suggest that DSA is not in good standing in its dealing with parties related to education and training in Ireland or abroad. Its primary relationship nationally is with the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). DSA previously indicated that if it is successful with the application to QQI, it is likely to transfer its awarding arrangements from DIT to QQI. On this occasion it was confirmed to the panel that intentions are to offer programmes awarded by both bodies and thus attempts to align QA and academic regulations were incorporated into the Quality Assurance policies and procedures submitted.   The panel was not convinced that DSA is currently in a position to assume overall responsibility for QA and academic governance underpinning its programmes in place of that being provided by DIT to date.
>
> On reviewing the revised QA Manual the Panel was concerned at the absence of detail in relation to Data Protection and records retention. The Panel noted DSA's statement of compliance in this regard but nonetheless expected detailed information on these matters to have been included. DSA provided documentation at the Panel meeting to evidence work that has commenced in respect of data protection and compliance with the incoming GDPR. The panel was satisfied that appropriate steps are

being taken but the current procedures are not adequate to support and protect the gathering, process and retention of student data.

Where criteria are not met, please identify and state the reason(s) why.

Not applicable.

4.2 Resource, governance and structural requirements:

4.2.1(a)   **Criterion:** *Does the applicant have a sufficient resource base and is it stable and in good financial standing?*

4.2.2(a)   **Criterion:** *Does the applicant have a reasonable business case for sustainable provision?*

4.2.3(a)   **Criterion:** *Are fit-for-purpose governance, management and decision making structures in place?*

4.2.4(a)   **Criterion:** *Are there arrangements in place for providing required information to QQI?*

Findings:

Does the provider's application provide evidence that these criteria have been met?
DSA was founded in 2008 and is funded from private resources. It submitted financial statements, an up-to-date tax clearance certificate, and accounts, in support of its claim of financial stability.
The initial panel visit in January 2017 found that DSA needed to revisit its proposed governance structures and imposed the condition that DSA fully reviews and reconstitutes its proposed governance system, giving consideration to specific matters including:

- Full terms of reference are required for each element of the governance system. These should include the composition of a given committee, its role and responsibilities, the frequency of its meetings, and how often the terms of reference are reviewed;
- The terms of reference need to be cross-referenced with the draft Quality Assurance Manual that DSA is developing, to ensure that the appropriate oversight indicated and required has been documented both within the procedure and within the relevant terms of reference;
- The governance system must show clear separation of commercial and academic decision-making powers;
- The Academic Council should be driven by academics and its critical role in overseeing and safeguarding academic matters should be clearly reflected in its terms of reference;
- Assessment and programme boards need to be considered (as part of increasing the focus on the programme rather than the module);
- The nature of the relationship of all committees with the Academic Council and/or the Governing Authority must be stipulated.

As a result, the Panel gave significant attention to this area during its review of the resubmission and the subsequent evaluation meeting with representatives of DSA. Panel members noted the existence

of a governance structure that was reflective of an organisation that had sought to address the Panel's earlier condition but nonetheless, remained concerned that an appropriate, fit for purpose infrastructure is still not in evidence. This is expanded upon in Part 5 below.

DSA operates various student and information management systems which enable it to produce learner data and reports as required.

Where criteria are not met, please identify and state the reason(s) why.

The panel is not satisfied that criterion 4.2.3 (a) has been met. As referenced, it is of the view that the governance structure and systems proposed are not fit for purpose and there is an absence of separation of the operational management and the strategic oversight of academic matters that is required for the appropriate governance of academic programmes. This is further compounded by the absence of a Registrar or equivalent role, as defined by Assessment and Standards Revised 2013.

The Panel is concerned that DSA operates its academic programmes as individual modules, which are also grouped as streams, and are assigned a module or stream lead, rather than as the validated programme in its entirety for which a named person has responsibility. The absence of programme level leadership and management, separated from executive level leadership and management of programmes, further emphasises the Panel's concerns in relation to academic governance.

The initial evaluation visit highlighted the gaps in the academic decision-making infrastructure for DSA resulting from the proposed separation from DIT, and the requirement to address this. The Panel remains concerned that DSA has not fully appreciated the academic governance systems although it is noted that the proposed structure and systems does seek, in the main, to address the requirement to separate academic deliberation and decision-making from business orientated interests.

The panel noted that while significant work had been done to develop the QA documentation, the resubmission made it difficult to cross reference processes and determine overlaps and workloads associated with implementation. The documentation also contained a number of significant contradictory use of job and committee titles as well as errors around procedures and the use of terminology more appropriate to further education, which were highlighted to the DSA representatives.

4.3   Programme development and provision requirements:

4.3.1(a)   **Criterion:** *Does the applicant have experience and a track record in providing education and training programmes?*

4.3.2(a)   **Criterion:** *Does the applicant have a fit-for-purpose and stable complement of education and training staff?*

4.3.3(a)   **Criterion:** *Does the applicant have the capacity to comply with the standard conditions for validation specified in Section 45(3) of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act (2012) (the Act)?*

4.3.4(a)   **Criterion:** *Does the applicant have the fit-for-purpose premises, facilities and resources to meet the requirements of the provision proposed in place?*

4.3.5(a)   **Criterion:** *Are there access, transfer and progression arrangements that meet QQI's criteria for approval in place?*

4.3.6(a)   **Criterion:** *Are structures and resources to underpin fair and consistent assessment of learners in place?*

4.3.7(a)   **Criterion:** *Are arrangements for the protection of enrolled learners to meet the statutory obligations in place (where applicable)?*

Findings:

Does the provider's application provide evidence that these criteria have been met?

The experience of DSA in designing, developing and delivering programmes leading to the awards of DIT provides clear evidence of a relevant track-record. It has also developed a staff base appropriate to the delivery and administration of these programmes and to the operation of a provider of its scale. The Panel did raise some concern about the potential capacity to deliver the proposed programmes to the proposed numbers outlined in the DSA application. It was however, clarified that these numbers may have been incorrect and the intention was to have approximately 500-600 students at any given time. Access, transfer and progression arrangements are included in DSA's Draft QA Manual and how it deals with admission and Recognition of Prior Learning was discussed in some detail. The Panel is concerned about the suggestion that learners may be permitted to complete a programme but not graduate until verification of entry qualifications has been provided, rather than preventing admission until such a time this has occurred. The operation of RPL and the Admission Appeal process highlighted the concerns relating to academic governance whereby the decision-making body is also the point of appeal.

Arrangements for the fair and consistent assessment of learners were discussed in detail. The Panel noted the confusing information provided within the draft QA manual and sought clarification on a number of matters including repeat assessment, regulations for award classification, review, remark, and appeal procedures, the operation and terms of reference of the Progression and Awards Board (DSA's naming of Board of Examiners). The Panel is concerned that the proposed academic regulations are not in line with the requirements of Assessment and Standards Revised 2013, particularly Sectoral Convention number 3. The Panel is further concerned that the governance structures pertaining to recommendations for progression or award, and to appeal are not fit for purpose. They confuse the correct order of events and the key steps that learner assessment decisions must progress through. The membership of the appeals body evidences the absence of appreciation of an appropriate academic governance structure and the requirement that an appeal should be made to a higher authority.

As noted following the initial Panel visit, the provider's intentions in terms of meeting its obligations for the protection of enrolled learners were not discussed at the panel meeting; however, it is clear from its application form that it intends establishing refund arrangements.

Where criteria are not met, please identify and state the reason(s) why.

Criteria 4.3.3 (a) and 4.3.6 (a) both require arrangements for the fair and consistent assessment of learners to be in evidence.   Discussion with DSA emphasised the consideration DSA has given to operating the academic management of its assessment, separate from DIT. However, the Panel identified a range of matters that continue to give cause for concern in respect of assessment. This is elaborated upon in Part 5. As a result, these criteria have not been met.

Criteria 4.3.5 (a) was also revisited as a result of the revised QA procedures submitted. The Panel is not satisfied that the appropriate governance structures are in place for the management of access, transfer and progression and therefore this criterion is not met. This is also elaborated upon in Part 5.

4.4   Evaluation of capacity to provide the proposed education and training provision - Overall finding:

The Panel acknowledges the experience of DSA in delivering higher education programmes and further recognises the extensive work undertaken by DSA since the initial evaluation visit. However, the panel remains concerned about the suitability of the proposed governance structure and systems as outlined in the application from DSA and how this subsequently impacts on a number of key areas of academic operation and management and potential learners. The Panel is of the view that the following areas of quality assurance remain a concern:

- Management and governance
- Programme development and validation
- Access, transfer and progression
- Deferrals
- Programme review and revalidation
- Assessment of learners
- Programme management
- Information and data management

Part 5 Evaluation of draft QA Procedures submitted by Digital Skills Academy

The following is the panel's findings following evaluation of Digital Skills Academy's quality assurance procedures against QQI's Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines (April 2016). This section of the report follows the structure and referencing of the guidelines.

1	GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT OF QUALITY

Panel findings

The primary focus of the Panel meeting with DSA was the governance structure and systems proposed by DSA in response to the condition imposed by the Panel visit in January 2017. The Panel recognised the notable improvement within the resubmission and the evidence of the substantial investment in time and resources that DSA had made in trying to address the criteria. Nonetheless, a number of concerns remain. As part of the meeting the Panel raised the following ongoing concerns:

- The lack of consistency in terminology and titling throughout the documentation created confusion and uncertainty.
- The absence of a Registrar, or equivalent, with executive responsibility for the management of academic matters, including the management of assessment. This was further compounded by the shared responsibility for such matters by the Head of Admissions, the Head of QA, and the QA and Assessments Manager.
- The absence of programme level academic leadership, with the focus being on curriculum leads at module or stream level only and the Director of Programmes having executive responsibility for all programmes.
- The use of 24 module board meetings rather than programme board meetings.
- The restricted use of learner representation. It appeared that was limited to Academic Council only. The absence of programme level leadership was also felt to reduce the opportunity for the voice of the learner to be heard.
- Understanding of the application of the governance structure in key matters such as appeals
- Separating commercial matters from academic matters in respect of deferrals, although it was noted this had been addressed in all other areas.
- Understanding the natural sequence of decision-making in respect of programme development and validation and the restrictions on changes post validation.

2   DOCUMENTED APPROACH TO QUALITY ASSURANCE

Panel findings

QQI's *Core Statutory QA Guidelines* associate the 'documented approach to quality assurance' with decisions made by the provider regarding how procedures are developed; the types of information they will contain; and how appropriate they are to their environment and context. The guidelines also expect a comprehensive approach to documentation, with responsibilities and accountability clearly identified.

The Panel noted that DSA had given due consideration to the feedback and recommendations from the Panel evaluation in January 2017 and evidence of this was apparent in the much more comprehensive revised Draft Quality Assurance Manual. The manual was extensive and had sought to address each of the areas of Quality Assurance for which a provider of programmes leading to QQI awards would be expected to address. It also reflected the distance and blended learning mode of delivery of DSA programmes. Notwithstanding this, the panel was not satisfied that the draft QA Manual is fit for purpose. This largely stems from the concerns pertaining to the governance structure and systems and how that then plays out through the QA policies and procedures. During the evaluation meeting, the panel communicated the following concerns:

- The documentation includes inconsistent terminology and role titling as well as roles that are not included on the organisational chart provided, leading to confusion.
- Many of the procedures evidence misunderstanding of natural sequencing of events or decision-making.
- Matters pertaining to appeals, including admissions appeals, reflect inappropriate governance of academic matters.
- The procedures relating to programme development and validation are confusing and don't appear to fully reflect the requirements of the QQI Core Validation Policy and Criteria.
- The potential for confusion or error as a result of overlapping responsibilities
- The leading of deferrals as an academic matter by the commercial side of the organisation.
- Inconsistency with QQI policy on Assessment and Standards, Revised 2013.
- Vagueness of policies relating to Data Management and the absence of associated procedures in some instances.

These references are not intended to be comprehensive but moreover provide a summary of the matters of concern that were discussed with DSA.

3   PROGRAMMES OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Panel findings:

The Panel noted the enhancement in the documentation submitted to reflect the particular characteristics of the development and delivery of programmes through a distance and online learning medium. Extensive information was provided in this regard and it was apparent that DSA had given due consideration to particular aspects such as content creation.

In its discussions with DSA representatives, the Panel became increasingly aware of the module level management and operation of programmes and the absence of programme level management separate to the strategic management of programmes. The extent of this was evidenced throughout a range of policies and procedures and the impact of programme level decision-making was highlighted as a concern for the Panel. The role of module boards in place of programme boards, review and proposed changes at module level, and the confusion in the documentation in relation to programme versus cohort further compounded concerns.

From a governance perspective, the relationship between the programme and Academic Council was not clear due to the absence of a Programme Leader. Similarly, the absence of a Registrar, or equivalent was of concern and impacted on managing programme quality and assessment.

4   STAFF RECRUITMENT, MANAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

Panel findings:

The Panel initially raised concerns about the capacity of DSA to accommodate the potential for 1400 learners as detailed in the application. It was clarified that this was an error but nonetheless the Panel wished to understand the staff recruitment process, induction and workload allocation.

The Panel noted DSA's industry links and the significance of this in recruiting subject matter experts. The commitment to inducting and developing staff in respect of the mode of delivery was recognised by the Panel. The use of weekly team meetings for academic staff was also noted. The academic staff in attendance were positive about being more empowered as a result of the preparations for the application to QQI.

DSA confirmed there is typically one academic assigned per module but that coaches and mentors are also allocated to support the learner group.

5 TEACHING AND LEARNING

Panel findings:

This area was addressed in detail at the initial visit in January 2017 and therefore featured less during the discussions at this subsequent visit. It did however still come up as a topic of discussion. The Panel noted that DSA had sought to include greater detail within the draft QA Manual relating to teaching and learning and the specific challenges and complexities in respect of distant and online learning.

The panel was advised that DSA typically applies the flipped classroom approach and each module is designed to include a number of "touch points" with learners as part of the teaching methodology. Each module has live synchronous tutorials to ensure the ongoing engagement of learners. The number of live sessions varies based upon the module size and duration. Typically a module would have one academic with coaches and mentors assigned as further support to ensure good practice. Live synchronous tutorials can be up to 120 learners with 2 curriculum leads in the session. Members of the panel felt this staff-student ratio would be extremely challenging for promoting student participation and engagement, beyond attendance, including staff student interaction, as was communicated to be the intent.

The Panel noted the template design of module delivery utilised by DSA that requires academic staff to develop a lesson around chunks of time. The Panel also noted the close relationship between the academic staff and the content development staff in the creation of online materials.

6 ASSESSMENT OF LEARNERS

Panel findings:

The *Core Statutory QA Guidelines* indicate the importance of having an assessment framework that reflects the provider's philosophy of assessment. This is particularly relevant when assessment is being designed for on-line and blended learning.

The Panel noted the greater detail provided by DSA in the Draft QA Manual in respect of assessment of learners. However, the Panel felt there was confusion, lack of understanding, and non-adherence to QQI policy evident.

The Panel acknowledged the intention of DSA to simultaneously offer programmes awarded by DIT and QQI and they had therefore sought to align the regulations and requirements of both bodies. DSA was invited to share where it had identified conflicting practice in respect of academic regulations. The Panel noted the inconsistent application of sectoral convention number 3 as documented in QQI Assessment

and Standards, revised 2013, and was concerned about the regulations pertaining to award calculation and classification. This was reinforced by the confusing regulatory information provided relating to assessment and specifically relating to repeat assessment opportunities.

The Panel was also concerned about the procedures in place for the management of review, remark, and appeal and the operation of Progression and Awards Boards. The information provided highlighted misunderstanding of the natural sequencing of events and the appropriate application of governance to assessment decisions.

The role of the Internal Verifier was questioned and the Panel was concerned about this appearing to be an administrative checking role and absent of the more academic moderation responsibilities.

As previously noted, the procedure for appeals was of concern and this included the evidence of the absence of the application of an appropriate system of governance.

7   SUPPORT FOR LEARNERS

Panel findings:

In its Self-Evaluation Report (August 2017), DSA updated the Panel on its intentions regarding ensuring Library provision, which as yet is not in place. DSA has shortlisted potential online library providers and is yet to complete a final service review in order to agree the contract and implement the service.

DSA informed the Panel in some detail of the extent and variety in learner support mechanisms. The Panel noted the positive work undertaken by DSA in respect of learner induction, referred to as Pre-onboarding and Onboarding. The Panel further noted the use of coaches and mentors to provide ongoing support to learners and the close working relationship these roles have with the academic staff of the modules being undertaken.

Within the Self-Evaluation Report DSA also outlines a number of areas for improvement, which includes the production of learner engagement reports generated from the LMS, and utilising the LMS to communicate programme updates to learners as high priority matters.

8   INFORMATION AND DATA MANAGEMENT

Panel findings:

Within its self-evaluation report, DSA identified the review of the creation and collation of data with respect to Data Protection requirements and implementation of process changes as a high priority. The Panel noted this and the evidence provided at the Evaluation meeting which evidenced the work that

was underway in this regard. This provided some assurance to the Panel who had communicated concerns relating to the vagueness of the policies and absence of procedures in this section of the QA Manual. It was not evident to the Panel how DSA currently complies with Data Protection legislation or how it satisfies its obligations in this regard. In particular, it was not clear what the records retention policy detail is and what DSA understands as its obligations and responsibilities in respect of the retention of programme and learner data.

9   PUBLIC INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

Panel findings:

Within its Draft QA Manual, DSA outlines the procedures in place to ensure the accuracy and completeness of public information.

As indicated in section 7, DSA provides a Pre-onboarding process where learners are required to attend live online sessions. During these sessions they are notified of the programme schedule (timetable), and provided with full programme information including detail of the methodologies and structures.

DSA also undertakes to publish quality assurance evaluation reports on its website as soon as possible after an evaluation, along with related improvement plans.

10   OTHER PARTIES INVOLVED IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Panel findings:

As noted following the initial Evaluation meeting in January 2017, the only awarding body relationship that DSA currently has is with the Dublin Institute of Technology. The nature of this relation did not form part of the discussion at this subsequent evaluation meeting but DSA did communicate their intention to continue to offer programmes leading to awards of DIT alongside those leading to awards of QQI.

Within its Draft QA Manual DSA has outlined how it intends to engage with a range of other parties including panel members and external examiners. The report from the initial Evaluation Meeting in January noted DSA's inclusion of reference to 'substantial engagements with peers in leading universities' in South Africa and Mexico (draft Quality Assurance Manual, p. 127). The Panel report subsequently noted that the quality assurance procedures do not detail the arrangements for due

diligence and how such relationships are formed. It was noted that this was a further area that should be attended to when DSA is revising its quality assurance procedures. There was no discussion in relation to this as part of the most recent Evaluation Meeting as the inclusion of such detail in the revised Draft QA Manual is not apparent.

11   SELF-EVALUATION, MONITORING AND REVIEW

Panel findings:

DSA includes self-evaluation, monitoring and review in its self-evaluation and draft quality assurance procedures (section 11). Its quality assurance procedures address how programmes are reviewed and self-evaluation reports produced, which leads to the identification of areas for improvement and on-going monitoring. DSA also describes the management of external reviews of programmes and how regular self-monitoring of activities is assured.

In its Self-Evaluation Report DSA outlines how it has more comprehensively documented its procedures and that it has sought to redress the balance of the previously overly onerous module level review as opposed to programme level review.

The Panel noted the detail provided has been extended and enhanced following the feedback from the initial Evaluation Meeting. However, in many cases it still lacks clarity and also continues to place emphasis on module level activities in some regards. The lack of clarity may be reinforced by the confusing use of terms such as "programme end" when referring to the end of the delivery of the programme to one specific cohort. A number of the procedures still lack specific step by step detail that would ensure the provision of complete information on expectations and requirements to the relevant stakeholders who would be required to engage with them.

Sector Specific QA Guidelines for Independent / Private Providers

The following is the panel findings following evaluation the draft quality assurance procedures against QQI's Sector Specific Quality Assurance Guidelines (April 2016). This section of the report follows the structure and referencing of those guidelines.

1.   OTHER PARTIES INVOLVED IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING (part 9)

Panel findings:

The findings of the panel relating to section 10 above of the *Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines* are of equal relevance to this reference to the sector-specific quality assurance guidelines for independent providers. Those findings are reproduced below:

As noted following the initial Evaluation meeting in January, the only awarding body relationship that DSA currently has is with the Dublin Institute of Technology. The nature of this relation did not form part of the discussion at this subsequent evaluation meeting but DSA did communicate their intention to continue to offer programmes leading to awards of DIT alongside those leading to awards of QQI.

Within its Draft QA Manual DSA has outlined how it intends to engage with a range of other parties including, panel members and external examiners. The report from the initial Evaluation Meeting in January noted DSA's inclusion of reference to 'substantial engagements with peers in leading universities' in South Africa and Mexico (draft Quality Assurance Manual, p. 127). The Panel report subsequently noted that the quality assurance procedures do not detail the arrangements for due diligence and how such relationships are formed. It was noted that this was a further area that should be attended to when DSA is revising its quality assurance procedures. There was no discussion in relation to this as part of the most recent Evaluation Meeting as the inclusion of such detail in the revised Draft QA Manual is not apparent.

In addition to the above, as noted in the Report of Evaluation Panel's initial visit in January 2017, DSA does not sub-contract the delivery of its programmes to any other providers.

On a separate matter, while PEL was not discussed as part of either meeting with the Evaluation Panel, DSA make it clear in their application that they intend to establish appropriate refund arrangements.

Evaluation of draft QA Procedures - Overall panel findings

The Quality and Capacity Panel noted a number of very positive aspects of the provision of Digital Skills Academy during its evaluation meeting. It once again noted the evident commitment to high quality distance and blended learning, and also the varied, accessible and ongoing arrangements in place for supporting learners.

The Panel further noted the evident commitment of DSA to considering and responding to the previous conditions and recommendations of the Panel. The product of this was documentation that was much more comprehensive and demonstrated very serious and significant changes made by DSA in an attempt to satisfy the criteria. Notwithstanding this, the panel was not satisfied that the documentation evidenced an appropriately sound understanding of academic governance, which in turn impacted on the fitness for purpose of the proposed quality assurance arrangements required of providers offering programmes leading to QQI awards.

As a result, the panel has found that Digital Skills Academy is not in a position to advance to the second stage of the initial access process and recommends that the QA procedures not be approved.

Part 6 Conditions and Recommendations

6.1 Conditions

N/A

6.2 Recommendations

N/A

Part 7 Proposed Approved Scope of Provision for this provider

As the recommendation of the panel is that DSA does not progress to stage 2, Part 7 is not applicable.

Part 8 Approval by Chair of the Panel

This report of the Quality and Capacity Panel is approved and submitted to QQI for its decision.

Name:

Jack O'Herlihy
Chair, Quality and Capacity Sub-panel

Date: 28/09/2017

Annexe 1: Documentation provided to the Panel in the course of the Evaluation

The following documentation was submitted by DSA:

- o Application form for initial programme validation leading to QQI awards, including
  - o Application form
  - o Evidence of type of legal entity
  - o Organisation chart
  - o Documentation on collaboration and partnerships
  - o Documentation relevant to financial viability and resources
  - o Public liability insurance details
  - o Current tax clearance certificate
  - o Statutory declaration

- o Self-evaluation report of Quality Assurance Procedures (August 2017)
- o Draft Quality Assurance Manual (Version 10, August 2017)

Annexe 2: Provider staff met in the course of the Evaluation

Name	Role/Position
Paul Dunne	Founder and CEO
Clifford Brown	Head of Admissions & Quality Assurance
Barry McAdam	Academic Leader
Susan Conlon	Manager of Programmes
Mike Davidson	Director of Business Operations
Antonio Palacios	Learning Experience Manager
Daniel Griffith	Curriculum Lead