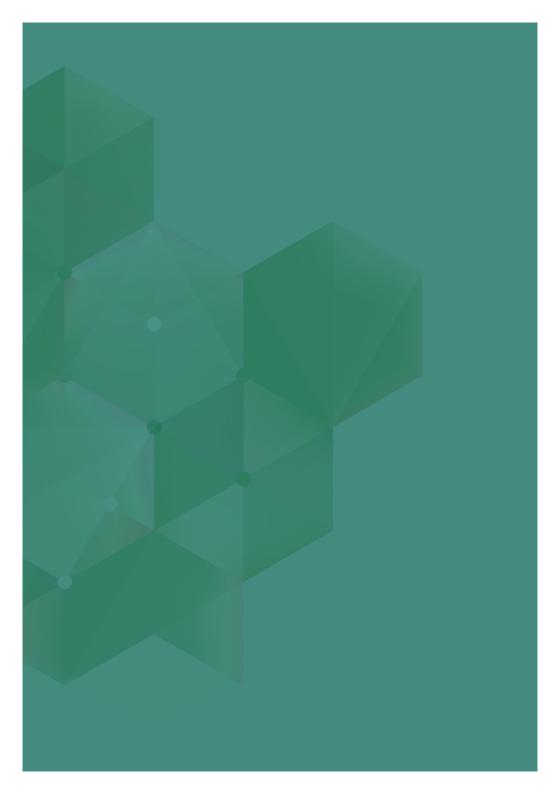# Guidelines for the Periodic External Review of Programmes Leading to NUI Degrees and Other Qualifications in Recognised Colleges that are also Linked Providers of NUI

9 May 2019

Ollscoil na hÉireann
National University of Ireland

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1 Executive summary

These guidelines are intended for use by Recognised Colleges of the National University of Ireland that are also Linked Providers of NUI, in accordance with the terms of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012.[1]

As a Designated Awarding Body, NUI is responsible for validating and accrediting programmes of education and/or training offered by such Colleges that lead to the award of degrees or other qualifications of the National University of Ireland. These guidelines are intended to support Recognised Colleges which are Linked Providers as they plan and implement a cycle of periodic external review of previously validated and accredited programmes.

Periodic external review of accredited programmes within Recognised Colleges forms an important part of NUI's overall approach to Quality Assurance, since such review provides an opportunity for in-depth reflection and dialogue between relevant stakeholders, with the added benefit of independent expertise from external reviewers in academic disciplines and/or professional subject areas. These guidelines are part of a suite of policies and guidelines that NUI provides for its Recognised Colleges.

Supported by the outcomes of periodic external review, which itself builds on more frequent quality assurance monitoring of academic programmes and modules within Recognised Colleges, NUI fulfils its statutory responsibilities to assure that education and training provision within Recognised Colleges is of a comparable standard to that offered by the Constituent Universities.

These guidelines clarify that while NUI is the programme validation and accrediting body, Recognised Colleges themselves are responsible for setting the terms of reference for individual periodic programme reviews and for organising such reviews. This aligns with NUI's overall QA policy which emphasises that responsibility for quality lies with Recognised Colleges themselves, guided by NUI as the awarding body and in line with national policy and European best practice guidelines where relevant.

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1   The 2012 Act defines a Linked Provider as 'a provider that is not a designated awarding body but enters into an arrangement with a designated awarding body under which arrangement the provider provides a programme of education and training that satisfies all or part of the prerequisites for an award of the designated awarding body'.

The guidelines that follow emphasise the importance that NUI places on independent disciplinary expertise during periodic external programme review, particularly for major awards on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), as well as opportunities for wider stakeholder involvement, including students and graduates, professional bodies and others.

In setting these guidelines, NUI distinguishes between requirements for periodic external review of programmes leading to major, minor and special purpose/supplemental awards on the NFQ. In relation to major and minor awards, and in line with Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) guidelines, Recognised Colleges are required to ensure periodic external review on a five-year cycle post-validation and accreditation.

2   Overview and background

Under its Charter, the National University of Ireland (NUI) is empowered to recognise colleges of higher education and award degrees and other qualifications in those colleges. Accordingly, since its establishment NUI has fulfilled responsibilities in relation to the standards and quality of its awards in these Recognised Colleges, seeking to ensure comparability between those qualifications and other qualifications of the National University of Ireland (awarded by NUI in the Constituent Colleges up to 1997, and by the Constituent Universities since then). With the establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), NUI has endeavoured to ensure consistency between the standards and quality of programmes leading to NUI qualifications and those of the Framework.

The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, under which NUI is a 'Designated Awarding Body', places further significant responsibilities on the University in relation to its quality assurance provision. Under the terms of the 2012 Act, NUI has statutory responsibility to ensure that QA policies and procedures are in place, approved and implemented effectively in Recognised Colleges that also meet the definition of 'Linked Providers' of NUI.

These guidelines are for NUI Recognised Colleges that are also Linked Providers of NUI. The guidelines seek to support these institutions in drafting and implementing their policies and procedures for the periodic external review of academic programmes which have previously been validated and accredited as leading to NUI qualifications.

3   Quality assurance roles and responsibilities

3.1   An enhancement-led approach

NUI policy for Quality Assurance states that the Recognised College has primary responsibility for the quality of its educational programmes and the continued quality enhancement of that academic provision.[2]

As the Designated Awarding Body working in line with evolving best practice for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), NUI seeks to adopt an enhancement-led approach to the fulfilment of its Quality Assurance responsibilities towards its Linked Providers. This means that NUI encourages its Recognised Colleges to prioritise the identification and implementation of enhancements to their activities and processes, as well as implementing mechanisms to ensure compliance with statutory and NUI QA procedures and guidelines.

In line with Irish and European best practice, NUI seeks to emphasise the importance of developing a quality culture within organisations that provide programmes of education and training which lead to degrees or other qualifications of the National University. In reviewing the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality Assurance in 2016-2018, the EU-funded EQUIP project highlighted that in order to ensure QA systems that are fit-for-purpose, organisations should ensure an ongoing reflective process that involves dialogue with all stakeholders.[3] NUI views periodic external programme review as an opportunity for stakeholders to engage in such dialogue at the programmatic level, drawing from information available from more regular quality monitoring activities that normally take place at programme and/or module level on a more frequent basis, for example annually. In its general statutory QA guidelines of April 2016, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) recommends that regular programme monitoring should provide information for periodic programme review.[4]

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2   NUI (2017), *Policy for Quality Assurance and Enhancement.*

3   Anna Gover and Tia Loukkola (2018), *Enhancing Quality: From policy to practice*, EQUIP project report.

4   QQI (April 2016), *Statutory Guidelines for Quality Assurance, for use by all Providers*, version 2.

3.2 NUI oversight of periodic external programme review

NUI's periodic programme review oversight role involves the following three core elements:

(i) ensuring that the Recognised College's periodic programme review policies and procedures are aligned with NUI's overall QA policies;

(ii) participation in periodic peer review panels, through appointed external expert(s);

(iii) reporting on the outcome of periodic reviews to NUI Senate, to support the re-validation of programmes on a cyclical basis.

4 Periodic external programme review

4.1 Introduction

Periodic review is a formal mechanism that enables institutions to undertake an objective "point in time" evaluation of the quality and related standards of academic provision. The process provides an opportunity for reflection and independent feedback on programme delivery, informing planning and driving enhancement of future provision. It can also be of wider benefit to an institution in identifying effective practice or related issues that have relevance for other areas of provision. It is therefore an important component of a College's quality assurance and enhancement activities.

4.2 Scope

These guidelines apply to all programmes, including those delivered in collaboration with other institutions.[5] The scope of a periodic programme review will be determined primarily by the Recognised College, in accordance with its QA policy and its stated objectives for the review. As part of its quality assurance processes, NUI will seek to ensure that Colleges consider the following:

(i) The appropriateness and sufficiency of the learning outcomes at programme and/or module level, and their associated assessment strategies and methodologies, including evidence from learner progression and achievement;

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5   Where provision is delivered in collaboration with a NUI Constituent University and the latter has a significant role in the review process, NUI Senate may determine that the participation of the Constituent University is sufficient to represent the interests of NUI in the review process.

(ii) The currency, validity and relevance of programme content in the context of current research, practice and knowledge in the relevant discipline(s) and any relevant professional or statutory requirements;

(iii) The academic standards delivered by the specified provision, benchmarked against the NFQ awards standards for Higher Education provision;

(iv) The individual and cumulative effect of changes to the design and operation of the specified provision (since original validation and accreditation);

(v) Feedback on the effectiveness and relevance of programmes from relevant stakeholders, including students, employers, professional bodies, etc.

NUI recommends that Colleges regularly review and align their programme review policies and procedures with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. In relation to the 2015 ESG, sections 1.3: Student-Centred Learning, Teaching and Assessment, and 2: Standards and Guidelines for external quality assurance are particularly useful.[6]

4.3   Frequency and methodology for periodic external review

4.3.1   Major and minor awards

Programmes leading to NUI major and minor awards are normally subject to periodic external review at least once every five years following original programme validation and accreditation. The scope of the five-year cycle of review includes all programmes leading to major awards (including all exit awards) and minor awards, as classified in line with the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

4.3.2   Non-major special purpose/supplemental awards

Programmes leading to non-major NUI awards that have been designated as Special Purpose or Supplemental on the NFQ should also be subject to periodic external review from time to time. NUI recognises that these programmes are different from undergraduate and postgraduate major and minor awards in a number of important ways, including NFQ level, duration, volume of ECTS, their stand-alone nature (no progression pathways) and a greater extent of module-sharing with other cognate programmes.

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6   ENQA (2015), *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance* (ESG).

In this context, while NUI requires that Recognised Colleges have procedures in place for periodic external review of all awards, NUI does not require that reviews of programmes leading to Special Purpose or Supplemental awards take place on a five-year cycle. Unless requested to do so by the College, NUI will not normally appoint an independent, external reviewer to review panel(s) that the College may establish for these programmes. Recognised Colleges should specify, in their QA policy and procedures, the strategy, frequency, and methodology for periodic, programmatic-level review of such programmes, including provision for involvement of external reviewers.

4.3.3 Methodology

It may be desirable for a periodic programme review to encompass a group of individual programmes. In line with its own policies and procedures for Quality Assurance, the Recognised College may wish to schedule relevant groupings of programmes in circumstances where, for example:

- ▶ multiple programmes reside within one academic discipline;

- ▶ multiple programmes span a small number of cognate disciplines and a substantial volume of module provision is shared.

Where a grouping of programmes is envisaged for the purposes of periodic external review, the Recognised College should ensure that the process enables effective scrutiny of any specific issues arising for individual programmes within the grouping.

Where provision is transnational, it may be desirable for the review to encompass the delivery of a programme or group of programmes at all of its delivery locations, including, where relevant, the home campus. Alternatively, it may be preferable to review cognate provision at a particular site.

The Recognised College should take care to clarify the rationale for any grouping of programmes for periodic review purposes. NUI will require notification of the decision and supporting rationale, and suggests that the Peer Review Group is provided with an opportunity for clarification.

4.4 Composition and roles and responsibilities of review panels

4.4.1 Composition of a Peer Review Group (PRG) for major and minor awards (including exit awards)

The number of peer reviewers to be appointed to a panel will be determined by the specific objectives of a review.

Normally, a peer review group for a programme leading to a major or minor award (including any exit awards) will include the following:

(i) External, independent reviewers: typically, two high-ranking academics from the higher education sector with expertise in the relevant academic discipline(s). Of these, at least one should be drawn from outside the NUI Constituent University system and will be appointed by NUI, in consultation with the Recognised College;

(ii) External stakeholder representative: typically a relevant employer or representative of a relevant professional body;[7]

(iii) A student/recent graduate of the programme(s);

(iv) Internal reviewer: typically a senior member of academic staff in the Recognised College who is not from the unit/department/school where the programme under review is located;

(v) Internal rapporteur: typically a relatively senior professional administrative member of staff from the College. This is an important role providing administrative support to the Chair of the panel and the panel members, bringing together all relevant information during the site visit and panel deliberations, checking facts and figures, and drafting the review report of the PRG;

(vi) Additional external members (as appropriate) to reflect any partnership interests and ensure comprehensive handling of all areas to be reviewed.

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7   In the case of the Institute of Public Administration, this individual will normally be a high-ranking professional from the Irish public service.

4.4.2 Composition of a Peer Review Group (PRG) for non-major special purpose/supplemental awards

NUI requires that a Recognised College's QA policy and procedures ensure that periodic review of these programmes takes place from time to time, and with external involvement. However, as stated in 4.3.2 above, NUI does not set requirements for the structure and/ or composition of review panels that Colleges may wish to establish for review of these programmes. NUI recommends that Colleges seek advice and guidance from NUI where necessary either before, during, or after programme review. NUI requires that Colleges provide reports on the outcomes of such reviews in a timely manner.

4.4.3 Suggested criteria for PRG composition: periodic external review of major and minor awards

It is recommended that PRG composition should reflect the following criteria:

(i) The breadth and depth of academic reviewers' expertise within the subject area(s);

(ii) The extent of reviewers' management experience with comparable programmes;[8]

(iii) Gender balance, as far as possible;

(iv) Affiliation with higher education institution(s) of high international standing and reputation;

(v) External profile within the subject area, including experience representing the discipline on groups or within agencies at national or international levels;

(vi) Fluency in speaking and report writing in the English language.

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8   In the case of the Institute of Public Administration, the breadth and depth of knowledge and experience is an important criterion when selecting an external reviewer from the Irish public service.

With regard to the external members of a PRG in particular, NUI stipulates that:

(i) At least one of the two academic reviewers will have no previous history or association with the Recognised College. Preferably, this individual will have no previous history in a lecturing or an independent review capacity with any Constituent University or Recognised College within the NUI federal system – where this proves not to be feasible, the College should seek guidance from NUI Registrar in good time;

(ii) An external reviewer is not appointed if there is a conflict of interest regarding any relationship with the relevant unit/school/department or associated staff in the Recognised College;

(iii) An external reviewer is not appointed if s/he is a current partner in research collaborations with the Recognised College or associated staff;

(iv) For the purposes of Programmatic Review, all members of the PRG should enjoy equal status and should have the opportunity to contribute to the PRG Report and the making of recommendations for further improvement. The PRG Report must be signed-off by all members of the PRG.

4.4.4 Selection and appointment of members of PRGs for major and minor awards (including exit awards)

(i) Chair: To be appointed by the Recognised College. It is expected that the Chair will normally be selected from among the external members of the PRG.

(ii) Internal members: To be nominated and appointed by the Recognised College.

(iii) External academic members: A list comprising a minimum of four nominees should be submitted to NUI by the Recognised College. In addition, NUI may propose names for consideration by the Recognised College. Of the total of four, typically two will be appointed; one by the Recognised College and one by NUI. Where possible, the NUI appointee will be from outside of the NUI federal system.[9]

4.4.5 Declaration by NUI-appointed reviewer

A declaration confirming that there is no known conflict of interest will be completed and signed by the NUI-appointed Reviewer. It will also be co-signed jointly by the NUI Registrar and Head of the Recognised College (or his/her designated nominee).

4.4.6 The role and responsibilities of the NUI-appointed member of the PRG

(i) The primary role of the NUI-appointed member of a PRG in the Recognised College is to act as independent discipline expert.

(ii) The external member is appointed by the University to act as its representative on the PRG in the Recognised College for the purpose of reviewing programmes leading to NUI degrees and other qualifications.

(iii) The NUI-appointed member will have equal status to the other members of the PRG (with the same responsibilities) and as such will be encouraged to participate fully in the review process.

(iv) As with other PRG members, the Recognised College will liaise directly with the NUI-appointed member regarding the review process and provide all relevant documentation.

(v) Where the NUI-appointed member has issues or concerns in relation to the integrity of the review process:

> ▶ He or she should in the first instance speak with the Chairperson of the PRG explaining the issue of concern and seeking a resolution.

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9   In the case of the Institute of Public Administration, NUI will normally appoint the external academic member to the panel. Where an external reviewer from the Irish Public Service is to be included in the panel, IPA will appoint this reviewer subject to agreement with NUI.

- ▶ If the issue of concern is not appropriately resolved, or if the subject of contention relates to the role of the Chair, the PRG member should then refer the matter to the senior representative in the Recognised College with responsibility for the management of the review process.

- ▶ The Head of the Recognised College, in consultation with the NUI Registrar (where the issue is raised by the NUI-appointed member), shall make the final decision if a resolution cannot be found at an earlier stage.

4.5 The report of the programme review (PRG report)

The final report of the PRG[10] will be submitted by the Recognised College to the NUI Registrar. The members of the PRG will be given the necessary documentation to ensure that their final report contains all of the required information. The report template will be structured by the Recognised College, but should be formatted with the following in mind:

(i) Reports should have headings that clearly identify the specific sections of the review (in line with stated objectives);

(ii) The overall assessment of the PRG should be clearly set out, relating to each section heading;

(iii) Illustrative findings should be included, in support of the overall PRG assessment against each heading;

(iv) A distinction should be made between findings related to individual programmes and generic findings related to groups of (cognate) disciplines;

(v) Report sections should be easily relatable to the College's own QA policy and procedures for Programme Review.

The final report may be subject to disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act, including to any person named in the report.[11] It may also be used as part of the University's processes of quality audit and quality assessment.

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10 Or equivalent structure/grouping in relation to non-major special purpose/supplemental awards.

11 The Freedom of Information Act 2014, http://foi.gov.ie/.

5 Re-validation of academic programmes following periodic external review

The NUI Registrar, following consultation with the Recognised College, will make a report to Senate concerning the findings and recommendations of the PRG report, including any necessary conditions attached.

NUI Senate meets three times each academic calendar year (November, January, and April) and the Registrar will make a report to Senate at the earliest opportunity following receipt of the PRG report.

Where, arising from a Review, a Recognised College proposes to introduce changes to approved programmes, or introduce any new programmes or awards, these should be submitted to NUI for approval in accordance with the NUI's policy and procedures.[12]

The NUI Senate may:

(i) Approve the re-validation of the programme or group of programmes;

(ii) Approve the re-validation of the programme or group of programmes subject to the fulfilment of certain conditions. Conditions are requirements, which must be met to ensure the continued validation of the programme or group of programmes;

(iii) Approve the re-validation of the programme or group of programmes subject to minor amendments/editorial changes to be completed as soon as possible, and suggested recommendations for improvement which may be considered by the Programme Team at their discretion;

(iv) Withhold the re-validation of the programme or group of programmes, pending further developments.

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12   NUI (2013), *Procedures and Regulations for the Approval of New Programmes and Programmes where there are Major or Minor Changes to the Content and Overall Learning Outcomes.*

6   Confirmation of the re-validation of the programme or group of programmes

The NUI Registrar will inform the Head of the Recognised College in writing of the Senate's decision regarding the re-validation of the programme or group of programmes.

Final programme documentation (incorporating any proposed amendments) shall be submitted to the NUI Registrar.

7   References

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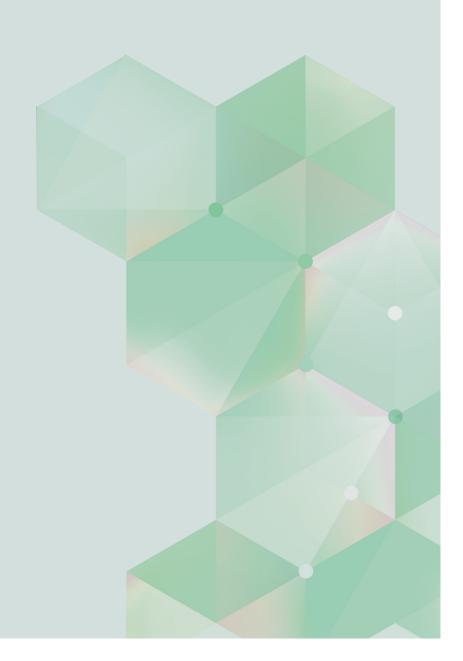
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UCC Quality Promotion Unit (2015), *Periodic review and annual monitoring of academic units*, https://www.ucc.ie/en/qpu/guidelines

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