

Degrees and Qualifications of the National University of Ireland
Regulations, Procedures and Guidelines
for the approval of New Programmes
and Changes to Existing Programmes
in the Recognised Colleges

May 2020



Ollscoil na hÉireann
National University of Ireland

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Executive Summary

The National University of Ireland (NUI) is a federal university comprising four Constituent Universities, two Recognised Colleges and six colleges linked with the Constituent Universities. NUI provides a range of services in support of its member institutions and their graduates. Central to the University is the enduring value and prestige of NUI academic qualifications nationally and internationally. In a world of increased educational opportunity, the NUI qualification is a mark of academic excellence that the University will continue to nurture and safeguard.

NUI is empowered under its charter and by statute to recognise other institutions of higher education, referred to as Recognised Colleges and is responsible for the academic standards of its degrees and other qualifications awarded in those institutions. In more recent years as the state has expanded its legislation and provision for Quality Assurance across the Higher Education sector, NUI became a Designated Awarding Body (DAB) under the terms of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, with the authority in law to award degrees and other qualifications.

This document sets out the regulations and procedures, with accompanying guidelines, for Recognised Colleges. These include the approval of new academic programmes, and programmes where there are changes proposed to the content and overall learning outcomes, offered in the Recognised Colleges and leading to degrees and other qualifications of the National University of Ireland.

NUI's Quality Assurance policy 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. The approval, monitoring and review of academic programmes is a key objective in NUI's policy, and we seek to be assured that the Recognised Colleges take appropriate measures to ensure the quality of their provision and its assurance.

The University also ensures that programmes seeking approval meet the requirements set out in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) so that students can attain NUI qualifications. The procedures and guidelines that follow also highlight the importance that NUI places on independent disciplinary expertise for peer review during the approval and review stages of programmes.

The University also ensures that programmes seeking approval meet the requirements set out in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) so that students can attain NUI qualifications. The procedures and guidelines that follow also highlight the importance that NUI places on independent disciplinary expertise for peer review during the approval and review stages of programmes. In addition, the support of relevant stakeholder bodies including students, graduates, professional and statutory bodies among others enrich the design process and review of programmes leading to NUI degrees and other qualifications.

These regulations, procedures and accompanying guidelines are part of a suite of policies and guidelines that NUI provides for its Recognised Colleges. Through these procedures, NUI continues to ensure that the quality of the learning experience is central to the design, delivery and assessment of programmes in the Recognised Colleges, and that overall standards are comparable to those in the Constituent Universities.

1. Introduction

- 1.1.** The National University of Ireland (NUI) is a university established by law under the Irish Universities Act 1908 and restructured under the 1997 Universities Act. NUI comprises, in law, four autonomous constituent universities. Separately from these, NUI is a Designated Awarding Body (DAB) named in the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 (hereafter referred to as the 2012 Act) with the authority in law to award degrees and other qualifications.
- 1.2.** NUI is also empowered under its charter and by statute to recognise other institutions of higher education, referred to as Recognised Colleges, and to award degrees and other qualifications in those institutions.
- 1.3.** These are regulations and procedures for the approval of new academic programmes, and programmes where there are changes proposed to the content and overall learning outcomes, offered in NUI Recognised Colleges and leading to degrees and other qualifications of the University.

2. Scope

- 2.1. These regulations, procedures and guidelines apply to (i) institutions that are currently Recognised Colleges of NUI and (ii) other institutions that may seek recognised college status with the University and intend to provide taught and research programmes leading to NUI degrees and other qualifications.

3. Purpose

- 3.1.** The purpose of this document is to set out the procedures and guidelines for Recognised Colleges when submitting a new programme for approval or proposing major or minor changes to existing programmes.
- 3.2.** NUI will seek to assure itself that programmes of study which lead to NUI qualifications in the Recognised Colleges are of an appropriate academic standard and that they adhere to University policy and procedures.
- 3.3.** NUI will seek to ensure that:
 - 3.3.1.** Programmes leading to NUI qualifications are designed in accordance with the University's requirements for programme design as specified in this document.
 - 3.3.2.** Programme aims and learning outcomes are clear and coherent and the proposed level of the award is in accordance with national standards and consistent, in so far as is reasonably practicable, with the requirements set out in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).
 - 3.3.3.** Curricula, teaching, learning and assessment methods enable students enrolled on programmes to acquire the standard of knowledge, skill or competence associated with the level of that award.
 - 3.3.4.** In the case of collaborative degree awards particular attention is attributed to the portion of the curriculum delivered by the partner institution and that due diligence has been performed.¹
 - 3.3.5.** The student experience is pivotal in the design and delivery of programmes and encourages an active role by students in the learning process and the devising of assessments strategies to reflect this approach.
 - 3.3.6.** Student support arrangements are appropriate within the Recognised College and sufficient to enable the student to achieve their award.

1 NUI (2013), *Quality Assurance for Collaborative and Transnational Provision of Academic Programmes Leading to NUI Qualifications*.

- 3.3.7.** There are sufficient resources (both learning and physical) and staffing in the Recognised College to support the proposed programme aims and objectives.
- 3.3.8.** There are adequate procedures in place in the Recognised College to assure the quality and standards of programmes accredited by NUI, including arrangements to support the student experience and monitor student performance.
- 3.3.9.** The standards and quality assurance of programmes leading to qualifications in regulated occupations take appropriate account of relevant external subject benchmarks and professional requirements nationally and internationally.

4. Quality Assurance

NUI is a DAB under the 2012 Act and has established Quality Assurance (QA) Procedures that focus specifically on its responsibility to comprehensively review, approve and ensure the effectiveness of the quality assurance provision in Recognised Colleges (which are also 'linked providers')² where NUI degrees and other qualifications are awarded. NUI's QA procedures are based on a specific set of standards and guidelines developed and published by QQI, in consultation with NUI, and provide a statutory framework for the review of the quality assurance provision in the Recognised Colleges.³

2 Where a recognised college is also a designated awarding body under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, the responsibility for approval of its quality assurance procedures lies directly with QQI.

3 QQI (2019), *Statutory Guidelines for the Review of Linked Providers by the National University of Ireland*.

5. Regulations governing the approval of academic programmes leading to NUI qualifications

- 5.1. NUI is responsible for ensuring that effective methods for the approval of new programmes are established and maintained, to ensure the standards and quality of proposed new programmes in the Recognised Colleges satisfy national and international standards and requirements⁴ and are consistent with comparable programmes offered in the NUI Constituent Universities.
- 5.2. A Recognised College has responsibility for the design and internal evaluation of a programme to be offered to its students before it is submitted to NUI.
- 5.3. The Senate requires that all new programmes leading to NUI qualifications in the Recognised Colleges are subject to a rigorous external and independent review.
- 5.4. Recognised Colleges offering new programmes leading to degrees and other qualifications of NUI, are required to map the specific knowledge, skill and competence associated with the level of the award in the NFQ.
- 5.5. Proposals for all new programmes need to be supported with a range of documentation to be submitted to the Registrar before a recommendation for approval is submitted to Senate (See Appendix 2).
- 5.6. In order to facilitate a robust programme approvals process, NUI sets timelines for the submission of documentation associated with applications for new programme approval or for changes to existing programmes. Recognised Colleges must be cognisant of the timeframe required for the design, review and validation of a programme before it is offered formally to students.
- 5.7. In circumstances where a major change is proposed to an existing programme, the Recognised College is required to make an application to NUI seeking approval by Senate following an independent and external review.

4 ENQA (2015), *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*.

5.8. While a policy governing marks and standards is principally the responsibility of the Recognised College, NUI will seek to be assured that the marks and standards governing programmes leading to NUI qualifications are robust and consistent with those in the NUI Constituent Universities and benchmarked appropriately to the National Framework of Qualifications.

6. Procedures for the submission of new programmes for approval

6.1. Procedures for the External review of new programmes

See Appendix 1 for Infographs and documentation checklists.

- 6.1.1.** All programmes leading to **major awards** in the NFQ will be reviewed by at least two Extern Assessors, one to be appointed by NUI and one to be appointed by the Recognised College. The Extern Assessors to be proposed should be agreed in advance following consultation between NUI and the Recognised College.
- 6.1.2.** All programmes leading to **minor, special purpose or supplemental awards** at all levels in the NFQ will be subject to external review as follows:
- a) Programmes which are more substantial in nature and typically equate to full-time study over a minimum of one year, i.e. a minimum of 60 credits, will require the support of an Extern Assessor appointed by the Recognised College, in consultation with NUI.
 - b) Shorter programmes, typically less than 60 ECTS⁵ credits, will require support by an Extern Assessor who is expert in the relevant discipline area. The Extern Assessor can be (i) appointed independently by the Recognised College or (ii) acting as an NUI appointed extern examiner for an existing programme in a related discipline area in the Recognised College.
 - c) There may be occasions when the NUI will seek to independently appoint an Extern Assessor to review a short programme, irrespective of the credits associated with the programme or the proposed NFQ Level. Any such review will be conducted in consultation with the relevant Recognised College.

5 ECTS Users' Guide (2015). The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is a tool of the European Higher Education Area using credits for making programmes of study more transparent. The ECTS is the credit system used for higher education in Ireland and across the European Higher Education Area.

- 6.1.3.** It is acknowledged that for some new programmes, participation by professional, regulatory or employer bodies may have an integral role in both the programme design and the review and accreditation process. In such cases, the Recognised College must demonstrate institutional oversight of its responsibilities relating to the relevant professional and/or statutory body.
- 6.1.4.** All programmes leading to NUI qualifications, and to be delivered jointly with collaborative partners, are subject to the same robust design and approval process as those to be delivered entirely by the Recognised College.⁶
- 6.1.5.** Extern Programme Assessor Reports
- a)** The findings of the Extern Assessor (where appointed by NUI) are submitted to the NUI Registrar in the first instance. The report is then shared with Registrar (or nominee) in the Recognised College where an opportunity is provided to respond to the findings or any issues raised.
 - b)** Where the Extern Assessor is appointed by the Recognised College, the initial report is submitted to the NUI Registrar together with any subsequent follow-up documentation to include, but not limited to, a response by the Recognised College to the initial findings/issues raised.

6.2. The approval of new programmes by NUI Senate

In cases where a new programme has satisfactorily undergone an external review and a set of recommendations have been made, the Senate may:

- 6.2.1.** Approve the programme in full;
- 6.2.2.** Approve a programme subject to the fulfilment of certain conditions. Conditions are requirements, which must be met by the Recognised College prior to the admission of a student onto the programme;

⁶ The policy and guidelines regarding programmes of study leading to NUI qualifications is currently being reviewed by the University. In the meantime, Recognised Colleges should refer to the following for guidance:

- NUI (2013), *Quality Assurance for Collaborative and Transnational Provision of Academic Programmes Leading to NUI Qualifications*.
- IHEQN (2013), *Guidelines for the Approval, Monitoring and Review of Collaborative and Transnational Provision*.

- 6.2.3.** Approve a programme 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;
- 6.2.4.** Withhold approval of a programme pending further consultation with the Recognised College.

6.3. Implementation of the approved new programme

- 6.3.1.** The NUI Registrar will inform the Head of the Recognised College, in writing, of the Senate's decision regarding the approval of a programme.
- 6.3.2.** The Recognised College will submit final programme documentation (incorporating any proposed amendments) to the NUI Registrar within an agreed timeframe.
- 6.3.3.** A start-date for the programme will be confirmed.
- 6.3.4.** For programmes leading to major awards in the NFQ, a periodic programmatic review will be provisionally scheduled within the first five years of the programme.⁷

⁷ Please see NUI (2019), Guidelines, Criteria and Procedures for the Periodic Review of Programmes Leading to NUI Degrees and Other Qualifications in the Recognised Colleges, http://www.nui.ie/about/pdf/gvrnce_docs/NUI_Guidelines_External_Review.pdf.

7. Procedures for major and minor changes to existing programmes

See Appendix 3 for guidance on the classification of major and minor changes to existing programmes.

7.1. Procedures for major changes to existing programmes

7.1.1. External review of programmes with major change(s)

- a) Proposed major changes to programmes will require support by an Extern Assessor who is expert in the relevant discipline area. The Extern Assessor can be (i) appointed independently by the Recognised College or (ii) acting as an NUI appointed extern examiner for an existing programme in a related discipline area in the Recognised College.
- b) The report of the Extern Assessor containing recommendations is submitted by the Recognised College to the NUI Registrar together with:
 - A short course document outlining the proposed major change(s) to the programme and detailing the impact of these changes on the overall structure and associated learning outcomes of the programme.
 - A statement from the Registrar (or nominee) supporting the application and providing a rationale for the proposed major changes.

7.2. Procedures for minor changes to existing programmes

7.2.1. In circumstances where the proposed changes do not significantly alter the content and overall learning outcomes of the programme, and have been subject to an internal review process and documented by the appropriate authorities in the Recognised College, the recommendations regarding the approval of the minor changes will be reported to Senate for noting.

7.2.2. Occasionally, proposed changes to an existing programme may be so substantial that the proposal should be classified and processed as a new programme. The Recognised College is asked to consult with NUI for guidance in such instances.

7.3. Reporting of recommendations to NUI regarding the approval of major and minor changes to programmes

- 7.3.1. In cases where programmes, submitted with proposed **major changes**, have satisfactorily completed the appropriate external review process, the Senate may:
- a) Accept the recommendations in full.
 - b) Accept the recommendations subject to minor amendments/ editorial changes to be completed within an agreed timeframe.
 - c) Reject the recommendations pending further review.
- 7.3.2. In cases where programmes, submitted with proposed **minor changes**, have satisfactorily completed an appropriate internal review process within the Recognised College, the Senate will note the recommendations.

Appendix 1: Documentation Checklist

a) New Programmes

Figure 1

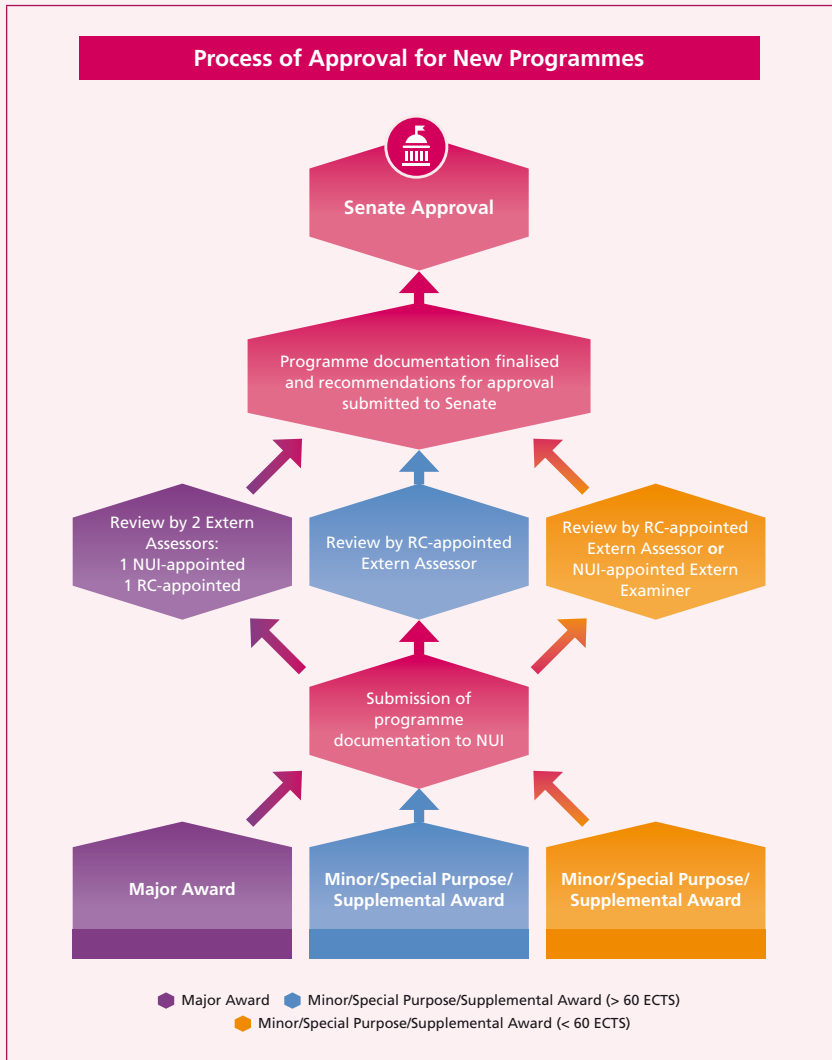
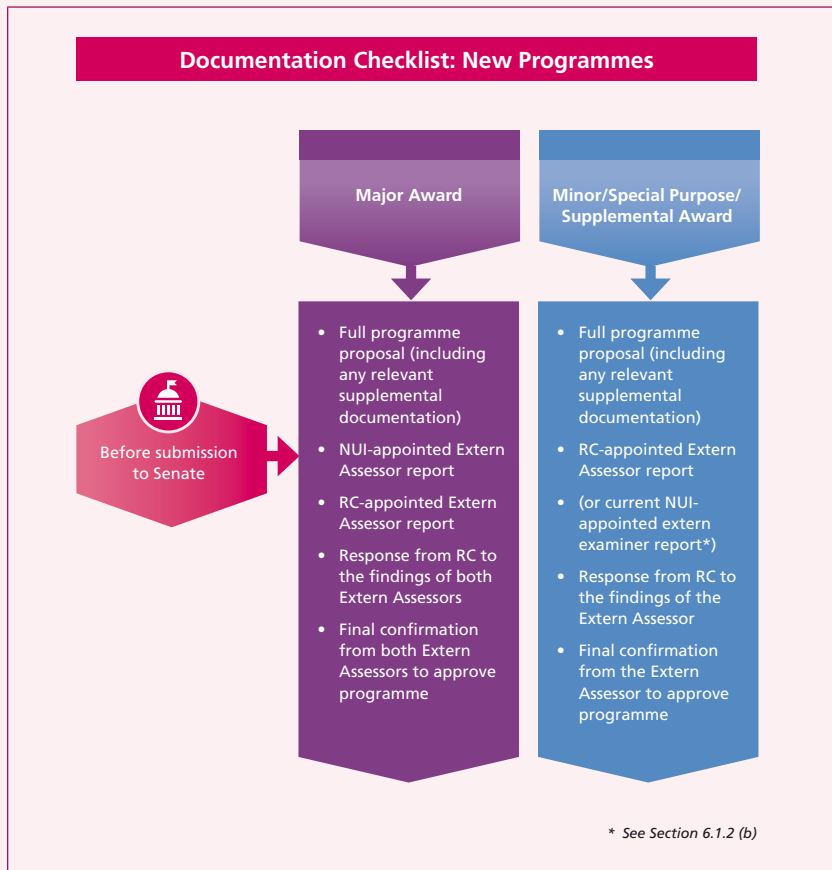


Figure 2



b) Programmes with Proposed Major/Minor Changes

Figure 1

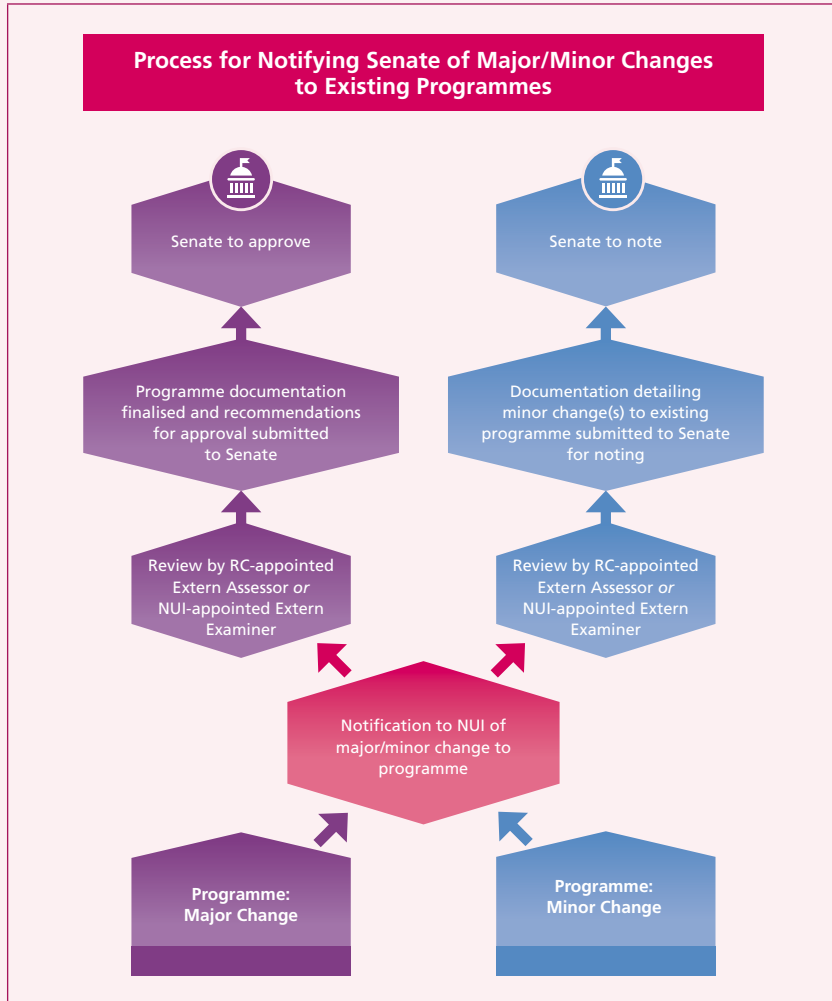
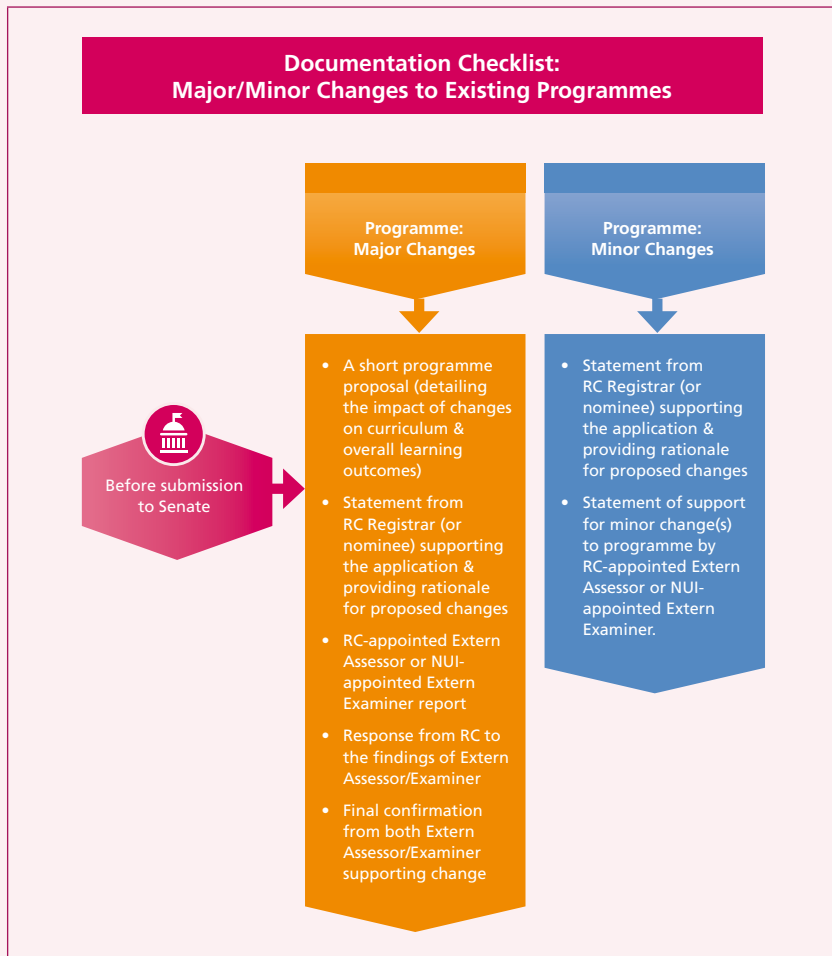


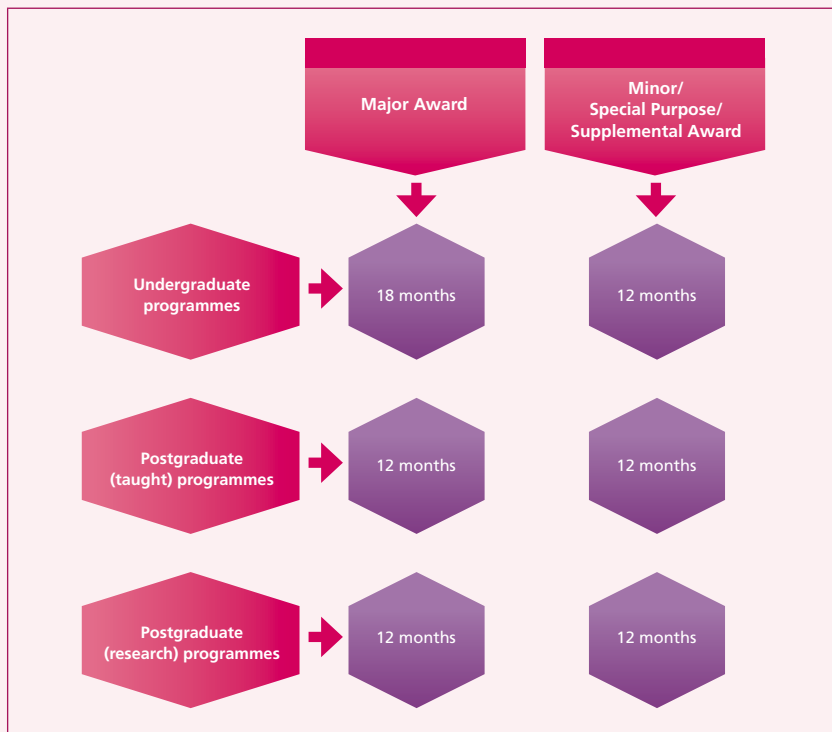
Figure 2



c) Timeframes for the submission of new programmes

In order to facilitate a robust programme approvals process, NUI sets timelines for the submission of documentation associated with programme applications. The award-type and size of the programme proposed will impact on the timeframe required for the evaluation and the eventual recommendation for approval by Senate. All programmes of study leading to NUI qualifications are subject to external and independent review. The size of the programme will determine the type of review to be undertaken by NUI (see section 5).

The following timeframes are indicative only of the period of time required from the inception and design phase of a programme to final approval by Senate. It should be noted that there may be occasions when the programme design/evaluation/approval phases will progress more quickly, or alternatively require further review and consultation.



Appendix 2:

NUI Template for Proposals for New Programmes

A proposal for a new programme should include but is not restricted to the following:

New Programme Overview

Title of Award/Qualification	e.g. Bachelor of Science
Title of programme	e.g. Biomedical Sciences For Research Degrees the type of Degree should be clarified, e.g.; Masters by Research Traditional PhD Professional Doctorate Structured PhD Practice PhD
School/Department	
Proposed start-date	
Award-type	Major Minor, Special Purpose or Supplemental
Minor/Exit Awards to be included	
NFQ: Level	
Mode of delivery⁸	
Duration of Programme	
Total Credits (ECTS) of programme	

8 The mode of delivery will be determined by the aim and content of the programme and will support students to attain the required overall learning outcomes. Modes of delivery may include but are not restricted to full-time/part-time study, distance learning, classroom-based learning, blended learning, online learning.

Entry requirements	e.g. formal qualifications or pre-requisites needed to undertake the programme and additional selection criteria, where appropriate.
Recognition of Prior Learning	A Statement on how RPL is embedded into the admissions policy.
Outline of programme structure	Diagrammatic overview
Marks and Standards	These are the assessment regulations used in the presentation of results to examination boards; for determining pass/progression within the programme; for decisions on the awarding of the qualification; the honours or other classification awarded; the requirements for completing outstanding requirements, repeat examinations, etc.
Programme Aim	In general terms, the knowledge and skills set attained by students completing the award.
Programme Content	Outline in general terms of the topics covered.
Programme Learning Outcomes	These are statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate having completed the programme. Statements should focus on what the student will have achieved rather than focussing on the content of what has been taught.

<p>Teaching, Learning & Assessment Strategies</p>	<p>Teaching, learning and assessment strategies including the alignment of module and programme learning outcomes with assessment methods.</p> <p>This section should make clear the extent to which a programme includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ continued assessment and the proportion of marks allocated to both continuous assessment and examinations; ▶ the mapping of assessment strategies to learning outcomes at (i) the module level and (ii) the programme overall. ▶ Practice-based elements where applicable. ▶ Supervision of research degrees (which may include a research studies panel). ▶ Regulations for assessment of research degrees.
<p>Progression/Exit Pathways/ Transfer routes</p>	<p>Where appropriate a general statement should be included to advise students on pathways to further study on completion of their initial award aim and any specific requirements in terms of academic standard, attendance, etc.</p> <p>Where exit awards are offered please provide separate learning outcomes for each award.</p>
<p>Professional/regulatory considerations</p>	<p>Where relevant.</p>

<p>Details of each Module offered</p>	<p>To include for each module:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Core/optional Credit volume NFQ Level General Aims and Objectives Module-specific Learning Outcomes Appropriate learning resources Assessment criteria
<p>Resources Statement</p>	<p>Description of the overall resources required for the programme, staffing and physical resources, and the evaluation of the adequacy of resources and ease of access for students.</p> <p>To include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching staff profiles Learning resources and student supports Information Systems Public Information Appeals

General memorandum of understanding (MOU) in relation to academic cooperation between a Recognised College and other relevant partner(s) (where applicable)⁹

To be completed in the case of programmes offered collaboratively with one or more other partners. This will include but is not limited to the following:

- ▶ Governance structure and management
- ▶ Financial arrangements
- ▶ Programme management (to include approval, monitoring and review)
- ▶ Learning resources and student supports
- ▶ Information Systems
- ▶ Public Information and Communications
- ▶ QA provision and responsibilities

9 (a) NUI (2013), Quality Assurance for Collaborative and Transnational Provision of Academic Programmes Leading to NUI Qualifications.
(b) IHEQN (2013), Guidelines for the Approval, Monitoring and Review of Collaborative and Transnational Provision.

Appendix 3:

Proposed Major and Minor changes to existing programmes

- 1. Classification of major and minor changes to existing programmes**
- 2. Guidelines when considering major changes to existing programmes**
- 3. NUI template for major changes to existing programmes**

From time to time, a Recognised College may want to make changes to programmes based on a range of factors including updated curricula, changes in market demands and adjustments to professional competencies to name a few. Depending on the types of changes required, defined here as major or minor, and the impact of them on the overall learning outcomes will determine the level of oversight required by NUI in the review process.

While specific review processes have been outlined relative to the types of changes proposed, a Recognised College should have consideration of the impact of any minor changes on the overall integrity of the programme as originally approved. This is especially relevant in cases where minor changes have been introduced to a programme over a number of years consecutively.

1. Classification of major and minor changes to existing programmes

1.1. Major changes to existing programmes

- A change in programme title;
- A change in the programme structure, for example, the addition of a minor, special purpose or supplemental award as a progression or exit route and/or a change in the overall credits for the programme;
- A substantive change in assessment methodologies;
- A substantial change in programme content and/or programme learning outcomes;
- The creation/withdrawal of subject areas/pathways/streams within a programme;

- f) The creation of a new subject area not previously taught in the Recognised College;
- g) A change in the mode of the delivery or learning environment. (Modes of delivery may include but are not restricted to full-time/part-time study, distance learning, classroom-based learning, blended learning, online learning);
- h) The deletion/withdrawal of a discontinued programme previously approved by NUI from the Recognised College portfolio;
- i) The addition of a new partner for programmes delivered in collaboration or addition of a partner to an existing programme approved by NUI;
- j) A change to undergraduate admissions requirements;
- k) Entry Requirements for Taught Postgraduate Programmes – where a proposed change results in a departure from the entry requirements originally approved, this may be considered a major change e.g. if the proposal results in an exclusion of a cohort previously allowed apply for the programme, or makes the entry requirement harsher than those specified at original programme approval.

1.2. Minor changes to existing programmes

These include any change in programme structure or module description that is not considered Major as defined above.

- a) Change in existing title and credit value of module(s);
- b) The replacement of module(s);
- c) The addition of new module(s);
- d) The discontinuation of modules;
- e) The change in the ratio of core to elective modules;
- f) Introduction of full-time or part-time option for existing programme;
- g) Entry Requirements for taught postgraduate programmes only – any change other than those outlined in 9.1(j) above.

2. Guidelines for a Recognised College when considering major changes to programmes

When considering proposed major changes to existing programmes, the Recognised College should have consideration for the following:

- 2.1.** Major changes to existing programmes are designed in accordance with the NUI's Policies and Procedures governing the approval of new programmes and curriculum change
- 2.2.** Aims and learning outcomes are clear and coherent and the proposed NFQ level of the qualification is in accordance with national standards in the revised programme
 - a) Curricula, teaching, learning and assessment methods in the revised programme enable students to reach the appropriate standard to achieve the award
 - b) The alignment of assessment to module learning outcomes, and in turn, the alignment of module learning outcomes to the programme learning outcomes
 - c) Student support arrangements in place for the programme are appropriate and sufficient to enable the student to complete the programme and achieve the qualification (e.g. in the case of students going on placement abroad)
 - d) The revised programme takes appropriate account of relevant external discipline benchmarks and professional, statutory and regulatory body requirements
 - e) Existing cohorts of students are not materially disadvantaged by the proposed change. Where a change might be to the detriment, or perceived detriment, of students then informed consent to the change should be sought appropriately from affected students.
- 2.3.** It is recommended that where a Recognised College is considering a major change to a programme, the Programme Team should be able to demonstrate appropriate consultation with relevant stakeholders in the decision-making process.

3. NUI Template for Proposals for Major Changes to Existing Programmes

A proposal for major changes to existing programmes should include but is not restricted to the following:

Title of Award/Qualification	e.g. Bachelor of Science
Title of programme	e.g. Biomedical Sciences
School/Department	
Proposed month and year for implementation of the proposed change	e.g. September 2012
Year(s) of Programme(s) to which change applies	First year, second year etc.
Award-type	Major Minor, Special Purpose or Supplemental
NFQ: Level	
Total Credits (ECTS) of programme	

<p>Summary of the Proposed Change:</p> <p>To include the following details:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) A brief narrative of what is proposed and the key differences from current provision. (ii) A rationale for the proposed change(s): to include academic, strategic, staffing, resource or other. (iii) Effect of proposed changes on (a) current and (b) future student cohorts (list advantages and disadvantages)
<p>Outline of revised programme structure</p>	<p>Diagrammatic overview: to include original modules and proposed changes</p>
<p>Revised Programme Overview:</p> <p>To include details of any changes in the following areas:</p>	
<p>Marks & Standards</p>	
<p>Programme Aim</p>	
<p>Programme Content</p>	
<p>Programme Learning Outcomes</p>	
<p>Teaching, Learning & Assessment Strategies</p>	

Progression/Exit pathways	
Professional/regulatory considerations	
Details of changes to Modules offered	To include for each module: (i) Core/optional (ii) Credit volume (iii) General Aims and Objectives (iv) Module-specific Learning Outcomes (v) Appropriate learning resources (vi) Assessment criteria
Details of changes in Resources	To include: (i) Teaching staff profiles (ii) Learning resources and student supports (iii) Information Systems (iv) Public Information

Appendix 4:

Guidelines for the award level and award-type assigned to NUI qualifications in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was established in 2003 and is a single structure mechanism for recognising all education and training in Ireland. The framework comprises ten levels, based on nationally agreed standards of knowledge, skill and competence and includes different classes or categories of awards/qualifications. The NFQ, whilst a national development, is also linked to similar initiatives that show how qualifications, or qualification levels, can be compared in other similar systems. Over 150 countries are now developing, or have developed, a national qualifications framework.¹⁰

1. Award level descriptors assigned to NUI qualifications in the NFQ¹¹

Level 6: Certificate and Diploma

Learning outcomes at this level include a comprehensive range of skills which may be vocationally-specific and/or of a general supervisory nature, and require detailed theoretical understanding. The outcomes also provide for a particular focus on learning skills. The outcomes relate to working in a generally autonomous way to assume design and/or management and/or administrative responsibilities. Occupations at this level would include higher craft, junior technician and supervisor.

Level 7: Certificate, Diploma and Ordinary Bachelor degrees

Learning outcomes at this level relate to knowledge and critical understanding of the well-established principles in a field of study and the application of those principles in different contexts. This level includes knowledge of methods of enquiry and the ability to critically evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems.

10 [https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/National-Framework-of-Qualifications-\(NFQ\).aspx](https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/National-Framework-of-Qualifications-(NFQ).aspx).

11 NQAI (2003), *Outline National Framework of Qualifications – Determinations made by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland*, pp. 20-21.

The outcomes include an understanding of the limits of the knowledge acquired and how this influences analyses and interpretations in a work context. Outcomes at this level would be appropriate to the upper end of many technical occupations and would include higher technicians, some restricted professionals and junior management.

Level 8: Honours Bachelor degrees/Higher Diplomas

Innovation is a key feature of learning outcomes at this level. Learning outcomes at this level relate to being at the forefront of a field of learning in terms of knowledge and understanding. The outcomes include an awareness of the boundaries of the learning in the field and the preparation required to push back those boundaries through further learning. The outcomes relate to adaptability, flexibility, ability to cope with change and ability to exercise initiative and solve problems within their field of study. In a number of applied fields the outcomes are those linked with the independent, knowledge-based professional. In other fields the outcomes are linked with those of a generalist and would normally be appropriate to management positions.'

Level 9: Master's degree/Postgraduate Diploma/Postgraduate Certificate

Learning outcomes at this level relate to the demonstration of knowledge and understanding which is the forefront of a field of learning. The outcomes relate to the application of knowledge, understanding and problem-solving abilities in new or unfamiliar contexts related to field of study. The outcomes are associated with an ability to integrate knowledge, handle complexity and formulate judgments. Outcomes associated with this level would link with employment as a senior professional or manager with responsibility for the work outputs of teams.

Level 10: Doctoral degrees

Learning Outcomes at this level relate to the discovery and development of new knowledge and skills and delivering findings at the frontiers of knowledge and application. Further outcomes at this level relate to specialist skills and transferable skills required for managing such as the abilities to critique and develop organizational structures and initiate change.

2. Award-type Descriptors contained in the NFQ which have been agreed between the universities and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI)

- ▶ **Major Awards** are the principle class of awards made at each level, e.g. Honours Bachelor degree (NFQ: Level 8) or Master's degree (NFQ: Level 9). The learning outcomes associated with these major award-types include many of the sub-strands of knowledge, skills and competence appropriate to the level and should be coherently planned to meet the aims and objectives of the award. Awards of a major-award type will provide learners with the options of (i) progressing to higher-level awards, (ii) transferring to other awards at the same level or (iii) gaining direct transition to employment.

Note: Where a major award is offered at an exit point, e.g. Postgraduate Diploma when exiting a Master's degree, then a separate set of learning outcomes should be included for this programme.

- ▶ **Minor Awards** provide recognition for learners who achieve a range of learning outcomes but not the specific combination of volume of learning outcomes required for a major award. The associated learning outcomes of these awards form a component part of the learning outcomes of a major award.
- ▶ **Special Purpose Awards** are stand-alone awards and recognise a specific or relatively narrow range of learning outcomes.
- ▶ **Supplemental Awards** recognise learning that is additional to a major award and could, for example, relate to the updating of knowledge or skills, or to continuing professional development.

Further information on the National Framework of Qualifications may be found [here](#).¹²

12 <https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/NFQ-Standards-and-Guidelines-.aspx>

Appendix 5:

National Framework of Qualifications Designing Programmes for Inclusion in the Framework – Frequently Asked Questions¹³ (extract)

Introduction

The following section sets out some examples of the questions that have arisen for higher education practitioners when undertaking the process of designing programmes for inclusion in the Framework.

When constructing major awards, which should be designed first, the programme or the module learning outcomes?

In order to give coherence to a programme, a top down approach is probably the more logical sequencing, certainly for new programmes. The design of clear programme learning outcomes, based on knowledge, skill and competence, provides a basis for direct mapping to Framework award-type descriptors and Framework levels. Modules that collectively address these outcomes can then be designed and articulated as module outcomes.

In redesigning existing programmes, the sequence may be the other way around, where a collection of related modules is being brought together to construct a programme, and the programme learning outcomes are being derived from the combined module outcomes and then mapped to the appropriate Framework award type/level.

Do all of the eight sub-strands of knowledge, skill and competence have to feature in the programme outcomes of a major award?

The majority of new or existing major award are likely to accommodate all of the sub-strands, but the balance of emphasis in their representation will depend on the individual programme. Also, individual sub-strands of a major award may be at a different level to the overall level of the major award-type. However, the overall package of learning outcomes for a named award needs to correspond to those of the award-type to which it belongs.

13 UCC Policies and Guidelines Governing Academic Programmes (updated November 2018), pp. 9-10.

Do all of the eight sub-strands of knowledge, skill and competence have to feature in every module of a major award?

It is extremely unlikely that all modules will reflect all of the sub-strands associated with the programme they combine to make. The function of the modules is to cumulatively address the programme learning outcomes of a major award.

Do all of the eight sub-strands of knowledge, skill and competence have to feature in the programme outcomes of a minor, supplemental and special purpose award?

Minor, supplemental and special purpose awards may often specify programme outcomes with fewer than the eight sub-strands. In some cases, their focus may be narrow and only a small number of sub-strands may be defined. If only one sub-strand is defined for the award then the level to which the award-type is allocated is decided on the basis of that strand. If more than one sub-strand is defined, a best-fit principle will apply. This will take into account the purpose and context for developing the award (and, where relevant, its link to other awards).

Is a programme designed using the Bologna Framework's cycle descriptors the same as using the National Framework of Qualifications level indicators and award-type descriptors for reference?

The relationship between national qualifications frameworks and European Frameworks is outlined in detail [here](#)¹⁴. This construct indicates that it makes sense for the Irish National Framework of Qualifications to take precedence when identifying a reference point for the design or redesign of programmes for inclusion in the Framework and for subsequent recognition in the context of the European frameworks¹⁵. The greater level of detail provided in the Framework descriptors ultimately makes it an easier framework to use as a reference for programme design; it accommodates the design of minor, special purpose or supplemental types and makes explicit how the suite of national awards relates to one another.

If a programme is designed for inclusion at Level x, do all of the outcomes associated with the programme have to be at that level?

There is no requirement that all of the outcomes of a programme at a given level (major or minor, special purpose or supplemental) need to be written to that level. With regard to major awards, 60 credits of learning outcomes need

14 Irish National Framework of Qualifications, <https://nfq.qqi.ie/>.

15 University Sector Framework Implementation Network, http://www.nfqnetwork.ie/Section_C/Default.146.html

to be at the level of the award; for minor, special purpose or supplemental awards the balance of learning outcomes need to be at the level at which the award is included. The distribution of level outcomes across a series of modules that make up programme is a matter for the programme designer, in response to the needs of the programme and the anticipated learner. There are often introductory and intermediate aspects of a programme that will be at a lower level than the overall programme level. Similarly, some programmes incorporate exit points, which are at lower levels of the Framework.

How are exit points built into a programme designed to be included at a given level of the Framework?

If a programme has exit points at which awards can be made, the sequence of designing outcomes from the top of the programme still provides a logical starting point. When the exit points are being built in, they should also be accompanied by programme learning outcomes. It is important when designing a major award with exit points to keep in mind the minimum of 60 credits being at the level at which the award is included in the Framework.

Are the Framework level indicators designed to be threshold level indicators?

The Framework level-indicators (and award-type descriptors) are considered to indicate the 'typical' learning outcomes associated with the successful attainment of an award at a given level on the Framework, rather than being indicators of 'threshold' or minimum learning outcome attainment. This distinction has important implications for assessment design and for the development of assessment criteria.

How is an Ordinary Bachelor Degree with 180 credits differentiated from an Honours Bachelor Degree with 180 credits?

The Framework includes an Ordinary Bachelor Degree award-type with 180 credits at level 7 on the Framework. At level 8, the Honours Bachelor Degree has been allocated a range of credit from 180-240 credits. If you are designing an Honours Bachelor Degree with 180 credits, the key element that distinguishes it from an Ordinary Bachelor Degree with the same credit amount is the learning outcomes. Those associated with the Honours Bachelor Degree should be evidently at the higher level. It is likely that all of the outcomes in the final year of a 180 credit Honours Bachelor Degree will be of a level 8 standard.

Appendix 6:

European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) on approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards (extract)

1.2 Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards¹⁶

Standard

Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes. The programmes should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes. The qualifications resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated, and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.

Guidelines

Study programmes are at the core of the higher education institutions' teaching mission. They provide students with both academic knowledge and skills including those that are transferable which may influence their personal development and may be applied to their future careers.

Programmes

- ▶ Are designed with overall programme objectives that are in line with the institutional strategy and have explicit intended learning outcomes;
- ▶ Are designed by involving students and other stakeholders in the work;
- ▶ Benefit from external expertise and reference points;
- ▶ Reflect the four purposes of higher education of the Council of Europe (cf. Scope and Concepts);¹⁷
- ▶ Are designed so that they enable smooth student progression;
- ▶ Include well-structured placement opportunities where appropriate;
- ▶ Are subject to a formal institutional approval process.

16 ENQA (2015), *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*.

17 Ibid, p. 8.

Appendix 7:

Guidelines and Criteria for the appointment of Extern Assessors to review programmes of study leading to NUI qualifications

NUI policy for quality assurance recognises that NUI Recognised Colleges have the primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance; the University, in turn, as the designated awarding body has quality responsibilities for the qualifications that it awards.

1. Criteria and Guidelines for the appointment of Extern Assessors

- 1.1. The Extern Assessor should be a specialist in the relevant field of study, have appropriate academic standing and expertise, and sufficient university experience to adjudicate on comparability of standards.
- 1.2. The Extern Assessor should not normally be appointed from a School/ College where a member of staff in the host School/College is currently serving as an Examiner.
- 1.3. The Extern Assessor may not be involved in the teaching of a subject/ degree programme, which he/she will be called on to moderate.
- 1.4. An individual should not be appointed as an Extern Assessor if his/ her impartiality could be called into question because of a personal or professional relationship with a member of staff or a student in the NUI institution concerned.
- 1.5. An individual who has retired, but who remains active in academic life and continues to engage in teaching, research or other academic activities relevant to the Extern Assessor role, is eligible for appointment as an Extern Assessor.
- 1.6. All programmes in a Recognised College leading to major awards in the NFQ will be reviewed by two Extern Assessors, one of whom will be appointed by NUI.
- 1.7. Programmes in a Recognised College leading to minor, special purpose or supplemental awards in excess of 60 ECTS credits will be reviewed by one Extern Assessor and will be appointed by the Recognised College in consultation with NUI.

- 1.8.** Shorter programmes, less than 60 ECTS, in a Recognised College and leading to minor, special purpose or supplemental awards in the NFQ will require support by an Extern Assessor who is expert in the relevant discipline area. The Extern Assessor can be (i) appointed independently by the Recognised College or (ii) acting as an NUI appointed extern examiner for an existing programme in a related discipline area in the Recognised College.

2. The Role and Responsibilities of the Extern Assessor

- 2.1.** The primary role of the Extern Assessor is to act as independent discipline expert.
- 2.2.** The Extern Assessor is appointed by the University to make recommendations to Senate in respect of new programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels proposed by the Recognised Colleges.
- 2.3.** All Extern Assessors will be required to report their findings to the NUI Registrar. The Registrar will report the recommendations regarding the approval of individual programmes to Senate.
- 2.4.** The Extern Assessor, appointed by NUI, will be provided with the relevant documentation, including material submitted by the Recognised College, on the proposed new programme and issued guidelines in respect of the report on the programme.
- 2.5.** The Extern Assessor will be invited to comment on any aspect of the programme proposal which may include the following:
 - ▶ Admissions criteria and the targeted student market.
 - ▶ The suitability of programme content in the light of the aims and objectives of the programme.
 - ▶ The alignment of module and programme learning outcomes with assessment methods and the suitability of the assessment instruments.
 - ▶ Whether the proposed programme meets the academic quality and standards of similar programmes offered by other institutions.

3. The report of the Extern Assessor

- 3.1. As part of the review process, the Extern Assessor is invited to submit a detailed report outlining his/her findings and make recommendations to NUI with regard to the approval of the programme. For reference, suggested criteria are included in section 4 below.
- 3.2. The Extern Assessor is encouraged to liaise with representatives in the Recognised College and/or NUI to satisfy themselves on any specific queries he/she may have in respect of the programme, prior to the submission of their recommendations.
- 3.3. The Extern Assessor, appointed by NUI, is requested to send their report directly to NUI in the first instance.
- 3.4. A copy of the report will be circulated to the relevant representatives in the Recognised College so that any issues raised can be addressed. The response to any issues raised will be referred back to the Extern Assessor for further consideration before a final recommendation is made.
- 3.5. It should be noted that the Extern Assessor's report may be:
 - ▶ Subject to the Irish Freedom of Information Act, 2014¹⁸ and that, accordingly, any person named in the report will be entitled to have access to it.
 - ▶ Used as part of the University's processes of quality audit and quality assessment.
 - ▶ Subject to the Irish Data Protection Act, 2018¹⁹ and the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Regulation (EU) 2016/679). Please refer to NUI's general Data Protection Policy, available at www.nui.ie.

18 Freedom of Information Act, 2014.

19 Data Protection Act, 2018.

4. Suggested criteria for the Extern Assessor report following a review of the proposed new programme

Listed below are suggested criteria for consideration by the Extern Assessor, however, it should be noted that this list is not exhaustive and any additional comments are welcome:

- 4.1. The validity and relevance of the overall aims and objectives of the programme;
- 4.2. The suitability of programme content in the light of the aims and objectives of the programme;
- 4.3. The alignment of module and programme learning outcomes with assessment methods and the suitability of the assessment instruments;
- 4.4. The provisions for teaching and learning in terms of the intended learning outcomes;
- 4.5. The provision of suitable student supports and guidance;
- 4.6. The provision of adequate staffing and other resources for the programme to ensure the proposed learning outcomes can be achieved;
- 4.7. Admissions criteria and the targeted student market;
- 4.8. Whether the proposed programme meets the academic quality and standards of similar programmes offered by other higher education institutions, having regard to the relevant current national and international benchmarks.

Appendix 8:

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