



Draft operational description for Integrated quality and enhancement review of higher education in colleges of further education in Northern Ireland

Consultation

February 2010

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Introduction

1 This consultation document provides a draft operational description of the review process, Integrated quality and enhancement review (IQER), proposed for the review of higher education in further education colleges in Northern Ireland from academic year 2010-11.

2 The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) has asked the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) to apply the IQER review method, used currently in England, to higher education in further education colleges in Northern Ireland. The main purpose of introducing IQER in Northern Ireland is to ensure that each of the six regional further education colleges (colleges) manages the student learning experience and discharges its responsibilities for the academic standards and quality of its higher education provision effectively.

3 This operational description and questionnaire will be circulated during January 2010 with a deadline for comments by March 2010. The analysis of the responses will be considered carefully and will be shared with representatives of the colleges, their awarding bodies, DEL and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) at a focus group in April 2010. After this, revisions will be made to the operational description and a review handbook will be published at the end of June 2010.

4 Colleges do not have powers to award higher education qualifications. They work with one or more higher education institutions and other awarding bodies such as Edexcel and professional statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) such as the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. The awarding bodies retain responsibility for the academic standards of all awards granted in their names and for ensuring that the quality of learning opportunities offered through collaborative arrangements is sufficient to enable students to achieve the academic standards required for their awards. IQER focuses on how colleges discharge their responsibilities within the context of their agreements with awarding bodies.

5 QAA reviews the responsibilities of higher education institution awarding bodies within these relationships through Institutional audit. Further details of Institutional audit can be found at www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/default.asp IQER is designed to be complementary to Institutional audit and not duplicate it. There is more information about the relationships between IQER and Institutional audit, and IQER and other awarding bodies in paragraph 40.

6 Against this backdrop, the overarching aims of IQER are to:

- support colleges in evaluating and improving the management of their higher education, for the benefit of students, and within the context of their agreements with awarding bodies
- foster good working relationships between colleges and their awarding bodies, for the benefit of students
- enable DEL to discharge its statutory responsibility for ensuring that provision is made for assessing the quality of education provided by the institutions it funds
- provide public information.

- 7 To realise these aims, IQER has three objectives:
- to engage colleges in a process of self-evaluation and peer review focused on reviewing, evaluating and improving the management of their higher education provision
 - to produce reports of these review activities
 - to contribute to public information about the academic standards and quality of higher education in colleges.

Scope

8 The IQER method described in this paper will apply to the six regional further education colleges in Northern Ireland. Each regional college will take part in one full IQER during the period 2010-11 to 2012-13. The review process will address all programmes at levels 4 to 7 of both the National Qualifications Framework and *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, with the exception of teacher and tutor education programmes. The review process will not include programmes leading to postgraduate awards by research. DEL has asked QAA to start the programme by carrying out the first Developmental engagements in colleges from September 2010. This means that the earliest review visit to a college will be February 2011.

9 The Developmental review which QAA carried out at each college during 2008-09 will be followed up in an exercise during spring 2010. This will consist of a short visit by a QAA officer and a review coordinator to review the progress each college has made in implementing the action plan developed after the Developmental review. The feedback resulting from this visit will make an important contribution to each college's preparation for IQER. QAA will liaise with ETI when scheduling these visits and future reviews.

The review method

10 IQER usually takes place in two complementary stages called **Developmental engagement** and **Summative review**. These stages are scheduled about one calendar year apart to allow time for the college to act on the recommendations made by the Developmental engagement team and to have evidence on the impact of this action available for the Summative review stage. Each college's complete IQER review will take place over three academic years.

11 The emphasis of the Developmental engagement is on supporting the college in developing its higher education provision and its management of the student learning experience in an open and collegial way. Summative review is primarily concerned with reviewing, and making judgements about, the effectiveness of the college's procedures for the management of the student learning experience and their implementation. While there are some methodological variations between the Developmental engagement and the Summative review stages which reflect these different emphases, both share a number of common elements. In particular, both stages of IQER:

- prioritise the interests of students
- focus on a college's management of the student learning experience for its higher education provision
- acknowledge the shared responsibilities of awarding bodies and colleges, and seek to enhance these relationships
- share three core themes: academic standards, quality of learning opportunities and public information

- are based on the college's self-evaluation and a student written submission
- assume that the college and its awarding bodies are already managing the provision effectively according to the expectations of the Academic Infrastructure
- are conducted by teams of peers with current or recent experience of managing, developing, delivering and/or assessing higher education in colleges and/or higher education institutions
- include visits by review teams to the college
- lead to evaluation and written reports
- promote enhancement and quality improvement.

Core themes

12 IQER teams (teams) will manage and focus their enquiries within this process according to the three core themes: academic standards, quality of learning opportunities and public information. Core themes in IQER have the same function as Key areas in Developmental review 2008-09.

- **Academic standards** refers to the level of achievement a student has to reach in order to achieve a particular award or qualification.
- **Quality of learning opportunities** considers the effectiveness of everything that is done or provided by the college to ensure that its students have the best possible opportunity to meet the stated outcomes of their programmes and the academic standards of the awards they are seeking.
- **Public information** is information about academic programmes, academic standards and quality of learning opportunities which is available to the general public and/or to students whether in print or electronic form.

13 Summative review will address the three core themes for all of the higher level programmes funded by DEL. Although the same three core skills will be reported on in the Developmental engagement, colleges will be asked to apply the Developmental engagement to only one aspect of their provision. This is partly to allow the team to consider the management of higher education in depth in one area of provision and also to allow the college to focus the Developmental engagement on the part of the provision they will find most helpful for their further development. Colleges may chose one focus for their Developmental engagement from the following themes:

- student assessment
- parity of experience for students enrolled for different modes of study, such as full-time, part-time, blended learning and work-based learning
- professional development for higher education teaching, learning and assessment.

14 Once a college has chosen the focus for the Developmental engagement, QAA will ask the college to propose three Lines of enquiry. Lines of enquiry in IQER are similar to the thematic enquiries in 2008-09 Developmental review. Colleges will be asked to assign one Line of enquiry to each of the core themes.

Review teams

15 The reviewers will work in teams, with the work of each team led by a coordinator. The size of the review teams will depend on the number of students enrolled on higher education programmes and the range of programmes. The Developmental engagement team usually comprises between five and seven people: the coordinator and equal numbers of reviewers appointed by QAA, and nominees who are members of staff from the college under review. The team will spend 2.5 days at the college.

16 The number of members of the Summative review team will be between five and seven and will comprise the coordinator and up to six external reviewers who will visit the college for either 2.5 or 3 days. Summative review teams do not include members of staff of the college under review. Instead the college is invited to nominate a facilitator to act as a single point of contact between the college and the team during the visit and beforehand. QAA advises that one of the college's nominees for the Developmental engagement becomes the facilitator to provide continuity between the stages of the IQER process.

17 Each team will include at least one reviewer with responsibility for higher education programmes in a college in Northern Ireland at the time of the review. The coordinators will help to ensure consistency both within and across the review teams. A QAA officer will assume overall responsibility for the management of the review process providing guidance and support as required.

18 Before a review visit, the college will be informed as to the proposed membership of the team and will be asked to declare potential conflicts of interest, as defined by QAA. In the interests of continuity, wherever possible, the coordinator and at least one reviewer will be common to the Developmental engagement and the Summative review.

19 QAA will draw reviewers from those who have recently been trained as reviewers for England, Northern Ireland and Wales. QAA will also select additional reviewers for training from nominations made by educational and other appropriate organisations.

20 QAA will publish details of the experience, knowledge and understanding criteria for reviewers. These will be similar to those for IQER in England and will also closely match those for the identification of team members for Developmental reviews carried out in Northern Ireland in 2008-09. Details of the person specification for each role in an IQER team are available at www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/IQER/handbook08/Handbook2008.pdf

21 QAA will provide training in Belfast for coordinators, reviewers, nominees and facilitators in accordance with its policy published at www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/policy/TDpolicy.asp Reviewer and facilitator training seeks to assist review team members and facilitators to build on their existing skills and apply them to the IQER process.

Briefing

22 In June 2010, QAA will hold a briefing event in Belfast to which all the colleges and their awarding bodies will be invited. The purpose of the briefing is to prepare colleges, including representatives of their higher education students, for IQER. As well as providing an introduction to the whole review process, the briefing will pay particular attention to the first stage of IQER, the Developmental engagement. This will include further guidance on identifying lines of enquiry, preparing the self-evaluation, and helping students to prepare a

written submission. The briefing also allows college staff and students to meet the coordinator who will be responsible for managing the review on behalf of QAA.

Self-evaluation

23 Self-evaluation is at the heart of the IQER process. QAA is concerned that the self-evaluation provides a sound basis for the review and shows that the college is a self-critical organisation. QAA will not be prescriptive about the format of the self-evaluation. Where colleges have developed one self-evaluation for the whole of the college's provision at both further and higher education levels, IQER teams will work with this document. In order that the team can focus on the college's higher education management processes, it will be essential that any references to higher education are well signposted within the self-evaluation.

24 Normally colleges will wish to update their self-evaluation for the Summative review stage of the review process. This will enable the colleges to comment on changes in the arrangements for higher education since the Developmental engagement and to show that the college is a responsive organisation by discussing the impact of the action taken after the Developmental engagement and the impact of this action.

25 QAA has recently contributed to developing a guidance note for colleges for the development of the Whole College Quality Improvement Plan. This document will provide valuable contextual information and other evidence to support IQER. QAA will provide further guidance on developing a self-evaluation in the IQER handbook to be published as a result of this consultation and also at the briefing event.

Student written submission

26 Students play an important part in the IQER process. In addition to discussing their experience of higher education with the review team during the IQER visits, they also have the opportunity to provide a student written submission. The student written submission is voluntary. QAA, however, encourages students to present IQER teams with this written briefing, typically three pages long for each of the two stages of IQER, about 12 weeks before the team visits the college. QAA provides advice to students in English colleges on the preparation of a written submission and QAA intends to provide similar guidance for students in Northern Ireland colleges. Examples of guidance for students may be found at www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/IQER/sws/sws_student_guide.pdf

Review visits

27 The review method requires IQER teams to visit the college to engage in discussions with staff who have responsibilities for managing and delivering higher education programmes. The teams also hold confidential meetings with representative groups of students. Discussions will focus on questions derived from the team's analysis of the college's self-evaluation and of the student written submission, as well as from any additional material provided by the college.

28 The team will sample students' assessed work as part of the Developmental engagement and may also need to look at a further sample at the Summative review stage. The team may also carry out direct observation of some elements of the higher education provision, for example learning resources. QAA review teams rarely carry out teaching observations. When a team member requires evidence of teaching quality, they will usually gain evidence from a documentary study of procedures such as the college's records of the observation of higher education teaching and learning, the analysis of student evaluation

questionnaires and other arrangements for gathering feedback. Exceptionally, the team may carry out class observations. This will usually only be necessary if the college cannot demonstrate that it has sound systems in place to assess teaching competence.

Conclusions, judgements and reporting

29 Towards the end of the visit for each stage of the review (Developmental engagement and Summative review), the team will identify areas of good practice and recommendations for improvement. At the end of the Developmental engagement, the coordinator, accompanied by the other team members, will make a short oral report about the team's findings to the college. These will then be incorporated into the report and the college will be asked to prepare an action plan to build on the good practice within the college and to take action to address the recommendations. The action plan will be incorporated into the final version of the report which will be distributed to the college, its awarding bodies, DEL and ETI within 10 weeks of the end of the visit. The Developmental engagement stage neither leads to judgements nor to a published report. It is, in effect, a working document which the college and the reviewers will use as part of the information to support the formal reporting stage of IQER, the Summative review.

30 **Good practice** in IQER is defined as practice which the team regards as making a particularly effective contribution to the college's management of the student learning experience of higher education in the context of the college under review. It is also practice which is worthy of wider dissemination within or beyond the college.

31 **Recommendations** for improving the college's management of its higher education provision are categorised as essential, advisable or desirable according to priority.

- **Essential recommendations** refer to important matters which the team believes are currently putting quality and/or standards at risk and which require urgent corrective action.
- **Advisable recommendations** refer to matters which the team believes have the potential to put quality and/or standards at risk and require preventive, corrective action.
- **Desirable recommendations** refer to matters which the team believes have the potential to enhance quality, build capacity and/or further secure standards.

32 Essential recommendations may lead to DEL asking QAA to carry out an extra Developmental engagement at a college because the recommendations indicate that quality and/or standards are at risk.

33 The Summative review stage results in a summary of the areas of good practice for sharing within the college and in recommendations for improvement; however, there is no formal oral report to the college at the end of the visit. The Summative review team normally meets off the college site one week after the visit to agree summaries of evidence and to make provisional judgements, one for each of the three core themes. The provisional judgements are confidence, limited confidence or no confidence.

Confidence

Where a college is found to be managing effectively its responsibilities for the delivery of the academic standards and the quality of its higher education provision, the prospects for the future continuation of this appear good, and it has rigorous mechanisms for the management of its DEL-funded programmes in accordance with awarding bodies' requirements, the provisional judgement will be confidence.

Limited confidence

Where significant concerns exist about aspects of a college's current or likely future management of quality and/or delivery of the standards of its DEL-funded higher education programmes, the provisional judgement will be limited confidence.

No confidence

Where major concerns exist about significant aspects of a college's current or likely future capacity to secure and maintain quality and/or deliver standards of its DEL-funded programmes, the provisional judgement will be no confidence.

34 Differentiated judgements will only be made where a team regards a college's management of the standards and/or quality and/or public information of the programmes of study of one awarding body to be substantially different from those of another.

35 If the provisional judgements are limited or no confidence, the team will make a second visit to the college to gain more evidence to complete the review. This second visit will take place no later than 15 weeks from the completion of the first visit. It will last for two days and will focus on gaining further evidence about the concerns which have led to the provisional judgements of limited or no confidence. The team will finalise the judgements by the end of the visit and the coordinator, accompanied by the whole team, will report these orally to the college together with the conclusions and evidence which support them.

36 The college and its awarding bodies will be given the opportunity to comment on a draft report for both the Developmental engagement and for the Summative review around four weeks after the end of the visit.

37 The Summative review report, including the judgements and the college's action plan to build on good practice and to take forward the recommendations, will be published on QAA's website and distributed to the college, its awarding bodies, DEL and ETI around 15 weeks from the last day of team visiting.

Follow up to IQER

38 If the final Summative judgements are of confidence for each of the core themes, the college will be asked to comment on the impact of its action resulting from IQER in its self-evaluation and this will be followed up by QAA in the next review round. If, however, the review results in outcomes of limited or no confidence in one or more of the three core themes, the college takes part in formal follow-up action to demonstrate its progress in implementing the action plan and the impact of this action on the students' education. QAA will carry out a formal programme of follow-up action to check the college's progress in implementing the action plan. The awarding body will normally wish to take part in formal follow up to any limited or no confidence judgement(s) related to its award(s).

Awarding body involvement

39 Awarding bodies may wish to support their partner colleges through IQER, by assisting, for example, with the preparation of the self-evaluation and by attending various IQER events, including review visits. IQER teams will be pleased to meet awarding body representatives at any stage of the process, and occasionally may encourage awarding body representatives to attend particular events should they consider it as likely to aid their understanding of the college's responsibilities. The participation of the awarding body should be considered against the maturity of the relationship between the partners; the extent of the

responsibilities which the awarding body has conferred on the college; and the accuracy and completeness of existing written evidence about these responsibilities. As a minimum, QAA will make sure that awarding bodies are invited to the briefing event, which will provide further guidance on the role of awarding bodies. However, awarding bodies are not required to attend the briefing, or any subsequent events. QAA has no desire to make unreasonable requests for awarding body involvement in this method which focuses on the responsibilities of colleges.

40 QAA reviews the responsibilities of higher education institution awarding bodies within these relationships through Institutional audit. IQER assumes no preferred model for higher education provision, other than that it expects that any model must permit the awarding body to assure itself about the standards and quality of its collaborative provision with colleges. Further details of a higher education institution's responsibilities for its awards can be found in the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section2/default.asp

41 In order to assist colleges and IQER teams to understand the responsibilities which Edexcel confers on colleges, Edexcel has produced a short guidance note available at [www.edexcel.com/iwantto/I%20want%20to%20%20Tasks/Specialist%20Paper%2012%20-%20IQER%20Self%20Evaluation%20Preparation%20-%20Guide%20for%20Centres%20\(2009-10\).pdf](http://www.edexcel.com/iwantto/I%20want%20to%20%20Tasks/Specialist%20Paper%2012%20-%20IQER%20Self%20Evaluation%20Preparation%20-%20Guide%20for%20Centres%20(2009-10).pdf)

QAA encourages colleges to draw on this guidance note in describing the policies and procedures they have adopted with respect to Edexcel awards in their self-evaluations. Edexcel will provide further information to colleges about the contribution Edexcel officers will be able to make to the IQER process. QAA also recommends that colleges discuss with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies if they wish to be involved in the IQER process.

Evaluation of the process

42 QAA will encourage institutions and reviewers to contribute to the evaluation of IQER review process by inviting comment on the reviews in which they have taken part.

Complaints and representations

43 QAA requires each team to conduct the review in accordance with the published method. A college may make a representation against a no confidence judgement to QAA Board. Details of how representations are considered are available at www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/policy/representationsIQER.asp
Details of QAA's complaints procedures are also available through this weblink.

Indicative timetable

Task	Target completion dates
Consultation on Operational description	February to April 2010
Consultation focus group	End of April 2010
Review scheduling	May 2010
Briefing event	June 2010
Final draft handbook available	July 2010
Training event	September – October 2010
Self-evaluations and optional student written submission submitted for first colleges to have Developmental engagements scheduled for spring/summer 2011	End of October 2010
Preparatory meeting for Developmental engagements scheduled for spring/summer 2011	November 2010 to March 2011
Developmental engagement visits take place	February to June 2011
Review reports finalised and distributed	April to August 2011
Evaluation focus group	September 2011
First colleges submit self-evaluation and optional student written submission for Summative review	October 2012
First Summative review visits	February to June 2013
First Summative review reports published (assuming second visit is not required)	June to October 2013
Evaluation focus group	September 2013

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