Document Title	Development & Validation of Programmes (QQI programmes only)
Policy Area	Area 3: Programmes of Education and Training
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Applies to	☐ All ☒ Specific *(QQI programmes only)*
	☒ Staff only ☐ Learners only ☐ Staff and Learners

Document Owner	Director of Quality & Academic Affairs
Approved by	Academic Council

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Related legislation, policies, procedures, guidelines and local protocols	- Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines (2016), QQI
	- Sector Specific Independent/Private Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines (2016), QQI
	- Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012
	- European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), et. al (2015), Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)
	- Policies and criteria for the validation of programmes of education and training (2016), QQI
	- Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Blended and Fully Online Programmes (2023), QQI

Table of Contents

1. PURPOSE

This document sets out SQT's policy and procedure for the development and validation of new QQI programmes. This seeks to ensure that all programmes undergo a robust design, development and approval process in line with 'Policies and criteria for the validation of programmes of education and training (2017), Quality and Qualifications Ireland'.

2. SCOPE/APPLICATION

This policy and procedure applies to the design and approval of QQI programmes only. A separate, adapted policy applies for the development of non-QQI programmes.

3. DEFINITIONS

- **Validation** is a regulatory process that determines whether or not a particular QQI award can be offered in respect of a provider's programme of education and training (programme).

- **Programme of education and training** is a process by which a learner acquires knowledge, skill or competence and includes a course of study, a course of instruction and an apprenticeship[1].

- **MIPLO: Minimum Intended Programme Learning Outcome** define the minimum learning outcomes for a particular programme at the programme level. These must always be specified. If the programme allows substantial choice, there may need to be variant forms of the minimum intended programme learning outcomes — e.g. a programme might allow a person to choose from a number of specialisations. MIPLOs must be consistent with the applicable award standard.

- **MIMLO: Minimum Intended Module Learning Outcome** are assessable learning outcomes that are specified with each module. Learners must demonstrate that they have achieved all module outcomes.

- **Blended Learning:** A type of education where teaching, learning and assessment occur using a mix of online and on-site learning with the online components taking place synchronously, asynchronously, or in combination

- **Fully Online:** A type of education where teaching, learning and assessment occur online, either synchronously, asynchronously, or in combination and where no on-site instruction is required.

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[1] As defined in Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012

- **Synchronous Learning**: Tutors and learners gathering at the same time online and interacting in "real-time".

- **Asynchronous Learning:** Learners accessing online materials at their own pace and interacting with their Tutor and peers at times that work around other commitments.

4. POLICY

In line with its mission, SQT is committed to developing and delivering a variety of relevant, effective, challenging and innovative programmes of education and training.

Whilst the validation processes and criteria vary according to each awarding body, appropriate due diligence is maintained with respect to the development of all new programmes. Rigorous and systematic processes and guidelines are in place to support this process. SQT is equally committed to delivering programmes through a variety of formats, including blended and fully online learning environments. These formats ensure flexibility and accessibility for learners while maintaining the high-quality standards of all SQT programmes.

Consideration of new programmes for development in all modalities (on-site, blended and fully online) must be assessed under several broad criteria as follows:

1. **Alignment with SQT's Strategy:** The development of online or blended programmes should align with SQT's broader strategic goals, such as expanding digital learning and offering flexible learning options.

2. **Impact on Existing Programmes:** Consider how transitioning to online or blended formats will affect current in-person offerings. Ensure that new modalities complement traditional delivery without causing duplication or confusion for learners.

3. **Differentiation:** Ensure that the online or blended programme offers a unique value proposition compared to existing offerings and other similar programmes.

4. **Operational and Financial Resources:** Assess technology infrastructure needs, including learning management systems and multimedia tools. Account for content development costs, such as creating interactive materials and ensuring accessibility compliance.

5. **Viability for Learners:** Consider the digital literacy of the target learner cohort and provide necessary training.

6. **Compliance with Quality Standards:** Ensure the programme meets QQI requirements for online learning, including standards for assessment integrity and accessibility (e.g., WCAG compliance).

7. **Engagement and Interaction:** Develop strategies to maintain learner engagement and tutor presence in the online environment through interactive content, forums, and live sessions.

The following principles apply to the development of all programmes:

- Programmes are developed based on evidenced needs.

- A fundamental aspect of programme design is that the minimum intended programme learning outcomes (MIPLOs) are consistent with the award standards. The minimum intended module learning outcomes (MIMLOs) must contribute to the programme learning outcomes, see stage 3 below. For blended and online programmes, the design must also consider the integration of technology and multimedia to support the achievement of the MIPLOs and MIMLOs. Interactive content, such as videos, quizzes, and simulations, will be developed in collaboration with the Multimedia Content Developer (MMD) to enhance learner engagement and accessibility.

- Programmes are subject to internal evaluation and approval prior to submission for validation

- Programmes must comply with requirements of Access, Transfer & Progression (ATP).

- Programmes are subject to ongoing monitoring and periodic review. SQT implements additional monitoring for blended and online programmes to assess learner engagement, digital content effectiveness, and platform performance. Continuous feedback from learners and Tutors will be used to make improvements to both content and delivery methods in the online space.

5. RESPONSIBILITY

The following responsibilities apply with respect of the programme development and validation process:

- The rationale and business case for the development of all new programmes (accredited and non-accredited) is reviewed by the Senior Management Team.

- Where significant financial investment is required, approval is sought from the Board of Directors prior to proposing the programme to Academic Council for consideration.

- The Programme Development team is responsible for the development of the programme and relevant documentation. This process is managed by the Programme Director with oversight from the Director of Quality and Academic Affairs.

- The Director of Quality and Academic Affairs is responsible for organising a 'mock validation event' (where relevant) and internal self-evaluation of the programme prior to submission to QQI

- All submission documents are subject to approval by the Academic Council prior to submission to QQI.

- All communication with QQI and/or the Expert Panel is carried out via the Director of Quality and Academic Affairs.

6. PROCEDURE FOR THE DESIGN, DEVELOPMENT AND APPROVAL OF NEW PROGRAMMES

SQT adapts a systematic approach to the development of new programmes. An overview of this process is presented in Figure 1 and is followed by a detailed description of each stage.

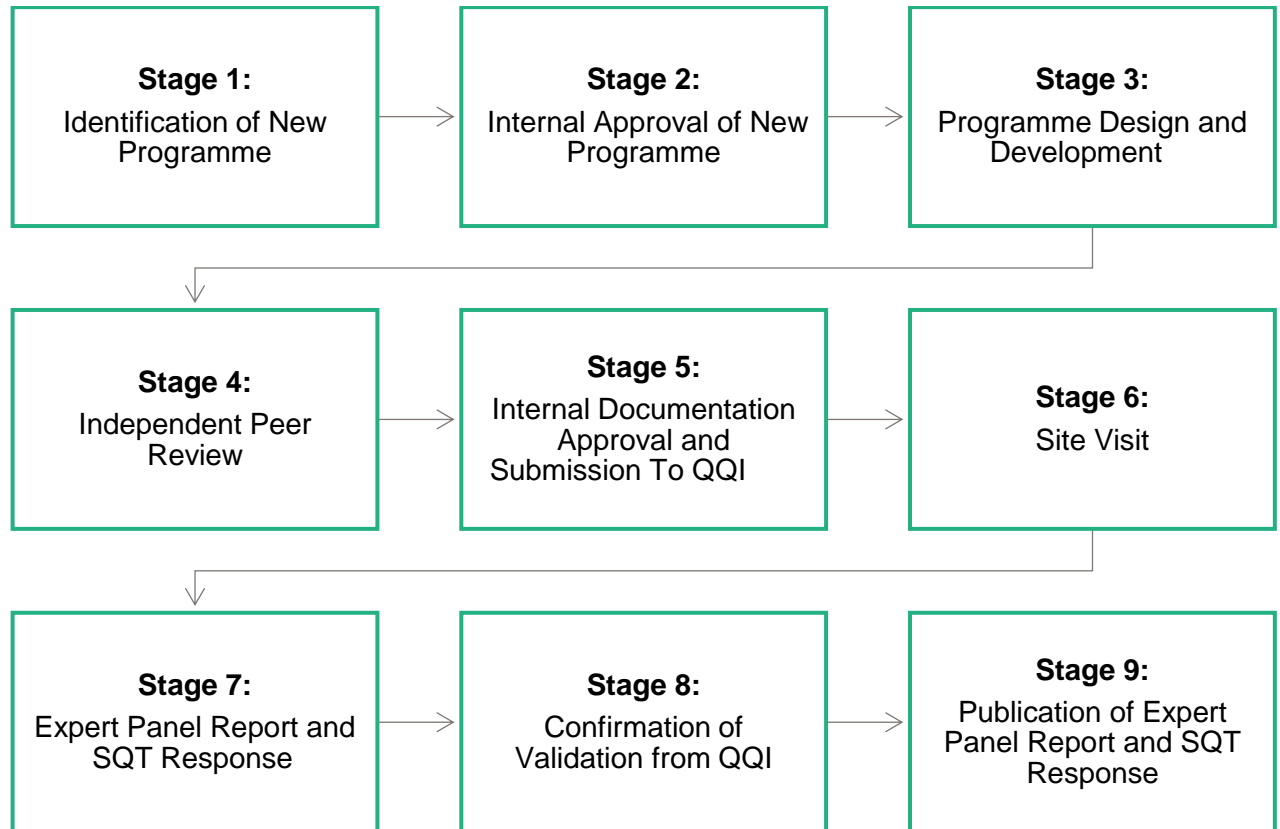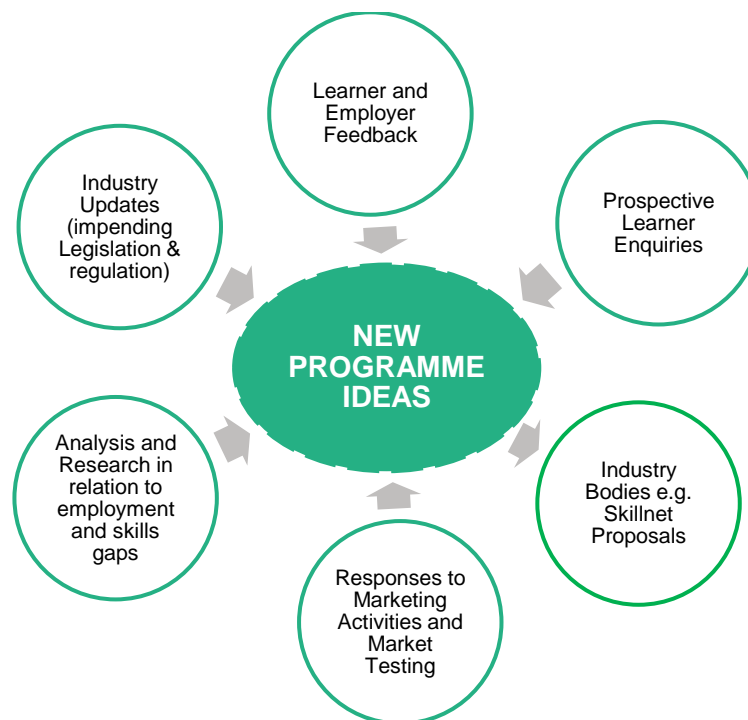| **Stage 1:** Identification of New Programme	**Stage 2:** Internal Approval of New Programme	**Stage 3:** Programme Design and Development
Stage 4: Independent Peer Review	**Stage 5:** Internal Documentation Approval and Submission To QQI	**Stage 6:** Site Visit
Stage 7: Expert Panel Report and SQT Response	**Stage 8:** Confirmation of Validation from QQI	**Stage 9:** Publication of Expert Panel Report and SQT Response

Figure 1: New Programme Development Model (QQI Programmes)

6.1. Stage 1: Identification of New Programme

Ongoing external stakeholder engagement allows SQT to keep abreast of industry requirements. In doing so, it provides a unique opportunity to identify potential skills and knowledge gaps and address these through the development of relevant programmes. Ideas and demand for the development of new programmes originate from the on-going monitoring of current programmes as well as from engagement with companies, Programme Directors, Tutors, and other relevant stakeholders. This is summarised in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: New Programme Development - Needs Identification

6.2. Stage 2: Internal Approval of New Programme
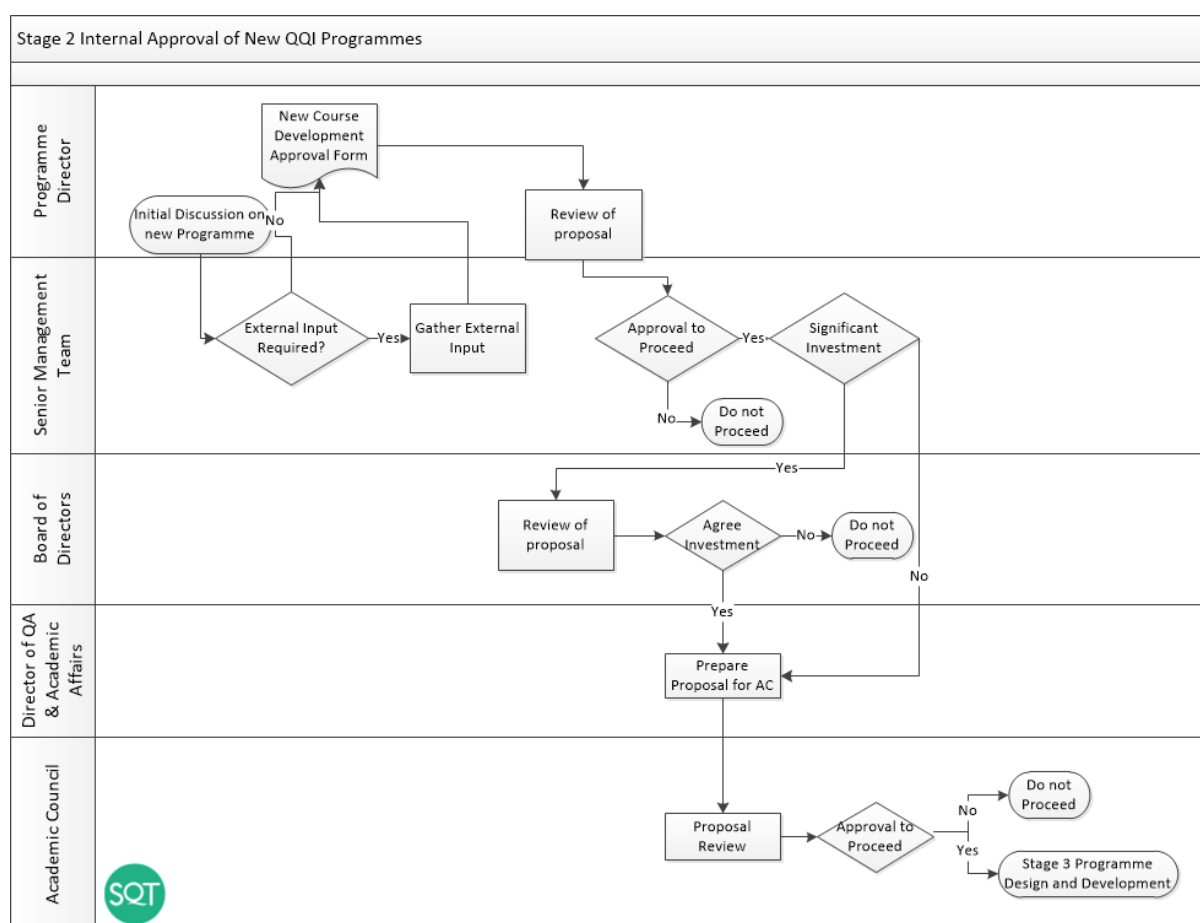
Step 2.1: Development of New Course Approval

A New Course Development Approval Form (F28) is completed for all new proposed programmes or for courses that require significant modification. This form is generally completed by the Programme Director and may involve discussions with the Senior Management Team prior to form completion.

Step 2.2: Review of Proposal by Senior Management Team

This proposal is firstly reviewed by the Senior Management Team and discussions are held with the Programme Director to ascertain the following:

- Relevance of proposed programme to SQT's vision and strategic development plan.

- Relevance of proposed programme to SQT's market and industry needs.

- Learner / Employer demand for the programme.

- Whether similar or related programmes are offered by other providers or within SQT.

- Accreditation body requirements.

- Implications of providing the new programme including human resources, IT requirements, financial implications, physical and support facilities.

- Viability (costings) for the programme.

Informal consultation / discussions may also take place with relevant stakeholders at this stage, if necessary.

Step 2.3: Review and Approval of Viability by Board of Directors (if applicable)

If the new programme proposal is accepted by the Senior Management Team, approval in principle is sought from the Board of Directors **ONLY** if significant investment is required. This step also includes consideration of Protection for Enrolled Learner (PEL) requirements.

Step 2.4: Review and Approval of Proposal by Academic Council

Subject to approval in principle from the Board of Directors if necessary, the Director of Quality and Academic Affairs in association with the nominated Programme Director prepares a proposal for review by the Academic Council. Feedback from the Senior Management review of the proposal is also presented at this stage.

6.3. Stage 3: Programme Design and Development

Step 3.1: Programme Development Team Established

Following formal approval of the proposal by the Academic Council, a Programme Development Team is established to develop the programme and relevant documentation. Membership is dependent on the nature of the proposed programme(s). In some cases, guidance from additional external personnel may also be sought, if necessary, at this stage.

Step 3.2: Project Plan Developed

A project plan with appropriate timelines is developed by the Director of Quality and Academic Affairs and Programme Director. Consultation may take place with QQI at this stage to determine PAEC (Programme Awards and Executive Committee) meeting dates.

Step 3.3: Programme Development

The Programme Director manages the development of the programme with oversight from the Director of Quality and Academic Affairs. Reporting to the Academic Council is carried out through the Director of Quality and Academic Affairs.

The development of the programme is undertaken in a systematic manner, informed by the structure of the QQI application documentation. Figure 3 below outlines the key stages of programme development. It is acknowledged that some aspects may involve an iterative process of review and redevelopment.

In demonstrating that they meet criteria applicable to programmes leading to awards in the NFQ, blended and/or fully online programmes being proposed for approval / validation will address the issues specific to the mode as set out in Appendix 1.
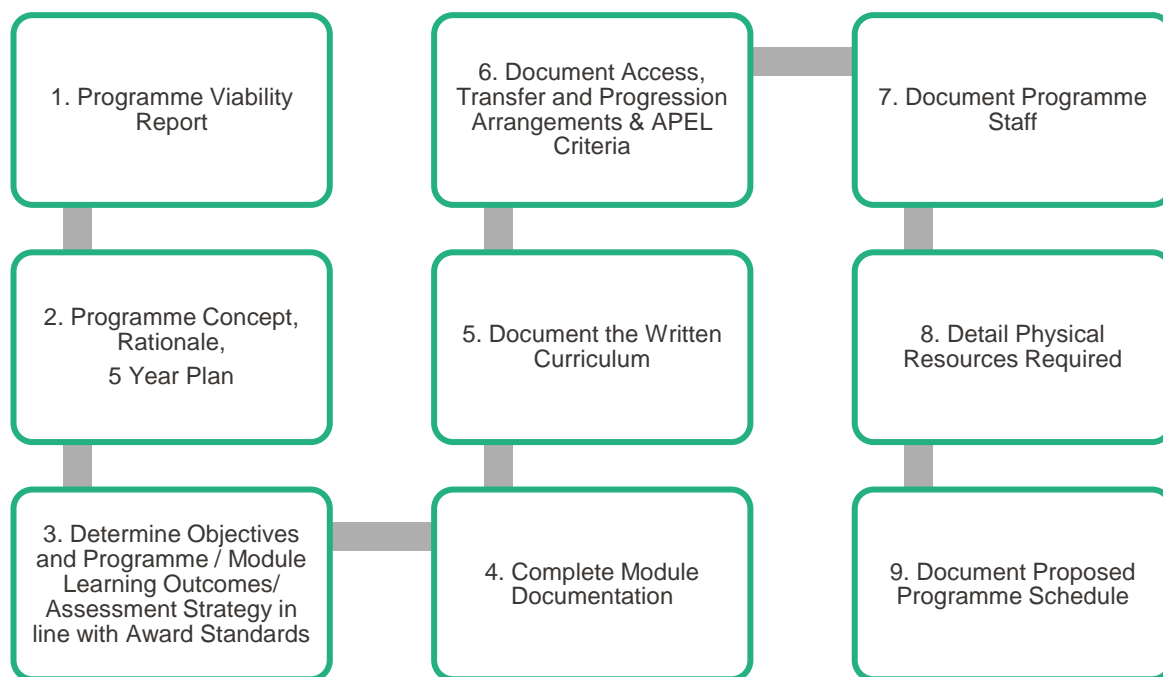
Figure 3: Key Stages of Programme Design and Development

Step 3.4: Completion of QQI Validation Material and Supporting Materials

The Programme Director ensures all relevant parts of the validation submission, including all relevant appendices, are addressed and satisfy the requirements of QQI. This step is supported by the Director of Quality and Academic Affairs.

6.4.   Stage 4: Independent Peer Review

The Director of Quality and Academic Affairs arranges for an independent peer review and evaluation of the programme against QQI's core validation criteria. This normally comprises two stages:

1.   A desk review by a QA expert and / or subject matter expert(s) - **compulsory**

2.   A 'mock' validation panel – **optional (always arranged for QQI HET programmes)**

In the case where core validation criteria are not met or evidenced, corrective action is undertaken by the Programme Development Team and the necessary documentation is updated as necessary.

6.5. Stage 5: Internal Documentation Approval and Submission To QQI
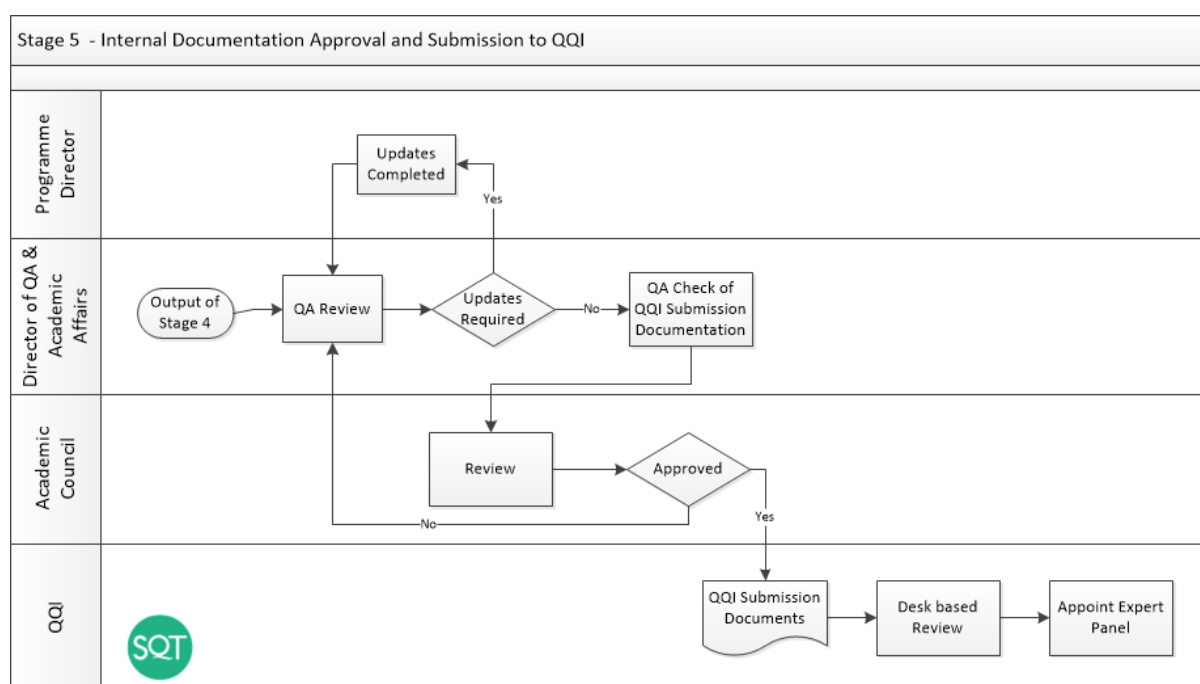
Step 5.1: Review of Material by Director of Quality and Academic Affairs

All documentation is subject to a final internal quality check by the Director of Quality and Academic Affairs. Any gaps or omissions are referred to the Programme Director for review and update.

Step 5.2: Approval of Documentation by Academic Council

All programme documentation and supporting materials is submitted to the Academic Council for approval prior to submission to QQI.

Step 5.3: Submission to QQI and Desk-Review

Following receipt of application, QQI acknowledges the application and conducts a desk review to determine whether the application addresses the validation criteria.

Step 5.4: Expert Panel Appointed by QQI

Following acceptance of an application, an Expert Panel is established by QQI to make an assessment of the application. Logistical preparations are made with SQT to coordinate and accommodate the panel visit.

6.6. Stage 6: Site Visit

The Expert Panel assesses the proposed programme against the core validation criteria. SQT's self-assessment is a key part of the evidence considered by at this stage.

6.7. Stage 7: Consideration of Expert Panel Report and SQT Response

Step 7.1: Draft Panel Report Issued to SQT

The Draft Expert Panel report is issued to SQT by QQI.

Step 7.2: SQT Response

At this stage, SQT are invited to:

- Comment on the factual accuracy of the Expert Panel report;

- Respond briefly to the overall findings (e.g. whether they are accepted by SQT);

- Submit any modified documentation and plans addressing any pre-validation conditions proposed in the report.

Step 7.3: Final Expert Panel Assessment

Following consideration of the response from SQT, the Expert Panel agrees a brief statement setting out its reaction and its final recommendations to QQI regarding validation. This statement will be included as an addendum to the report and included in the submission to Academic Council.

6.8. Stage 8: Confirmation of Validation from QQI

QQI will either:

1. Validate the proposed programme subject to conditions.

2. Validate the proposed programme or a stand-alone part of it that is a programme, subject to conditions including special conditions.

3. Refuse validation of the proposed programme.

QQI delegates the formal validation decision to its Programme and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC). The PAEC's decision is based on validation policy and criteria and informed by the following evidence:

- The Expert Panel report

- SQT's response

- The Expert Panel's reaction to the provider's response if any

- A memorandum from the QQI executive on the context for and conduct of the process noting any concerns or complaints expressed by the provider

6.9.   Stage 9: Publication of Expert Panel Report and SQT Response

Following a successful validation decision, the Expert Panel report is published on the QQI and SQT website.

7. DOCUMENTATION REQUIREMENTS

The documentation / evidence generated from each stage of the programme design process is set out in Table 1 below.

Stage	Documentation / Evidence Generated at each Stage
Stage 1: Identification of New Programme	- New Course Development Approval Form - Relevant preliminary research and communication with stakeholders
Stage 2: Internal Approval of New Programme	- Programme proposal - Minutes Senior Management Team Meeting - Minutes Board of Directors Meeting - Minutes Academic Council Meeting
Stage 3: Programme Design and Development	- Project Plan - <u>DRAFT</u> Completed QQI Application Form (QQI template) and relevant supplementary documentation
Stage 4: Independent Peer Review (Mock Panel)	- Agenda for Mock Site Visit (if applicable) - Independent Peer Review Report
Stage 5: Internal Documentation Approval and Submission To QQI	- <u>FINAL</u> Completed QQI Application Form (QQI template) and relevant supplementary documentation - Minutes Academic Council Meeting - Acknowledgement of receipt of documentation from QQI
Stage 6: Site Visit	- Agenda for Site Visit (Expert Panel)
Stage 7: Consideration of Expert Panel Report and SQT Response	- Communication from QQI / Expert Panel - Expert Panel Report - Minutes Academic Council Meeting (to consider SQT Response) - SQT Response
Stage 8: Confirmation of Validation from QQI	- Certificate of Validation
Stage 9: Publication of Expert Panel Report and SQT Response	- Link to published reports via SQT website - Programme marketing materials

Table 1: Documentation Requirements for QQI Validated Programmes

8. POLICY MONITORING

Responsibility	Frequency	Methods
Director of Quality and Academic Affairs – Document Update	Per QA audit schedule	- Review of documentation as per procedure set out in QAP2-1: Ongoing Review and Update of QA Documents.
Director of Quality and Academic Affairs / QA Committee	Per programme	- Review of process after each new programme validation event. - Review of feedback from Expert Panel, Mock Panel and QQI.
Programme Director	Per programme	- Monitoring implementation of actions arising from internal Peer Review and Independent Expert Panel.

9. DOCUMENT CONTROL

Version No	Approval Date	Description of Revision	Originator	Approved By
2.0	1/3/19	Complete revision in line with new validation guidelines (QQI Policies and Criteria for the Validation of Programmes of Education and Training, 2016). New document format.	Director of Quality and Academic Affairs	Academic Council
3.0	November 24	Updated to take account of Topic Specific Guidelines for Providers of Blended and Fully Online Programmes (2023), QQI.	Director of Quality and Academic Affairs	Academic Council

APPENDIX 1: CRITERIA FOR BLENDED & FULLY ONLINE PROGRAMMES

In demonstrating that they meet criteria applicable to programmes leading to awards in the NFQ, blended and/or fully online programmes being proposed for approval / validation will address the issues specific to the mode. i.e.

- direct and indirect contact hours offered through synchronous or asynchronous teaching methods, or a combination, reflect the credit value of modules and the programme.

- demonstrate that the programme's duration and credit are appropriate.

- set out the expected proportion of on-site vs synchronous and / or asynchronous teaching and learning.

- detail maximum class sizes to manage online interactivity.

- demonstrate prior engagement with all key stakeholders and draw on relevant business intelligence.

- describe any strategic collaborations or partnerships offering digital services and what agreements are in place to mitigate risks and maintain business continuity, especially when offered outside of Ireland.

- describe staff qualifications and experience in the provision of blended and/or fully online learning delivery and arrangements for training and continuing professional development.

- describe what digital tools and platforms will be used to facilitate blended and fully online teaching and learner interactivity and provide access to appropriate digital learning resources and materials.

- describe how the planned curriculum design, teaching, learning and assessment strategies reflect learner-centred principles and good practice in blended and/or fully online learning provision.

- describe what learning resources and materials will be available and what remote access learners will have to the library and other electronic databases.

- describe the synchronous and/or asynchronous teaching methods planned to support teacher-learner and learner-learner interactivity following good practice and learner-centred principles.

- confirm that testing of delivery platforms and environments has been undertaken to confirm that it is possible for learners to engage in blended and/or fully online learning, especially if studying outside of Ireland

- indicate how the programme meets and is bound by the provider's commitments to privacy and data protection laws and safeguard learners' confidentiality and consumer rights, especially when offered outside of Ireland.

- describe mechanisms for verifying the identity of learners throughout their programme of study but particularly regarding assessment, to mitigate risks against fraudulent practices, attempts to gain unfair advantage, or academic malpractice.

- identify the academic owner of all modules of the programme, if and when a second provider or collaborator is involved.

- describe what policies, procedures and resources are used to promote academic integrity, including mitigation of fraudulent practices and monitoring of AI-generated digital artefacts. describe what online communication channels will be available for learner enquires and consultations with teaching, professional and administrative staff.

- describe what provision there is for learning support and how learners can develop their digital skills and ability to learn how to be an effective online learner.

- describe the administrative protocols to accurately maintain records, monitor progression and achievement and offer appropriate interventions for learners who may be struggling or at risk of failure, especially those studying fully online.

- identify on-site and/or virtual office hours when teaching staff are available for learner consultations.

- describe how the online dimensions of the learning design promote learner engagement and success

Mandatory Criteria for Fully Online Programmes

- virtual office hours for learner consultations with teaching staff must consider time zone differences when people are studying outside of Ireland.

- approval and validation processes must describe specific strategies designed to foster a strong sense of belonging in the programme of study and institution at large to help reduce the risks of non-completion.