Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review, Northern Ireland (IQER NI):
Overview report

August 2014

Contents

Introduction

1   Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review, Northern Ireland (IQER NI) was the method used by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) to review higher education provision within further education in Northern Ireland, as commissioned by the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland (DEL) in 2009-10.

2   The method was designed to assure the maintenance of the academic standards and quality of the higher education qualifications delivered by the further education colleges on behalf of their awarding bodies and organisations.

3   The process ran from academic year 2010-11 to 2013-14 and reviewed the six colleges in Northern Ireland offering higher education programmes.

4   The IQER NI method was preceded by Developmental Review which ran from 2008-09 and was intended to prepare the colleges for the QAA review methodology following the major reorganisation of colleges in 2007-08.

Aims

5   The aims of IQER NI, as stated in the *Handbook for Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review, Northern Ireland 2010/11-2013/14* (the Handbook), were as follows:

- to 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
- 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
- to foster good working relationships between colleges and their awarding bodies, for the benefit of students
- to provide public information.

The method

6   The IQER NI method, in common with all QAA review methods, is an evidence-based, peer review process, which used the Academic Infrastructure[1] as its main reference point to explore the core themes of academic standards, quality of learning opportunities, and public information.

7   IQER was first devised for further education colleges delivering higher education in England and comprises a two-stage process. The first stage is the Developmental Engagement, which supports the college's development of the higher education it provides. The Developmental Engagement identifies good practice and makes recommendations for improvement. Recommendations are classified as essential, advisable and desirable to indicate the level of seriousness and the urgency with which they should be addressed. A key feature of the Developmental Engagement is that the review team comprises two nominees who are members of college staff. To further encourage openness, the outcome is an unpublished report which is for the college and its awarding bodies only to consider and address.

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[1] The Academic Infrastructure was subsequently revised and developed into the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

8   The second stage, the Summative Review, takes place approximately 12 months later to enable the college to address the issues highlighted in the Developmental Engagement. The Summative Review also identifies good practice and makes recommendations, but additionally makes judgements about the effectiveness of the college's processes for managing the academic standards and quality of the students' learning experience, and these are made public in a report. Judgements can only be made about those areas for which the college has responsibility delegated to it by its awarding body, therefore colleges were required to produce a checklist to identify those areas in advance of the review.

9   Judgements are made by teams of peers, led by a Coordinating Reviewer. The judgements on academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are confidence, limited confidence and no confidence. A commentary is also provided on whether reliance can be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information published about its provision by the college. At both stages the college is required to produce an action plan to explain how it will disseminate the good practice and address the recommendations identified.

10   The key stages in the review process are: the submission of a self-evaluation document with a portfolio of supporting evidence by the college; the production of a student written submission by its students; a visit to the college by the Coordinating Reviewer to discuss preparations and the arrangements for the visit; a visit by the team to the college to scrutinise the evidence and meet staff, students and other stakeholders, for example, employers; an interim discussion approximately six months before the Summative Review to check progress; a judgement meeting held by the team and the Coordinating Reviewer approximately one week after the visit at an off-site location; the preparation of a report; and the production of an action plan. In order to maintain continuity, at least one reviewer from the Developmental Engagement is retained in the Summative Review team.

Adaptations to the method for the Northern Ireland colleges

11   The method was developed by QAA in consultation with DEL to ensure that it was tailored to the needs of Northern Ireland's further education college system. Owing to the larger higher education cohorts, which in 2009-10 ranged from just over 1,000 students (263 full-time and 807 part-time) to just under 4,500 (1,944 full-time and 2,532 part-time), review teams were generally larger than those deployed in England with between four to six reviewers. Reviews were also half a day longer, at two and a half days. In order to share good practice and encourage peer review, each review team included at least one reviewer from a college in Northern Ireland.

12   At the Developmental Engagement stage in IQER England, assessment was selected as an area of particular focus for the review. Two additional areas of parity of experience for students enrolled for different modes of study and staff development for higher education teaching learning and assessment were offered to the Northern Ireland colleges. However, all six colleges chose the area of assessment.

13   Training for all reviewers and the three coordinating reviewers who participated in and managed the reviews respectively throughout the whole cycle, was held in Belfast in spring 2010. This was followed by a briefing for providers in the summer term. Training and briefing were considered very valuable, but delivery was necessarily limited to one of each event.

14   The reviews were scheduled over a four-year period, beginning with three Developmental Engagements in 2010-11, and ending with three Summative Reviews in

2013-14. Activities being undertaken by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) within the colleges were taken into consideration in planning the schedule.

15   Owing to the gap of at least 18 months between the two stages a progress review was added to the method to ensure that sufficient progress was being made on the action plan in preparation for the Summative Review. This took the form of a telephone conversation between the Coordinating Reviewer and the College Facilitator, and centred on the submission of an updated action plan.

Findings

16   This report is based on three principal sources of information: the individual reports published for each college; the two evaluation reports which summarise the feedback from the colleges, the awarding bodies and the review teams, and are produced internally for QAA at the end of the cycle of Developmental Engagements and Summative Reviews; and the two focus groups, informed by the evaluation reports, which representatives from the sector attended at the end of each cycle. The report findings are therefore in two sections, the outcomes from the reviews and the feedback on the review process itself.

The review outcomes

17   All colleges submitted their self-evaluation documents on time and all the colleges' students produced a written submission for both the Developmental Engagement and Summative Review stages of the process. Self-evaluation documents were of varying quality, but all provided an adequate basis for the review. Areas for development included insufficient evaluation and inadequate referencing. These are not uncommon issues within the sector and guidance has been developed and disseminated under the new methodology which is improving the providers' understanding of what is required from the self-evaluation. The quality of student submissions was more variable, but all were welcomed by the teams as a valuable perspective on the colleges' provision. It is generally recognised that the production of a student submission within a college environment presents challenges which higher education institutions tend not to encounter in terms of student availability and the provision of administrative support, and this needs to be taken into consideration in preparing for Higher Education Review (HER).

18   Visits were well organised and there were no operational issues at either stage of the review process. Review teams were able to meet with the required samples of staff, students and employers, and awarding body representatives were present during the majority of visits.

19   Reports were all produced on time. The judgements from the Summative Reviews are provided in Table 1.

College	Academic standards	Quality of learning opportunities	Public information
North West Regional	Confidence	Confidence	Reliance
South Eastern Regional	Confidence	Confidence	Reliance
Southern Regional	Confidence	Confidence	Reliance
Northern Regional	Confidence	Confidence	Reliance
South West	Confidence	Confidence	Reliance
Belfast Metropolitan	Confidence	Confidence	Reliance

Table 1: Judgements from Summative Reviews

20   In summary:

- all six colleges received confidence judgements in academic standards
- all six colleges received confidence judgements in relation to the quality of learning opportunities
- in all six colleges reliance could be placed on the accuracy and completeness of public information.

The six colleges therefore achieved a 100 per cent success rate, which compares favourably with the success rate of 97 per cent for colleges in England, as measured when the final reviews were completed in 2011-12. The number of reviews undertaken in England was much greater at 265, but the IQER NI outcomes nevertheless apply to over 11,000 higher education students.

Developmental Engagement

21   Table 2 shows the number of features of good practice and recommendations identified at the end of each stage of the review.

Stage	Good practice	Recommendations		
		Essential	**Advisable**	**Desirable**
Developmental Engagement	33	1	12	20
Summative Review	24	0	10	14

Table 2: Good practice and recommendations by stage of review

22   The balance of features of good practice (32) to recommendations (33) from the Developmental Engagement is very even, which is consistent with the outcomes from IQER in England. There was one essential recommendation relating to assessment practice, which meant that additional support was required for this review as it can foreshadow a negative judgement. The additional support included the progress review mid-way between the two stages becoming a face-to face meeting with the Coordinating Reviewer to ensure a more thorough check on progress, and a QAA officer in attendance at the Summative Review visit to ensure due process. At the Summative Review the team found that sufficient progress had been made on the essential recommendation to justify a confidence judgement on the quality of learning opportunities for the college concerned.

Summative Review

23   All six colleges were able to demonstrate changes or improvements in the period between the Developmental Engagement and the Summative Review, although in two colleges a recommendation had not been addressed as effectively as anticipated. In one case the team reported that 'The impact of IQER on the College's higher education provision has been significant. Prior to the IQER NI process, engagement with the Academic Infrastructure was ceded to the awarding bodies. Engagement with the IQER NI process has resulted in a greater understanding of the learning needs and academic standards of higher education students and the structures, operating procedures and policies necessary to meet their requirements. These developments are ongoing but have been embedded into the College's management structures.'

24   A more detailed list, extracted from the unpublished reports, is provided in Annex 1 and shows that other improvements made as a result of the Developmental Engagement include increased standardisation of higher education documentation; advances in staff

development; more effective use of the virtual learning environment in support of higher education students; improved programme specifications; improvements to assessment practice; and increased monitoring of work placements.

25   Table 2 shows that across all the Summative Reviews there were 24 items of good practice and 24 recommendations, maintaining the balance noted at the end of the Developmental Engagement stage. Of the recommendations, 10 are advisable and 14 desirable, and it is worth noting the difference at this point. Advisable recommendations are defined as 'matters which the team believe have the potential to put quality and/or standards at risk and required preventative corrective action' whereas desirable recommendations are 'matters which the team believe have the potential to enhance quality, build capacity and/or further secure standards'. The ratio of good practice to recommendations and the proportion of advisable to desirable recommendations reinforce the overall positive outcome.

26   The performance of individual colleges is not within the scope of this report and detailed outcomes relating to named colleges have been deliberately withheld to avoid direct comparisons. However, differences in performance are evident. In three colleges, the proportion of good practice to recommendations is greater; in the other three, the reverse is the case. In two colleges there are no advisable recommendations and in a further two colleges, only a single advisable recommendation. In one college there are five features of good practice and three desirable recommendations, and in another four features of good practice and only one advisable recommendation, both constituting strong profiles. The weakest profile comprises three features of good practice with six advisable and three desirable recommendations.

27   The individual college profiles derived from the number of features of good practice compared with the number and nature of the recommendations will assist DEL and QAA with the scheduling of HER. For example, few features of good practice coupled with a larger number of advisable recommendations and a lack of progress against the action plan would suggest that a college should have an early review, whereas a college with several features of good practice and only desirable recommendations which have been fully and promptly addressed would be scheduled later in the cycle. This would, however, need to be set against other criteria, such as a substantial increase in student numbers, a significant change in provision, or major changes to the structure of the college's senior management team.

28   A complete list of features of good practice and recommendations is provided in Annex 2. These items have been listed under the core themes which applied when the method was implemented and have also been cross referenced to the version of the Quality Code which was in place when the Summative Reviews were completed. A summary is provided in Table 3. The table presents the distribution of good practice and recommendations under the areas of academic standards, quality of leaning opportunities, and public information for analysis. The juxtaposition of the core themes against the Expectations of the Quality Code reveals discrepancies which are also worthy of further comment.

Academic Infrastructure core themes	Quality Code Expectations (June 2013)	Good practice	Recommendations
Academic standards	General	2	2
	A4: Approval and periodic review of programmes	3	2
Quality of learning opportunities	B3: Learning and teaching	7	4
	B4: Enabling student development and achievement	5	2
	B5: Student engagement	0	2
	B6: Assessment	1	5
	B10: Managing higher education provision with others	2	
Public information	Information about higher education provision	2	7
Additionally	Enhancement	2	
Total		**24**	**24**

Table 3: Good practice and recommendations by Academic Infrastructure/Quality Code

29   The majority of features of good practice and recommendations are naturally linked to those areas for which the colleges have the most delegated responsibility, namely quality of learning opportunities and public information. Issues relating to Academic standards are principally the responsibility of the awarding body and would therefore be considered under the review of the awarding body's provision. The core themes have been further broken down using the Expectations of the Quality Code to show that programme approval and review (A4); learning and teaching (B3); enabling student development and achievement (B4); student engagement (B5); assessment (B6); managing higher education provision with others (B10); and information about higher education provision (C) are the areas which attract most attention from the review teams. The highest levels of attention are directed towards learning and teaching, as might be expected, followed by the information about higher education provision, enabling student development and achievement, and assessment. It is clear that there are areas where the colleges demonstrate mainly strengths overall, namely in learning and teaching where there are seven features of good practice and enabling student development and achievement, where there are five. A recurrent strength noted in the Northern Ireland colleges which compares favourably with colleges in England is the number of features of good practice associated with employer engagement and employability, of which there are eight, covered by Expectations B3, B4 and B10. Areas where there is a general need for improvement are in information about higher education provision with seven recommendations, and assessment where there are five. There are also no examples of good practice and two recommendations under student engagement. Additionally, colleges are recommended to continue the work they have started in differentiating higher education policies, monitoring higher education resources and supporting the development of higher education staff.

30   In attempting to align the core themes with the Expectations of the Quality Code, various discrepancies emerge. This is because the Academic Infrastructure, which included the Code of Practice, had been reformulated into the Quality Code (which itself has been recently revised) during the implementation of the IQER NI process. Changes to the Quality Code are driven by the sector which owns the Quality Code, and although due consideration has been given to these changes in continuing to deploy the IQER NI methodology, some aspects could not be fully applied. However, it is vital that they are highlighted in preparation for Higher Education Review (HER). Overall the review method has become more rigorous

as the 20 Expectations of the Quality Code are more specific and each has to be evaluated by the review team in contributing to an overall judgement on each area. Areas such as *Part C: Information about higher education provision* are now subject to a judgement, rather than just a commentary, reflecting the increased importance attributed to the production of information about higher education provision, which now encompasses all information and is not limited to that which is published. Student engagement has assumed greater prominence, reflecting a drive within the sector to involve students as co-creators of their learning experience and also a shift in emphasis associated with the introduction of tuition fees and a more customer- focused culture. Although good practice is still identified, the concept of Enhancement has been formalised and a judgement is now made according to whether there is evidence to demonstrate that 'deliberate steps are being taken at provider level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities'. It is encouraging to note that two feature of good practice from IQER NI could be classified as Enhancement (Annex 2, Good practice, Items 23 and 24). As Annex 2 also shows, there is no longer a location for generalised good practice (Items 4 and 5) and recommendations (Advisable recommendations, Items 1 and 2) associated with staff engagement with the Quality Code, as providers are expected to have developed a greater understanding of the application of individual Expectations.

The review process

31   QAA is committed to working with stakeholders to develop its activities in support of its mission to safeguard standards and improve the quality of UK higher education. Evaluating the operation of the method serves a variety of purposes, not least of which is reporting to funding bodies and other stakeholders as part of QAA's contractual obligations. Evaluation allows for the identification of good practice and highlights areas where there is scope for further development within the method as part of the process of continuous improvement. Review evaluations form an important part of QAA's own quality assurance processes and are a major aspect of QAA's Evaluation Policy.

32   The evaluation of the IQER NI method took the form of a post-review questionnaire circulated to key participants. Tables 4 and 5 show the number of respondents to the post-review evaluations by respondent group, following the Developmental Engagement and Summative Review stages.

Respondent group	Questionnaires sent	Number returned
Reviewer	12	9
Nominee	12	11
Coordinator	6	4
College	6	2
Awarding body	18	4
Total	**54**	**30**

Table 4: Developmental Engagement: Response rates by respondent group 2010-12

Respondent group	Questionnaires sent	Number returned
Reviewer	28	25
Coordinator	6	4
College	6	6
Awarding body	68	25
Total	**108**	**60**

Table 5: Summative Review: Response rates by respondent group 2012-14

33   The response rate for Developmental Engagement between 2010 and 2012 was 56 per cent. The overall response rate for Summative Review between 2012 and 2014 was also 56 per cent. This low response rate was largely due to the relatively small numbers involved and the lack of responses from the awarding bodies. Although colleges were asked to provide updated awarding body contacts before their review visits, five awarding body emails were returned as 'undeliverable' and eight awarding bodies responded to say that they had no involvement with the reviews. Excluding the evaluations to awarding bodies the response rate was much higher, at 87 per cent.

Developmental Engagement

34   The key points drawn from the evaluations conducted at the end of the cycle of Developmental Engagements were used to inform discussion at the focus group in June 2012, and the issues arising from both are summarised below.

35   The overall conclusion was that the Developmental Engagement process had met its stated aims. The main strengths of the process were considered to be:

- providing a focus on higher education within further education
- highlighting good practice and areas for development
- fostering closer working relationships with awarding bodies
- providing students with a voice.

36   Colleges felt that the review process had provided a timely focus on higher education within the wider college provision and the identification of good practice and areas for development had proved helpful in setting internal agendas. Liaison with awarding bodies during the process had improved working relationships, although there was a general lack of clarity surrounding the role of the awarding bodies in the review. Colleges also welcomed the involvement of students, while acknowledging that more support was required to enable them to articulate their views more fully. Other positive feedback referred to the arrangements for meetings during review visits, which were considered to be a valuable source of information and appropriately conducted. All participants considered that communication between QAA, the coordinating reviewers, the review teams and the colleges was strong throughout the process.

37   The principal challenges identified included:

- ensuring involvement in and understanding of the process among college staff
- producing sufficiently evaluative documentation
- gathering and collating supporting evidence
- the overall time commitment.

38   Respondents felt that the information provided in the Handbook and the training had prepared participants for the process, although there were some suggestions for improving the training, including more training for Northern Ireland reviewers who may be less familiar with QAA review methodology; refresher training between the Developmental Engagement and the Summative Review; and more guidance for awarding body representatives regarding their attendance at meetings.

39   While the majority of self-evaluation documents were considered fit for purpose, coordinating reviewers emphasised the importance of ensuring that the narrative was evaluative and that the supporting evidence was reviewed for accuracy and appropriateness. Colleges were also reminded that starting preparations early would reduce the time pressure and that reviews should not require the production of new evidence, only the signposting of

that already in existence. Coordinating reviewers noted that student written submissions would benefit from being more analytical and that better guidance could be offered to students, including more examples of best practice.

40   A question was also raised at the focus group about the timing of the reviews and whether they could be synchronised with the colleges' established quality assurance cycle, and this was followed up in a subsequent event (see paragraph 58).

Summative Review

41   Feedback from the post-Summative Review evaluations recorded in Table 6 shows that the majority considered that the IQER NI method fulfilled its stated aims.

Respondent type	Completely	To a large extent	To some extent	Total
Coordinating Reviewer	4	0	0	4
Reviewer	21	4	0	25
College	5	1	0	6
Awarding body	13	6	6	25
Total	**43**	**11**	**6**	**60**

Table 6: Response rates to aims of review

42   90 per cent of respondents felt that the process had met its aims completely or to a large extent. All coordinating reviewers who responded felt that the review process had achieved its aims completely, a view shared by 84 per cent of reviewers and 83 per cent of colleges. The only negative responses came from the awarding bodies with 24 per cent stating that the aims had been achieved to some extent and that this was in part attributable to the lack of information about the process, and the lack of clarity surrounding the role (see paragraph 33).

Evaluation feedback

43   A table showing the full range of responses is provided in Annex 3 and positive feedback on the method included:

- good communication with the colleges during the review process
- effective management of the process by the coordinating reviewers
- student involvement in the process
- well prepared review teams who adopted a collegial approach to their interactions with college representatives.

44   These points reflect largely on the smooth operation of the process, but also, and importantly, comment on the value of student involvement in the review process through the student submission and in meetings with the teams, and on the value of the peer process.

45   Respondents suggested a number of ways in which the process could be improved, which included:

- more emphasis on employability
- observation of teaching and learning
- more focus on progress since the last review
- an overall shorter process, but more time allocated to the review visit
- greater involvement of students
- more involvement of awarding bodies
- less involvement of awarding bodies.

46   Colleges felt strongly that their emphasis on employability in the curriculum, advocated by DEL, could be more fully reflected in the review methodology. Some respondents believed that there should be direct observation of teaching and learning as the most appropriate way of assessing pedagogic effectiveness. Most also felt that there should be more emphasis on progress made since the last review. Colleges generally found the overall length of the process from the point of notification of the date of the review visit to the publication of the report and action plan to be excessive. In contrast, the length of the review visit itself was considered inadequate for evaluating some of the larger provision. The involvement of students was welcomed and it was felt that this element of the process could be further extended. The apparently contradictory responses to the level of involvement of the awarding bodies may again reflect some lack of clarity around who should be involved and to what extent (see paragraph 34).

47   Feedback from colleges, reviewers and coordinating reviewers on what could be improved about the support provided included:

- more training for reviewers
- more training on the Quality Code
- more training on Qmmunity.

48   More training for reviewers was suggested in response to the fact that there was only one training session at the start of the four year process and that some refresher training would have been welcome during this period. Providers also asked to be updated on the revisions to the Quality Code which had been implemented since the IQER NI process began. There was also a request for more practical help with Qmmunity, QAA's secure electronic communication system.

Focus group feedback

49   The key issues from the evaluations were raised at the focus group held in June 2014, attended by representatives from the six colleges, DEL and ETI. The aim was to provide an opportunity to reflect on the IQER NI method and to develop a clearer understand of the key features of HER. To provide a perspective on the HER method, a student reviewer based in Northern Ireland, and recently a member of a HER review team, was also invited to attend, and a small number of the college representatives had recently participated in a training session for HER reviewers. College representatives were asked, with the help of their colleagues from the department and other invitees, to consider the benefits of IQER NI; to reflect on how they perceived themselves at the end of the review cycle; to outline the potential challenges of the HER method; and to identify what they would need to support the transition to the new method.

50   The focus group discussion reinforced the benefits of IQER NI previously identified at the Developmental Engagement stage: the welcome focus on higher education provision

which helped to drive the development of a higher education ethos; the concomitant increase in the availability of relevant staff development; and the increased staff awareness of the higher education quality reference points. Additionally, participants drew attention to the involvement of students, the greater cooperation developing between colleges and, above all, the fact that they had all come through the review process successfully.

51   In reflecting on how they now perceived themselves, colleges concurred on the 'significant distance travelled' underpinned by increasing dialogue within the sector and cited the progress made in developing more evaluative quality processes; in embedding employability into the curriculum; and in recognising the importance of involving staff in scholarly activity. Colleges also commented on some difficulties with resourcing higher education provision which were evident in the physical environment, and with staff-student contact hours, which tended to be the same for lecturers delivering both further and higher education.

52   Colleges anticipated a number of new challenges in adapting to HER, most of which were associated with understanding the changes to the Quality Code, the implications for the method and communicating these to staff. These included the wider definition of information; the introduction of the concept of enhancement as a judgement area; and the expanded role of students in quality assurance and review. Other challenges related to the need to improve current practices, for example, improving the evaluative content of the self-evaluation; supporting the preparation of the student submission; facilitating the sharing of good practice; improving resources; and maintaining the required focus on higher education in order to provide a secure foundation for its ongoing development. Most significantly, given that it was the focus of the Developmental Engagements and is still the subject of five recommendations and only one feature of good practice, assessment policy and practice is also worthy of continued attention.

53   Participants recognised that the new method remains fundamentally an evidence-based peer review process which focuses on the management of standards and quality, but with more clearly defined reference points and a wider range of judgements. Colleges acknowledged that it would be a more exacting process and, in accepting that this is both necessary and challenging, also voiced concerns that that there may be a wider gap to bridge than in England, where providers have had more time to become accustomed to the differences. Linked to this, some colleges expressed regret at the absence of a developmental stage in the process, which prompted a discussion about the relative maturity of the colleges and their readiness to go straight to judgement. Questions were raised about the desirability of equivalence with their English counterparts and the merits of being party to the same quality assurance method as their awarding bodies.

54   The focus group also afforded the opportunity to explain how the HER method would address some of the issues raised about IQER NI, which are listed under suggested improvements in Annex 3. A collective wish to take greater account of employability is fulfilled by one of the options available under the Theme, which are currently Student employability and Student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement, and detailed in paragraph 33 of *Higher Education Review: A handbook for providers, June 2014* (HER Handbook). The desire for greater student involvement is addressed in two ways, firstly by the introduction of student reviewers, who are equal members of all review teams (HER Handbook paragraph 26), and secondly through the role of the Lead Student Representative (HER Handbook paragraph 40). The Lead Student Representative works in tandem with the College Facilitator to prepare for the review, to meet with the Review Manager and the review team during the review visit, and to check the draft report and contribute to the action plan after the review. The Lead Student Representative also has specific and separate responsibility for producing the student submission and selecting students to meet the review team. The role of the awarding bodies has been clarified in that

there is no obligation for them to be involved in the review, but they can participate if they wish (HER Handbook paragraph 42). As suggested, greater emphasis will be placed on progress since the last review as the action plan will be published on the provider's website and the provider will be expected to update it on an annual basis until it is completed (HER Handbook paragraph 112). The overall length of the process will not be reduced, but the more risk-based approach intrinsic to the new method means that the size of the team will vary according to the size of provision, and the length of the visit will be determined by the review team's assessment of the college's ability to meet the Expectations and its track record from previous reviews (HER Handbook paragraph 83). Finally, because the method does not involve subject review, it will not include observation of teaching and learning.

55   Although requests were made for more reviewer training, there will still be only one initial training event, however, it will be supported by eLearning modules to augment and refresh skills. It will also include the use of Qmmunity, which has been simplified and improved. The Annual Reviewers' Conference will continue to be the principal forum for method updates, supplemented with a quarterly newsletter, and QAA will provide briefings to update providers on what will be a rolling method with the capacity for incorporating minor changes on a yearly basis.

56   Following the discussion on benefits and challenges, and the clarification of the method, colleges were invited to consider how they would prepare for the introduction of HER, expected in 2015-16, and what support they would need. Colleges agreed that they could support themselves by building on the good practice and addressing the recommendations already identified under IQER NI, and by conducting internal reviews to monitor the quality of provision, identify further areas for improvement, and support with appropriate staff development. Participants also agreed that peer review could be used more extensively for mutual support and for exploring common themes. Colleges requested assistance from QAA in providing briefings on the Quality Code and the method, particularly the application of *Chapter B5: Student engagement*, *Part C: Information about higher education provision* and Enhancement. QAA was also asked to help develop the relationship with the National Union of Students in Northern Ireland (NUSNI). DEL was asked to provide guidance on the timeframe and roll out of the process, and also to consider funding for students to attend events to develop the potential for student engagement. QAA also advised that, with DEL's approval, colleges should consider subscribing to QAA in order to secure a permanent voice in the quality assurance of UK higher education.

Supplementary activity

57   In 2012-13, and as a consequence of the Developmental Engagements, QAA was approached informally by college representatives to help develop a peer review process. This initiative was prompted by the Northern Ireland reviewers who had derived great benefit from being part of the review teams and experiencing other quality assurance systems and practices. An event was held in February 2013 to investigate the current situation, examine potential barriers and suggest ways in which a peer review process could be established. As a result, the colleges have set up a quality network for higher education provision.

58   The two-day event was also used to introduce the then developing HER method and explore ways in which the colleges' quality assurance systems might be adapted to accommodate the preparations necessary for a HER review. Discussion centred around the production of the Whole-College Self-Evaluation Reports and Quality Improvement Plans, and to what extent these could encompass the evaluation of higher education provision. The discussion also included the optimum time for QAA reviews to take place in relation to the annual Self-Evaluation Reports/Quality Improvement Plans process,

while also taking Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) schedules into account. The timing and frequency of HER has subsequently been the subject of conversations between QAA and DEL.

Outcomes from HER 2013-14

59   No formal research has been conducted into the outcomes of HER at the time of writing as only 31 reports from the 47 reviews conducted in 2013-14 have been published so far. Of these reports, 29 are for further education colleges and only two are for higher education institutions. There are four judgement areas for HER: academic standards; quality of learning opportunities; information about higher education provision; and enhancement of student learning opportunities. Each area has three grades: meets UK expectations; requires improvement to meet UK expectations; and does not meet UK expectations. With the exception of academic standards, all areas also have a commended judgement.

60   The initial impression from the review outcomes is that the overall success rate is lower than for IQER with 81 per cent of providers achieving a 'meets UK expectations' grade in all areas, reinforcing the view that the method is more rigorous. Table 7 provides a breakdown of the grades. The 100 per cent meets grading for academic standards can be explained by the fact that the majority of providers are further education colleges, therefore ultimate responsibility for standards is located with their awarding bodies. Quality of learning opportunities and information appear to be sound, with above-the-line grades of 97 per cent and 94 per cent respectively. The area which is producing the most variation is enhancement, where 23 per cent of providers have been 'commended', but 16 per cent have received a 'requires improvement to meet UK expectations' grade. Limited analysis of these outcomes has so far been carried out, but additional guidance is currently being prepared for providers on defining and evaluating their approach to the enhancement of student learning opportunities.

	Academic Standards	Quality of Learning opportunities	Information	Enhancement
Commended	(0)	4	1	7
Meets	30	25	28	19
Requires improvement	0	0	2	5
Does not meet	0	1	0	0
Total	**30**	**30**	**31***	**31***

Table 7: HER outcomes by grade
*One provider participated in a partial review.

Conclusions

61   Based on the findings relating to both the outcomes and the review process, it can be concluded that IQER NI method has substantially achieved its aims. The reviews were conducted according to the published method and the agreed schedule, and progress reviews enabled the method to stay on track. Feedback from those involved is positive regarding the operation of the method, which has enabled DEL to discharge its statutory responsibility for ensuring that provision is made for assessing the quality of education provided by the colleges it funds.

62   Reports were published on time, contributing to public information about the management of higher education standards and quality in Northern Ireland.

63   Relationships between the colleges and their awarding bodies have generally been strengthened, although some colleges need to provide better information to some awarding bodies (and to QAA) regarding the scheduling of reviews which they may wish to be involved in. The HER Handbook has clarified the role of awarding bodies under HER.

64   The overall outcomes were good in that all six colleges ultimately achieved positive judgements from the Summative Reviews. Colleges have made significant progress, as evidenced in the outcomes from the Developmental Engagement, and some clear themes have emerged from the good practice identified in the Summative Reviews which can be built on, for example in teaching and learning and employability. Progress has also been made in developing an awareness of what needs to be done to improve their higher education provision for the benefit of students. Through the evaluation process they have identified improvements required to current practice, for example, in developing more evaluative documentation and supporting the preparation of the student submission and the role of the Lead Student Representative. There are also some common areas for development arising from the Summative Review recommendations, including assessment, the provision of information, and student engagement. Colleges should also continue to develop a higher education ethos through the development of differentiated policies, resources and support for staff.

65   Colleges acknowledge that many of the areas for improving the review process suggested in the IQER NI evaluations have been addressed by the rigour of the new method, and the outcomes of HER so far show that there will be challenges in responding to the demands of the method and maintaining the alignment of systems and practices with the Quality Code. In addition to the strengths and areas for development already identified collectively and individually, colleges should be aware of the outcomes of the HER reviews conducted so far and begin to consider how they will deal with the newer aspects of review such as enhancement.

66   There is a level of concern among some colleges about their readiness for the new method, which is largely unfounded. Colleges have all taken part in Developmental Review and IQER NI, and HER continues this upward trajectory. Preparations for HER have involved QAA in an event in February 2013 to initiate peer review and introduce the new method; in the focus group held in June 2014; and in ongoing discussions with DEL. Colleges should derive confidence from the fact that they have demonstrated an increasing maturity throughout the process and have a good track record in addressing issues. Individual profiles are at least satisfactory and generally good. Two colleges have no advisable recommendations and there are indications of a systematic approach to enhancement. All are comparatively large further education providers of higher education and should have the infrastructure and capacity to respond to the challenges which they have themselves identified. Colleges should also accrue substantial benefits from adopting

the same method as the majority of other UK colleges and their awarding bodies in terms of consistency and the dissemination of good practice in moving toward the same shared goals.

67   Support for the transition to HER will involve both internal and peer reviews, principally in dealing with improvements to current practice. With support from DEL, QAA will provide briefings on the changes to the Quality Code, the new HER methodology and issues around student engagement via the Student Engagement Team.

68   Additionally, it would also be beneficial for each college to nominate a higher education member of staff to become a HER reviewer, if they do not already have one, as a means of keeping up-to-date with the method. Colleges should consider subscribing to QAA in order to ensure they can contribute to the quality assurance of UK higher education in the longer term.

69   The review outcomes have provided DEL with a measure of the quality of provision which will be taken in to account when scheduling HER reviews. Consideration will also be given to how the process can accommodate existing Whole-College Self-Evaluation Report and Quality Improvement Plan processes in terms of timing and can be synchronised with the ETI inspection schedule. The frequency of reviews, which is currently four years in England for colleges with a good track record, may also be adapted.

Recommendations

70   In order to support the transition from the IQER NI to the HER method the following actions are therefore recommended.

- Colleges should ensure that awarding body information is accurate to enable appropriate dissemination of information regarding arrangements for reviews to QAA and awarding bodies.
- Colleges should begin to prepare as soon as possible for the HER method by undertaking inter-departmental peer review to build on the individual good practice and address the recommendations identified in IQER NI.
- Colleges should engage in inter-college peer review to build on and/or address the wider themes arising from the good practice and recommendations identified in IQER NI.
- Colleges should continue to develop and differentiate their higher education policies, resources and support for higher education staff.
- Colleges should monitor the themes emerging from published HER reports in England in order to inform staff development requirements.
- Colleges should consider subscribing to QAA so that they are able to participate more fully and formally in the development of UK higher education.
- Colleges should consider nominating a senior member of their quality team to train as a HER reviewer, if they have not already done so.
- QAA's Student Engagement Team should provide an event on the theme of student engagement, to include the development of the Lead Student Representative role and the production of the student submission.
- QAA to encourage the involvement of NUSNI in supporting student engagement within the colleges.
- QAA should provide an event on the revisions to the Quality Code and the implications for the review method, and further updating on the HER method.
- QAA should work with DEL to schedule reviews according to the individual college profiles of good practice and recommendations and other relevant criteria, including the colleges' quality cycles and ETI's inspection schedule.

- DEL should provide the colleges with guidance on the schedule and roll-out of reviews.
- DEL and QAA should discuss and determine the frequency of reviews and the length of the review cycle.

References

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Annex 1: Improvements since the Developmental Engagement

The following examples are taken directly from the text of the six reports and are listed under the relevant core themes.

Academic standards

- The College established a Higher Education Academic Review Board to ensure its higher education meets quality standards in accordance with the Quality Code and the expectations of its awarding bodies.

Quality of learning opportunities

- The College has introduced a Management Effectiveness Team which meets once a fortnight with individual course teams.
- The College has taken significant positive steps in managing assessment including staff development and peer monitoring of new teams.
- More staff have enrolled on the City and Guilds Training and Assessment Quality Assurance Award for internal moderators, which provides training on assessment and feedback.
- The College has invested significantly in Specialised Technology Centres for each of the College's campuses.
- The FdEng Civil Engineering and Transport has gained professional recognition, allowing students to register with any of four professional bodies.
- The College has made considerable progress and taken appropriate action to standardise higher education documentation and to develop the virtual learning environment.
- There has been some increase in staff use of the virtual learning environment.
- The College has developed the Business Engagement and Student Tracking System software, which is an effective mechanism designed to monitor work placement activity.
- The College has achieved much in systematically capturing the range and richness of the employer engagement for the benefit of higher education in the College as a whole to provide examples of good practice.
- There are now programme specifications contextualised to each Edexcel course.
- Staff have written clear and specific programme specifications using QAA guidance.
- Pearson Edexcel programme specifications have been updated in a continuing process.

Public information

- The College has introduced a standard operating procedure that delegates responsibility for ensuring the accuracy of information.
- A new and comprehensive range of documentation has been developed to support placements and work based learning opportunities.
- Course handbooks are reviewed at the beginning of each academic year.

Annex 2: List of good practice and recommendations from the Summative Review

Item	Core theme	Quality Code Expectation*
Good practice		
1. The College's bespoke Tool Kit database enables staff to monitor effectively the standard of its higher education provision	Standards	A4
2. The cross-college functions of the quality assurance and coordinators' groups, the Standards Improvement Unit and the Centre for Curriculum Quality Assurance and Performance Development serve, effectively, to take a holistic view of standards	Standards	A4
3. The College has fully embraced the Quality Code and has invested much staff development time in implementing its indicators, with evidence of its impact across the provision in terms of staff understanding	Standards	A4
4. The extent and depth of the College's engagement with the Quality Code	Quality	-
5. The thoroughness of approach and application of the Quality Code mapping exercise	Standards	-
6. The positive impact of curriculum projects enhancing the student experience across the provision	Quality	B3
7. The well considered procedures to increase the amount and sophistication of the content available to students on the virtual learning environment	Quality	B3
8. The number and range of the enhancements to the curriculum which significantly increase the students' employability skills	Quality	B3
9. The Integrated Learning and Teaching and Pedagogy Programme supported by nine school-based mentors	Quality	B3
10. The industry-related opportunities for staff development which enhance the student experience and maintain the currency of the curriculum	Quality	B3
11. The responsive and specialised curriculum which is informed and supported by employers	Quality	B3
12. The Standard Operating Procedures provide a single source of guidance and information to all staff with a role in learning and teaching	Quality	B3, C
13. The development and implementation of the Business Engagement and Student Tracking System software in the management of placement learning, which helps to ensure an effective and safe learning environment.	Quality	B4
14. The number and range of opportunities offered by the College to develop students' employability skills and increase awareness of business and industry culture	Quality	B4
15. The collation, analysis and sharing of student support activities	Quality	B4
16. The internship programme which supports students to find beneficial work placements	Quality	B4
17. The College puts strong emphasis on employer engagement and vocational learning and provides an	Quality	B4

excellent range of enhancement activities to increase employability skills in line with its strategic objectives		
18. The comprehensive and effective feedback on the Institute of Leadership and Management programmes provides students with excellent guidance for future assessments	Quality	B6
19. The depth and scope of the engagement with employers	Quality	B10
20. The extensive and effective engagement with employers	Quality	B10
21. The Management Effectiveness Team meetings which are valued by all staff as an inclusive and supportive mechanism for enhancing the provision in an effective and timely manner	Quality	Enhancement
22. Sharing good practice is well developed and exchange moots, for example, provide opportunities to discuss experience on a multidisciplinary basis	Quality	Enhancement
23. The effective processes for checking public information	Public information	C
24. The College's engagement with the process of providing information to meet the diversity of student needs, resulting in the award of two charter marks	Public information	C
Advisable recommendations		
1. Improve its engagement with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education	Standards	-
2. Ensure that all higher education staff become fully conversant with the Quality Code	Standards	-
3. Improve staff use of the virtual learning environment to enhance delivery of the provision	Quality	B3
4. Ensure that a detailed, standardised policy for the submission of Edexcel assessments is implemented across the College	Quality	B6
5. Ensure the consistent implementation of its internal verification policy	Quality	B6
6. Ensure that the terms of reference for the regulation and operation of assessment boards are clarified to ensure that the Edexcel specialist guidelines and the Quality Code, *Chapter B6: Assessment of students and accreditation of prior learning* are followed	Quality	B6
7. Ensure that the target for completing programme specifications by September 2013 is achieved	Quality	C
8. Improve the guidance provided to students in course handbooks	Public information	C
9. Ensure the consistency of the core content and the quality and depth of supplementary information in student handbooks	Public information	C
10. Review its website checking procedures to promote greater diligence in ensuring the accuracy and completeness of public information	Public information	C
Desirable recommendations		
1. Continue to develop its use of performance indicators	Standards	A4
2. Consider extending the range of Standing Operating Procedures or developing terms of reference and a membership list for committees and groups with responsibility for academic standards and the quality of the student experience	Standards	A4

3. Further develop student engagement in its senior committees and enhance students' awareness of the impact of their contributions	Standards	B5
4. Continue to monitor the appropriateness of education learning resources available to students	Quality	B3
5. Analyse separately and routinely teaching observation sample outcomes for higher education classes	Quality	B3
6. Review the induction process for staff teaching on higher education programmes	Quality	B3
7. Continue to develop and implement its emerging tutorial policy	Quality	B4
8. Review the use of tutorial time to ensure its effectiveness	Quality	B4
9. Further develop student engagement to enhance academic standards	Quality	B5
10. Ensure that assessment feedback is provided consistently in accordance with the stated policy	Quality	B6
11. Ensure that students understand clearly the penalties for late submission of assessments that apply to their current programme	Quality	B6
12. Ensure that students are fully appraised of the availability of specialist facilities and resources that will enable them to achieve their intended learning outcomes	Quality	C
13. Involve higher education students more directly in the development of public information	Public information	B5, C
14. Continue to develop its website in order to give greater emphasis to its higher education provision, thereby enhancing its public profile	Public information	C

Key

Academic Infrastructure, core themes	Standards	Academic standards
	Quality	Quality of learning opportunities
	Public information	Public information
UK Quality Code for Higher Education chapters	Part A	Setting and maintaining academic standards
	Part B	Assuring and enhancing academic quality
	Part C	Information about higher education provision
Additionally	Enhancement	Deliberate steps taken at provider level to improve the quality of learning opportunities

*Quality Code Expectations extant at the end of the IQER NI cycle are detailed in *Higher Education Review: A handbook for providers*, Annex 2: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=104.

Annex 3: IQER NI evaluation feedback

	Positives	Suggested improvements
1. The method	(43 respondents out of 60 said that the review achieved its purpose completely and 11 to a large extent, so overall the response is positive)	More focus on the vocational aspects of provision and employability to match the emphasis accorded to it by DEL
		Include classroom observation
		More emphasis on progress since the last review
		Ensure that the new method builds on the old
		Reduce the overall length of the review process
		Extend the length of the review visit to reduce the pressure and meet with more staff and student and visit more campuses
		More training on the Quality Code
2. Student involvement	Student involvement, particularly in producing student written submission was good	Students are at the centre of the process so there should be maximum student involvement
	Level of involvement in producing SWS was commendable	Contact with and feedback from students should be at the centre of the review and an increased level would be welcome
3. Awarding body involvement	College kept us informed during the review, and we didn't feel the need to be more closely involved	More involvement of and discussion with the awarding body
		Less involvement from the awarding body
		More clarity about the role of the awarding body
4. The review team	Very effective communication between college and coordinator	
	Coordinator supported the team very well	
	Team well prepared (had clearly read the documentation) and were professional	More training/updating for reviewers
	Team adopted a collegial approach and did not segregate themselves during meetings	
5. Administrative arrangements	Preparatory arrangements and administrative support for the review were very good	Some issues with Qmmunity
	Communication with the college was very good	