



UCC

Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh
University College Cork, Ireland

University College Cork Quality Framework

Enhancing Practice, Guiding Progress

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Introduction

University College Cork (UCC) is a research-led, globally connected university committed to excellence in education, research, innovation and societal impact. Quality assurance and enhancement are fundamental to achieving the University's strategic objectives, supporting excellence in the student experience, research, professional services, sustainability and continuous improvement across all areas of activity.

This document sets out the University's Quality Framework and places it within the national and international context for quality in higher education, drawing on relevant legislation, policy and sectoral guidance. It provides an overview of UCC's approach to quality for external stakeholders, including statutory, regulatory and professional bodies, peer reviewers, students and quality professionals, and signposts related quality policies and resources available on the University website.

This document co-exists with detailed operational guidance and procedures, published internally for staff and students engaged in quality assurance and enhancement activities. Together, these documents support the effective implementation of the University's quality arrangements and the ongoing enhancement of its academic, research and professional activities.

Quality in Higher Education

The implementation of quality assurance in higher education can be traced back to the Bologna Declaration (1999), a major European policy initiative for educational mobility, transnational cooperation, and mutual recognition of educational outcomes. Quality assurance methodologies and approaches were developed to provide a basis for comparability across higher education systems, guided by the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), supplemented by national standards and guidelines.

European Standards and Guidelines for Quality

The overall architecture of quality developed through the [European Standards and Guidelines](#) operates at three levels which are intrinsically linked:

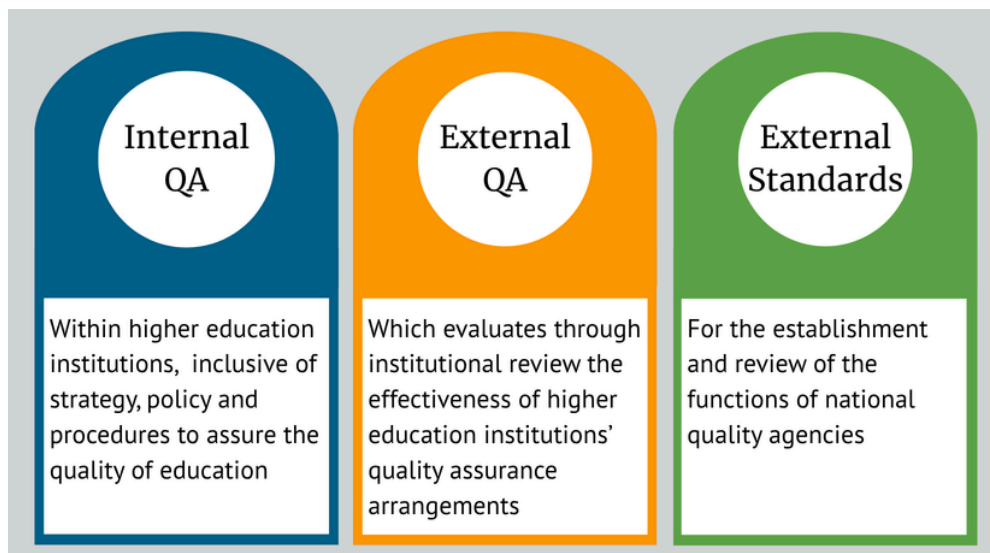


Figure 1: The Three Levels of Quality

- Internal quality assurance within higher education institutions which is inclusive of strategy, policy and procedures to assure the quality of education;
- External quality assurance which evaluates through institutional review the effectiveness of higher education institutions' quality assurance arrangements;
- External standards for the establishment and review of the functions of national quality agencies.

The term quality assurance as adopted serves the purposes of accountability and enhancement in providing public assurance of the quality of higher education as well as identifying how it may be enhanced. Assurance and enhancement are inter-related and form the basis of quality culture.

The European University Association (EUA) define quality culture as:



Quality Culture refers to an organisational culture that intends to enhance quality permanently and is characterised by two distinct elements: on the one hand, a cultural/psychological element of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality and, on the other hand, a structural/managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts. (EUA, 2006, p10)¹

It has been identified that a commitment to a quality culture is indicative of increased institutional autonomy, credibility, and attention to enhancement.

National Context of Quality for UCC

Alongside the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG, 2015), quality assurance in Irish higher education has been shaped by a succession of legislative and sectoral developments that provide the framework within which UCC operates.

 <u>Universities Act 1997</u>	Introduced statutory quality assurance requirements, laying the foundation for systematic review and continuous improvement in Irish universities.
 <u>Irish Universities Quality Board Framework (IUQB) 2007</u>	Established a sector-wide framework for periodic quality reviews , creating a consistent approach to evaluating academic, research, and service activities.
 <u>Qualifications & Quality Assurance Act 2012</u>	Strengthened quality assurance through national oversight by QQI, mandatory cyclical reviews , and publication of review outcomes and improvement actions.
 <u>Higher Education Authority Act 2022</u>	Reinforced institutional accountability by linking governance, performance, and quality assurance to the achievement of university objectives.

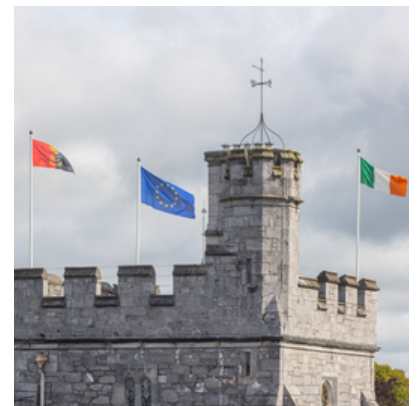
Figure 2: The Succession of Quality Development

The quality assurance framework in Irish higher education has evolved through a series of legislative and sectoral developments. The Universities Act 1997 established the statutory basis for quality assurance, requiring universities to promote excellence in teaching and research through regular review, stakeholder engagement, and publication of review findings.

Building on this foundation, the [Irish Universities Quality Board \(IUQB\) Framework \(2007-2012\)](#) introduced a sector-wide approach to periodic quality review across academic, research, and service areas. Following the enactment of the [Qualifications and Quality Assurance \(Education and Training\) Act 2012](#), the functions of the IUQB were transferred to Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), on 15 October 2012.

The [Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act 2012 \(amended 2019\)](#) strengthened the system by establishing Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) as the national quality authority. The Act requires higher education institutions to maintain comprehensive quality assurance procedures, undertake cyclical reviews at least every seven years, publish review outcomes, and implement improvement actions. It also provides for national statutory quality assurance guidelines, promoting an institution-wide approach that encompasses both academic and corporate activities. The Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines state:

“Quality assurance policies, procedures and systems are designed as a comprehensive system. Quality assurance is embedded in the provider’s activities at all levels. Quality assurance spans both the corporate domain (e.g. governance, finance, human resources) and academic domain.” (QQI, 2016, p10)²



Most recently, the Higher Education Authority Act 2022 reinforced institutional accountability by linking governance, performance, and quality assurance to the achievement of university objectives and the ongoing effectiveness of institutional systems and practices as part of a comprehensive national education systems performance approach.

This policy framework provides the basis for UCC's quality assurance processes and supports a culture of continuous enhancement across the University.

Quality Culture and Quality Enhancement

The European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015) identify quality culture as a key outcome of the relationship between quality assurance and enhancement, supported by the active engagement of students, staff and institutional leadership. Harvey (2024)³ similarly emphasises the role of organisational culture in shaping quality through shared values, collective responsibility and critical reflection, rather than through compliance alone. In this context, quality culture provides the environment within which enhancement activities are conceived, implemented and sustained.

External Quality Assurance and Accreditation

UCC's approach to quality is strengthened by engagement with a range of external quality assurance, accreditation and peer review processes that complement the University's internal enhancement activities. Through participation in national and international quality networks, engagement with external experts, and accreditation by relevant professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, the University benchmarks its activities against recognised standards and sectoral good practice. These external engagements provide valuable independent perspectives, support ongoing development and innovation, and demonstrate the quality and relevance of UCC's provision to students, employers, professional bodies and wider society.

Institutional Review

Institutional Review is a key component of Ireland's national quality assurance framework for higher education institutions. Coordinated by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and conducted on a seven-year cycle, the review involves a comprehensive evaluation by an independent panel of national and international peers. The process examines the effectiveness of the University's quality assurance and enhancement systems, identifies areas of institutional strength and opportunities for further development, and provides an externally validated assessment of the University's performance and strategic direction.

IEM Award

The International Education Mark (IEM), awarded by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) under the TrustEd Ireland initiative, provides formal recognition of UCC's commitment to delivering a high-quality experience for international learners. The award is granted following an independent assessment of an institution's policies, procedures and supports relating to areas such as student recruitment, admissions, learner supports, programme information and the overall international student experience.

For UCC, attainment of the IEM reflects the University's commitment to transparency, student-centred provision and continuous development in supporting a diverse international learning community, while enhancing its reputation as a globally engaged institution.





Professional Accreditations

Professional accreditation provides discipline-specific recognition that programmes meet the standards and expectations of relevant professions, industries and regulatory bodies. Across the University, many academic programmes are accredited by national and international professional bodies, reflecting their alignment with current professional requirements, graduate competencies and sectoral expectations. These accreditations support the continued relevance and currency of programmes, strengthen graduate employability and professional recognition, and foster ongoing engagement between the University and the professions and industries it serves.

UCC's Approach to Quality Enhancement

UCC's approach aligns with these perspectives by recognising that sustainable improvement is most effectively achieved when principles of quality are embedded throughout institutional activities, values and behaviours. This is reflected in the University's [Quality Enhancement Policy](#), which evidences UCC's commitment to enhancement as a collaborative, evidence-informed and impact-oriented process.

As an autonomous degree-awarding institution, the University recognises that enhancement plays an important role not only in improving quality but also in sustaining and demonstrating the responsible exercise of institutional autonomy.



Quality enhancement is the organising ethos of UCC's Quality Framework, which is enacted by University staff and students through a cycle of interconnected activities that iteratively and reciprocally inform the whole, as illustrated in the graphic below. The Framework positions Quality Culture as the overarching environment within which all quality enhancement and quality assurance activities take place, recognising that a culture of shared responsibility, collaboration and continuous improvement is fundamental to sustaining and strengthening quality across the University. A defining characteristic of the Framework is the strong commitment to, and engagement of, students in quality processes as active participants and reviewers.



The Framework is further informed by active engagement with national and international quality networks, policy developments, peer learning and collaborative initiatives, ensuring that institutional practices remain informed by wider sectoral and global developments.

Periodic Quality Review

The **purpose** of Quality Review is to provide an enhancement-led, reliable peer evaluation process that supports UCC's strategic goals for excellence, the development of a quality culture, ongoing organisational development and the assurance and enhancement of education and training, research and services provided by the University. External peer review provides access to wider perspectives, often international, on the effectiveness of the University's practices as well as expert advice on new and developing approaches at the forefront of higher education.

Quality Review is an internal quality mechanism based on external and internal peer review, operated primarily as a cyclical process over a period of 7 years. It can be augmented as required by topic focused reviews that evaluate a specific theme, and these may be conducted on a shorter cycle.

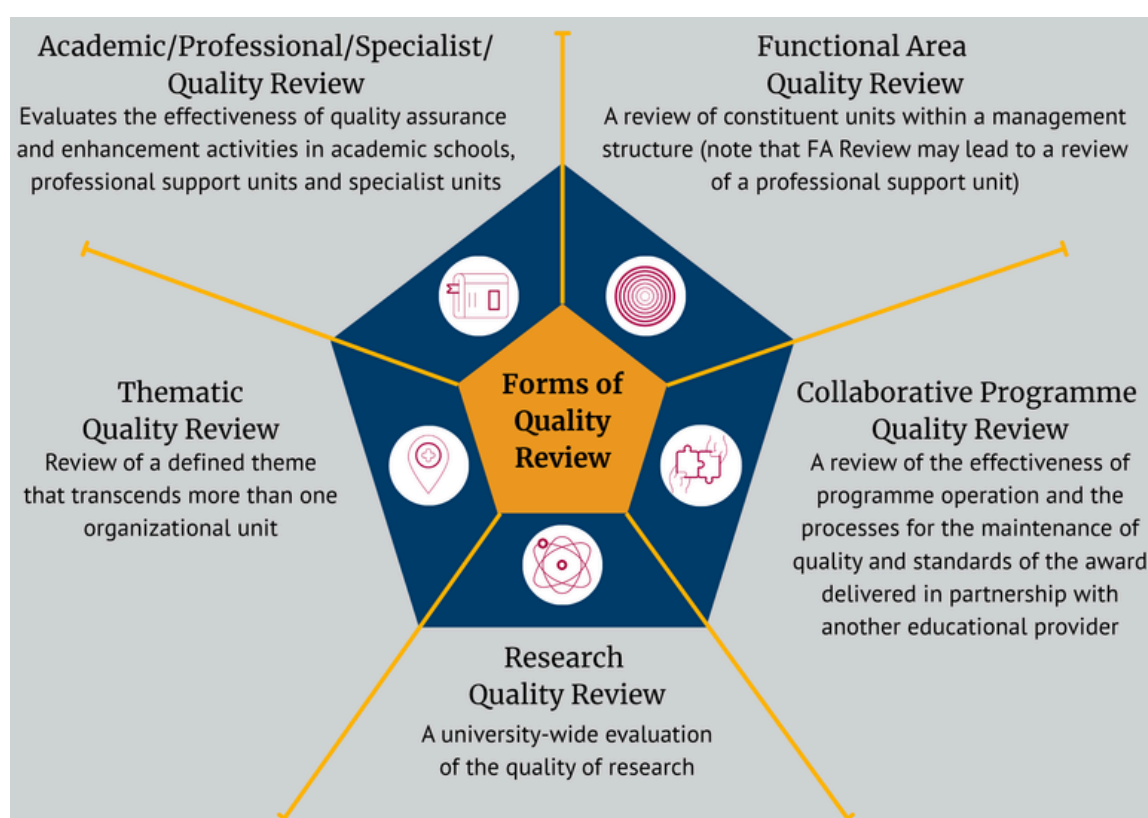


Figure 4: The Forms of Quality Review

The current forms of quality review may be adapted or augmented as required based on emerging or future institutional needs. Relevant resources for internal review are documented and shared with University staff and students through a dedicated [SharePoint site](#). Reports arising from quality review are published on the University [website](#).



Monitoring and Review of Framework

The effectiveness of the University's Quality Framework is monitored internally through stakeholder feedback, under the governance of the University Quality Enhancement Committee and through annual reporting to the Governing Authority of the University. It is also monitored externally through the provision of an Annual Quality Report to Quality and Qualifications Ireland and is periodically reviewed externally through statutory and voluntary institutional review in alignment with national Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines and the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality. External reviews of the effectiveness of UCC's quality arrangements can be found [here](#).

Quality Development and Institutional Enhancement

Quality development refers to topic-specific, enhancement-focused activities undertaken through scoped projects that address recurring themes emerging from quality reviews or other strategic institutional processes. Projects coordinated and led by the Quality Enhancement Unit typically involve university-wide collaboration with colleagues, students, and other stakeholders, reflecting a shared commitment to continuous improvement.

Our approach is underpinned by a developmental mindset that values relationship building, trust, collaboration, and shared ownership of change. We work to bring people together around a common purpose, creating opportunities for dialogue that help dissolve organisational silos and enable collective problem-solving across institutional boundaries. In doing so, we seek to balance complexity with pragmatism, drawing on the best available internal expertise and, where appropriate, external perspectives to inform policy development, decision-making, and practice.



Quality development work is informed by an understanding of evolving policy, quality assurance expectations, and emerging practices across the higher education sector, both nationally and internationally. Through professional horizon-scanning and engagement with external networks, we identify innovative approaches and opportunities that can inform and enhance practice within UCC.

A key element of this work is the effective use and repurposing of institutional data and evidence to generate new insights, support strategic priorities, and facilitate evidence-informed enhancement. Quality development also includes purposive initiatives designed to strengthen and broaden active quality communities across the University, fostering a culture of partnership, reflection, and continuous enhancement.

Good Practice



Good practice is a preferred terminology to indicate instances of practices that may be regarded as being particularly effective through peer endorsement, external accreditation outcomes, educational or administrative innovation, digital advancements or emergent research/practice knowledge. The context-specific nature of good practice and the limits of direct transference are acknowledged.

Incrementally, the identification and dissemination of Good Practice Case-Studies is an outcome of quality review and has led to the development of a curated resource bank accessible to staff across the institution.



In addition, there is a Biennial Good Practice Symposium which is holistic in its scope and includes contributions from students, academic and research staff, and professional support staff. This event provides a visual showcase of good practices, aligned to institutional strategy and priorities, with the opportunity for internal networking and national/international peer engagement. The contributions to each Symposium are retained as digital artefacts and published on the University [website](#).

Partnership and Engagement

Student Engagement in Quality Review

Students are active participants in UCC's periodic quality review process and are embedded within the University's enhancement-led approach to quality. These opportunities enable students to engage authentically and effectively across a range of quality enhancement activities. A distinctive feature of UCC's approach is the inclusion of **Student Reviewers as full members of Peer Review Panels**, a practice introduced in 2014 and regarded as unique within the Irish university sector. Student reviewers analyse Self-Evaluation Reports, participate in review visits, contribute to panel discussions and help shape the final Quality Enhancement Report. They receive dedicated training and support from the Quality Enhancement Unit.

Student Representation in Quality

Students are represented at institutional level through the **Quality Enhancement Committee (QEC)**, which oversees quality enhancement activity across the University. The Committee includes Students' Union officers and doctoral student representation, ensuring that the student perspective informs policy development, review outcomes and institutional priorities.

The Quality Enhancement Unit works closely with UCC Students' Union on a growing range of quality initiatives, including the recruitment and support of Student Reviewers.



Through this representation structure, students contribute to discussions on quality policy, annual reporting and the monitoring of enhancement activities across academic and professional service areas. QEC reports regularly to Governing Authority on quality outcomes and impacts, including those raised through these structures and collaborations.

Students as Collaborators in Quality

UCC's quality culture positions students as partners and collaborators, rather than solely recipients of services. The University's Quality Enhancement Policy explicitly commits to engaging students as active partners in quality enhancement and embedding a student-centred approach.

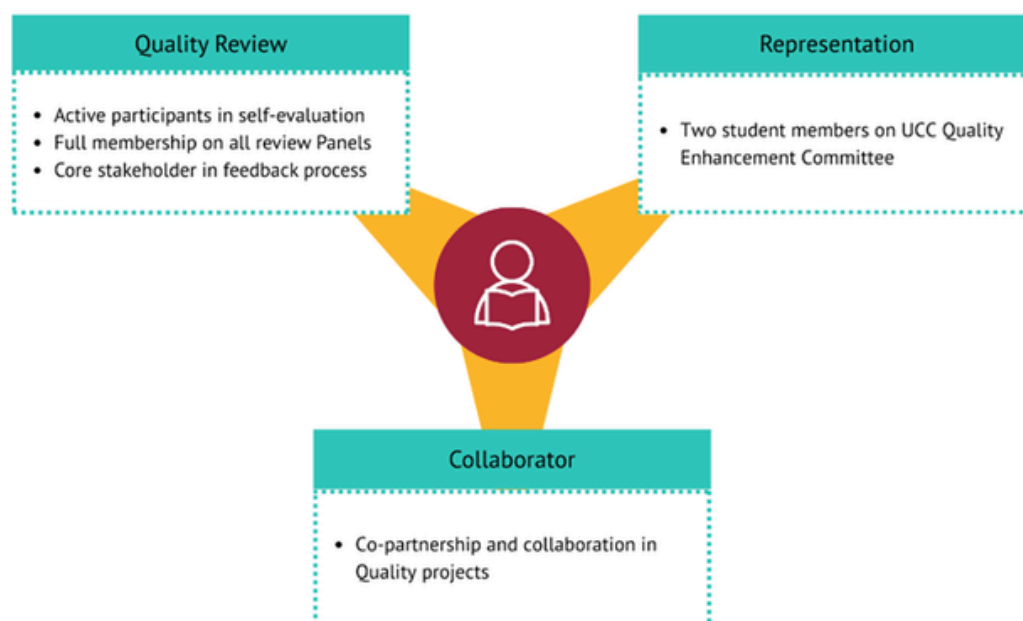


Figure 5: Areas of Student Partnership and Enhancement in UCC Quality Activities

Staff Engagement in Quality Review

Academic and professional staff prepare Self-Evaluation Reports, participate in review visits and engage in reflective dialogue with internal and external reviewers. Staff from across the University also serve as members of Peer Review Panels, bringing institutional knowledge and disciplinary expertise to the review process. Quality reviews culminate in the development of Quality Enhancement Plans, with staff responsible for implementing recommendations and embedding improvements within their Academic and Professional Service Units.

Staff Representation in Quality

Staff are represented through the Quality Enhancement Committee (QEC), with membership including representatives from academic leadership, Colleges, professional services and other key institutional functions, ensuring broad staff engagement in quality governance.

Staff as Collaborators in Quality

The University's Quality Enhancement Policy highlights the importance of building an engaged, reflective and connected quality culture through collaborative approaches to evaluation and improvement.

Staff are central to this through their engagement with quality review and quality enhancement activities, enhancement of their own practice as well as the development and dissemination of good practice.

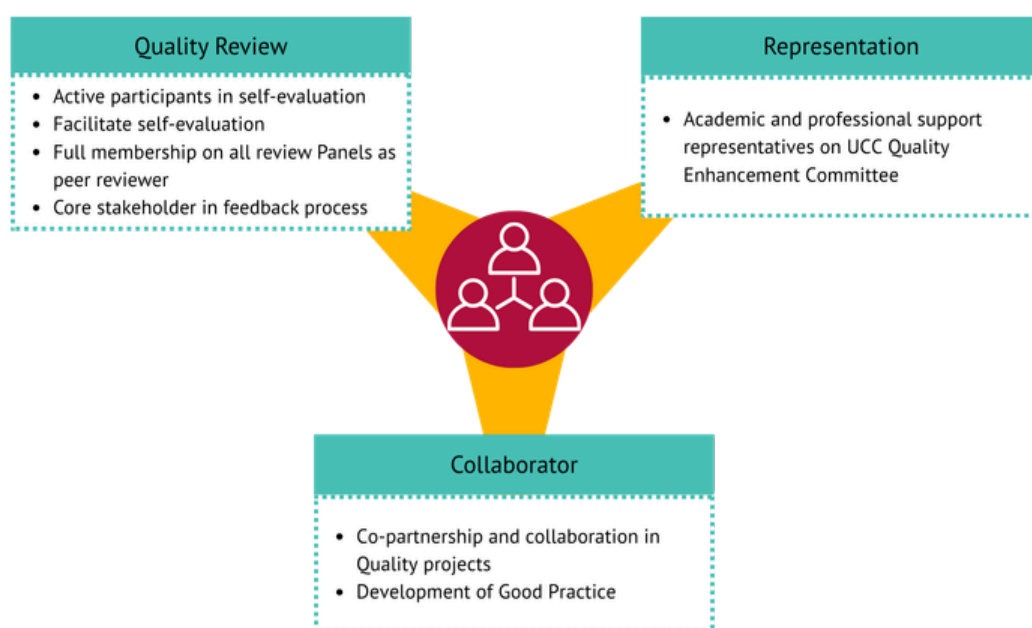
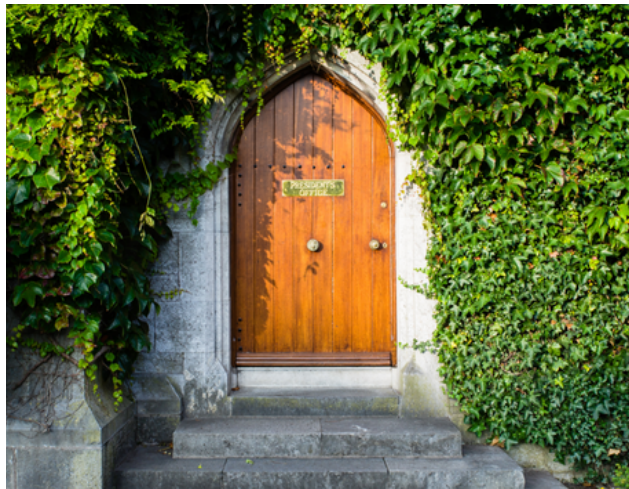


Figure 6: Areas of Staff Partnership and Enhancement in UCC Quality Activities

Governance, Leadership and Management of Quality

The governance, leadership, and management of quality at UCC are underpinned by a coordinated institutional framework that promotes excellence in teaching, learning, research, and service through robust oversight, accountability, and continuous enhancement.

Quality Enhancement Committee



The Quality Enhancement Committee (QEC), chaired by the President, governs the University's periodic quality review process and university-wide enhancement activities. Its membership includes appointed academic and professional staff members, representatives of Academic Council, student representatives and ex-officio positions.

The QEC receives and considers all periodic quality review reports and Quality Enhancement Plans prior to publication.

It provides summary reports and thematic analyses to the University Leadership Team, as well as an Annual Report to the Governing Authority on the outcomes and effectiveness of the University's quality processes. The QEC maintains a separation from the development of academic policies, regulations and processes which form the basis of quality assurance procedures developed by Academic Council, so that periodic quality review provides objective assurance as to the effectiveness of these procedures and thematic reviews can inform future enhancements. This separation fulfils the expectations for the governance and management of quality as expected by QQI Core Statutory Guidelines (2016, 1.1, p5). The following diagram illustrates the relative functions of Academic Council and Quality Enhancement Committee.

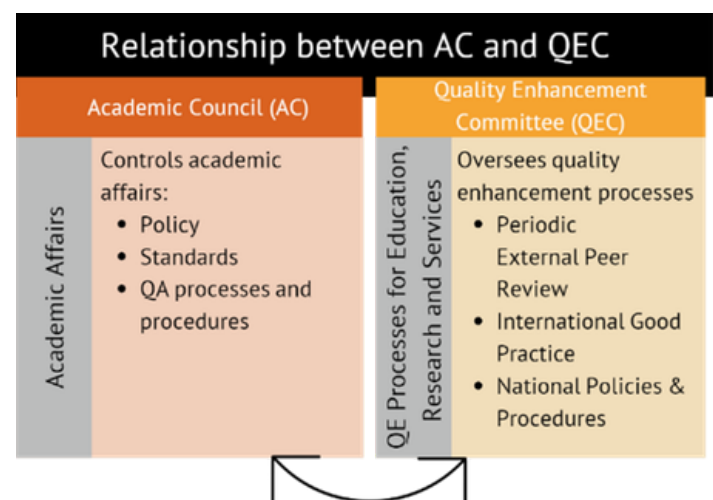


Figure 7: The Relationship between Academic Council and the Quality Enhancement Committee in UCC

Quality Enhancement Unit

The Quality Enhancement Unit (QEU) is a small expert team of higher education quality professionals. The QEU is responsible for leading the development and management of quality review processes and promotion of a quality culture university-wide in accordance with national and European guidelines, codes, and standards as well as national and international good practice. It also manages the University's relationship and reporting requirements with Quality & Qualifications Ireland (QQI). Members of the team participate in national development groups and engage with consultative bodies on a wide range of quality topics.

Under the European Erasmus project, the team participates in European mobility programmes and international capacity building projects with international higher education institutions. The Director of Quality Enhancement reports to the President of the University and is an ex-officio member of Academic Council and its sub-committees, the University Leadership Strategy Implementation Group. The Director also participates as an expert quality review peer for professional bodies, higher education institutions and quality assurance bodies.

Important References

[ESG 2015](#)

[QQI Core
Statutory
Guidelines](#)

[Sector Specific
Guidelines for
Universities](#)

[Topic Specific
Guidelines for
Research
Degrees](#)

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1. European University Association. 2006. Quality Culture in European Universities: A Bottom-up Approach. Report on the Three Rounds of the Quality Culture project 2002-2006. Brussels: European University Association.
2. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). 2016. Core Statutory Assurance Guidelines. Dublin: QQI. Available at:
<https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-11/qg-1-core-statutory-quality-assurance-guidelines.pdf>
3. Harvey, L. 2024. Extended Editorial: Defining quality thirty years on: quality, standards, assurance, culture and epistemology. Quality in Higher Education, 30(2), pp. 145-184.

Glossary of Terms

AC - Academic Council

DAB - Designated Awarding Body

ESG - European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area

EUA - European University Association

HEA - Higher Education Authority

IUQB - Irish Universities Quality Board Framework

UCC - University College Cork

UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

QEC - Quality Enhancement Committee

QEU - Quality Enhancement Unit

QQI - Quality and Qualifications Ireland

Review - Review is generic term for any process that explores the quality of higher education.

Review refers to explorations of quality that do not result in judgements or decisions. Quality review (evaluation) (Analytic Quality Glossary)

SOAR - Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results